

Seventh Annual Symposium—The Public Lives of Things

Winterthur Museum & Country Estate

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ABSTRACTS

Panel 1: Public Collections & Collecting Policies

Katherine Feo, University of Texas at Austin (American Studies)

"Laptops, Moccasins, and Key Chains: The Life of Personal Effects at the HRC"

The Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas is a world-renowned collecting institution of Modernist literature, art and photography. Less known, however, are the personal effects that are swept into the archive along with the manuscripts and memoirs of great artists and writers: shoes, typewriters, handkerchiefs, razor blades, and key chains. This paper examines the meaning, history and research value of personal effects at a public institution that never meant to collect personal effects. As an intern at the HRC, I have used material from current HRC exhibitions, interviews with curators, and archival research in the yet-to-be opened Personal Effects Collection to formulate my own theory about the public research potential of everyday ephemera within the context of a manuscript-oriented archive. This paper will locate the institutional categories that determine the value of a personal effect as it enters the HRC, keeping in mind that until recently such objects were considered of little value, and mostly acquired inadvertently or as "deal breakers"—unwanted objects whose acceptance into the archive was a condition of a larger, more important acquisition. Interrogating the narratives that determine institutional value is an act of deconstruction aimed at destabilizing the concept that archival objects are taken in because they are inherently worthy objects of study. I finish the paper by presenting new categories of research value for the personal effects, as well as possibilities for those objects that are currently considered the least valuable of all effects in the collection, the "deal breakers". Such categories reorient and widen the lens of historical research to include beloved, corporeal, and sometimes bizarre objects that were saved by artists, writers, and collectors without the intention of contributing to the mainstream, Modernist historical discourse currently represented at the HRC.

Tamara Mann, Columbia University (American History)

"Proprietary Heritage: The Iraqi Jewish Archive and the Logic of Cultural Property"

In a war zone, in a desert, a freezer truck arrived in Baghdad to rescue twenty-seven trunks of decomposing Hebrew and Arabic documents. Only one month before, the United States Military watched as looters ransacked Iraq's National Museum and tore through the wreckage of the burned National Library of Baghdad. A horrified international community decried the "loss of the world's greatest collection of Babylonian, Sumerian, and Assyrian antiquities" and pressed the United States to guard Iraq's cultural property – a modest collection of materials dedicated to the Iraqi Jewish community was probably not what they had in mind.

In the shadows of international ire, U.S. forces discovered, saved, and eventually imported a collection of documents pertaining to the now dispersed Jewish community of Iraq. To transport these objects legally from Baghdad to the American National Archives, the U.S. and the

Coalitions Provisional Authority (CPA) formed a confidential agreement: the U.S. would import the materials through the Immunities from Seizure Act, a law pertaining to foreign objects slated for exhibition, for the duration of the restoration process; following a small U.S. exhibition the objects would be returned to the new Iraqi government. This bargain helped transform a loosely affiliated set of papers, parchments and books into a single unit of cultural property, a term that thrust the materials into a current of international debates.

From its inception in the laws of war to its current incarnation in peacetime international legal treaties, cultural property, as a concept, has worked to convert objects of cultural significance into the collective heritage of abstract groups. Mayan statues become the heritage of Mexico, Angkor Wat the heritage of humanity and ancient Greek vases the heritage of Italy. The beauty of integrating a past culture into one's present identity has blinded scholars from recognizing the way in which the cultural property debate has mushroomed into an illogical system that falsely equates heritage with ownership and thwarts legitimate private claims for the sake of national ones. The story of the Iraqi Jewish Archive exposes the perils of this conflation – ownership and heritage – challenging scholars to rethink the efficacy of the term cultural property.

Mariana Françoço, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil (Social Sciences)
"Exoticism and Identity: The Transatlantic Trajectory of a Tupinambá Feather Coat"

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the different political meanings attributed to a singular piece of Amerindian craftsmanship: the Tupinambá feather coat, made by this native Brazilian people in the beginning of the seventeenth century and today housed at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. In the year 1644, German count Johann Moritz von Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679) returned to The Netherlands after an eight-year tenure as governor to the Dutch Colony in Northeastern Brazil. During his stay, he assembled a very interesting collection of curiosities, partially through diplomatic gifts that he received from different social groups. Among these gifts, there was a red feather coat made by the Tupinambá Indians of coastal Brazil, originally used by shamans in religious and war rituals in the sixteenth century.

When Nassau returned to The Netherlands, he presented his collection to the Court in receptions at his Mauritshuis. The Tupinambá coat was worn by dames of the nobility in masquerades where they dressed up as "Amazons" and were portrayed as such. In 1654, the coat was given by Nassau to Frederik III, King of Denmark, as a diplomatic gift, which became part of the King's *kunstkammer*. The artifact did not leave Copenhagen until the year 2000, when it was lent to be part of a Brazilian exhibition celebrating five centuries of the Europeans' first arrival in South America. In that occasion, a group of Tupinambá Indians claimed that the feather coat was a fundamental element of their cultural heritage and therefore should be repatriated to Brazil.

This presentation will retrace the trajectory of this singular artifact as a means of discussing its shifting meanings through the centuries. While at first glance it historically represents power and exoticism, a critical analysis will unveil how it also embodies colonial Amerindian agency and present-day quest for identity and political rights.

Panel 2: Public Bodies

Rob Goldberg, Ph.D. Candidate, History Department, University of Pennsylvania
"Negro Dolls, Soul Babies, and American Girls: Objectifying Blackness in the Doll World from the Civil Rights Era to the Age of Obama"

This paper takes up the question of how the plastic bodies of black dolls have been sites for defining, contesting, and re-casting the meanings of blackness and African-American identity over the past forty years. In 1928, critic Walter Benjamin wrote that toys uniquely embody a "silent signifying dialogue" between children and their nation. Following Benjamin, the changing materiality of these dolls, and the debates that surround them, become vehicles for contemplating the shifting dialogue about race in America from the late 1960s to the present.

Looking at the toy business as a powerful culture industry, I first trace the black doll trend of the late '60s and early '70s through the line of a black doll maker called Shindana Toy Company, which was founded at a pivotal moment in the modern civil rights movement—the trend toward cultural nationalism, black power, and community-based economic development. One of the objects for exploring this shift is Talking Tamu, a doll that sported a large Afro and floral dashiki, and said things like, "Can you dig it?" and "I'm proud." Next, I jump to the zenith of the multiculturalism debate and the revival of black doll production in the 1990s with an analysis of the American Girl Company's popular historical-character doll Addy, a doll whose context is the history of slavery. It is Addy, I argue, who can help us explore the potential for and limits of a plastic, object-based pluralism—dolls as a means to teach diversity. Finally, the paper brings these questions to the present, focusing on the recent production of and controversy over plush likenesses of Sasha and Malia Obama. The larger meaning of the Obamas entering the White House, I suggest, is not just about a black President and First Lady. It is also about what it means for black children to grow up inside—and inflect both materially and symbolically—a longstanding site of white political and cultural power in America.

Ultimately, this paper asks what we might learn from these commercial products about the ways Americans have manufactured and played around with the idea of race since the 1960s. While I hope to contribute to the historiographies of the black freedom struggle and consumer culture, I also believe that the topic of race and the potent symbolic power of children's toys will make this paper—along with the discussion it seeks to provoke—a useful means for an audience wider than the traditional academic community to explore such questions.

Caitlin Galante-DeAngelis Hopkins, Harvard University (History of American Civilization)
"This Stone Was Cut by Pompe Stevens: African-American Memorial Art in Eighteenth-Century Newport, Rhode Island"

In this paper, I examine the gravestones produced by Pompe Stevens, an enslaved artisan working in Newport, Rhode Island during the 1760s. Stevens, who was owned by the renowned Newport stonecarver William Stevens, carved several memorials, including one with an extraordinary epitaph that testified to an enduring familial relationship and made a bold statement of artistic authorship:

This Stone was
cut by Pompe
Stevens in Memo
ry his brother
Cuffe Gibbs, who
died Decr. 27th. 1768,
Aged 40 Years.

Pompe Stevens' carvings are significant both within the context of the Newport Common Burying Ground and as early examples of African-American art. Within the contested space of the graveyard, Stevens' work counteracts slaveowners' assertion of their right to define the dead by publicly naming familial relationships rather than relationships of dependency. In addition, his use of orthodox Anglo-Puritan iconography at a time when his Anglo-American contemporaries were carving distinctively black soul effigies points to the 18th-century debate over the racial identity of the soul and its implications for spiritual equality. Stevens' formal orthodoxy also raises important questions about the differences between an artist and an artisan, and challenges us to define "African-American art" expansively. I argue that Stevens' work is indicative of the choices made by enslaved artisan-artists who expressed cultural autonomy through inconspicuous media.

Though Pompe Stevens' work is of particular interest to scholars of death and memorialization, it also has broad appeal for the general public. In recent decades, the history of slavery in the North, along with the identification and preservation of African-American cultural sites in Northern states, has become a subject of general interest. In addition to their importance as some of the earliest signed pieces of African-American art, Pompe Stevens' carvings and their situation within the Newport Common Burying Ground provide an opportunity for general audiences to confront competing narratives of domination and resistance within a New England setting. The graveyard, which served as the arena for public debates about slavery, human dignity, and acceptable forms of artistic expression in the eighteenth century, is still an active site for shaping public memory.

Theodore Triandos, University of Delaware (Art History)

"Dressing on the Internet: 'American Trad' and the Performance of Self-Representation"

The clothes we select are coded with socio-historic meaning, which we enact through our bodies and daily activities. This is especially true for an Internet community known as "trads." On an online forum, trads share photographs of themselves performing (staged) daily narratives in their clothes. Trads derive a sartorial mode from an historic style they identify as the "American Ivy-League Look." In conversation and through photographic comparisons, they connect this exclusive style and the leisurely and professional activities they perform, in dress, on the Internet, with a history of elite men whose American narratives of success they continue. I argue, for some members of this online community, to learn the language of trad activates new trajectories for representing identity. Others perform "trad" with a sense of irony, in ways that seem to address some of the problematic social underpinnings of the notion and its practice.

To explore this new genre, my paper synthesizes a number of methodological approaches. Like Bernard L. Herman's study of narrative enacted through the evocative arrangement of cultural objects, I understand the composition of trad-photography as works of bricolage. I interpret clothing choices as selections of historic materials, and I interpret "posing" as the powerful arrangement of meaningful codes. I employ art historical formal analyses of these visual narratives, and I explore the historic photographic sources the trad community appropriates in the production of collective artistic and social vocabularies. I then trace the service of this lexicon to the establishment of what vernacular architectural historian Dell Upton has described as a mode, or a style re-sourced to express a group's cultural exclusivity. Ultimately, trads desire to align themselves with conventional American iconography, while positioning themselves outside of mainstream American culture, thus producing a mode subject to constant flux.

Panel 3: The Private Lives of Public Objects

Emily Voss, Cooperstown Graduate Program (Museum Studies)

"Astronauts, Aliens, Rockets, and Ray Guns: Space Toys and American Children 1950-1977"

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Space Race influenced American politics, science, and society. The events of the unfolding national drama inspired designs for everything from toasters to Thunderbirds. Items for children were similarly affected by the pervasive interest in space exploration. This study specifically examines space-themed toys as a means of discovering how both adults and children experienced the Space Race in their day-to-day lives.

As the decades progressed, space toys evolved from fantasy-based items driven by fears of nuclear war, to reality-based toys that allowed children to celebrate national achievements and encouraged them towards careers in science. The toys also reflect changing ideas about advertising, gender, and of course, the popularity of the American space program. This analysis joins the growing field of material culture-based studies on playthings and what they reveal about the culture of children. In this case, through the public lives of their toys, children demonstrated their excitement about a major national event and appropriated real people and real technology for play.

For the purpose of this study, I examined reality-based toys and fantasy-based toys. The realistic toys were inspired by or accurately represented aerospace technology. Fantasy-based items reflected purely fictitious ideas and images of outer space. The primary source of information for this study was the collection of the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. Periodicals from the Space Race era such as *Parents and Boys' Life* provided objects and perspective on Space Race culture. Though perhaps neither children nor parents recognized it at the time, space toys held a great deal of inherent meaning. Parents' cautious hopes for a technological future and their children's dreams of exploring the New Frontier were expressed in the public lives of playthings.

Bess Williamson, University of Delaware (History of American Civilization)

"Doing It Themselves: Gadgets for and by People with Disabilities, 1945-1970"

In the decades following World War II, people with severe physical disabilities were able to live increasingly independent lives outside of medical institutions. Whether they were survivors of war, car accidents, birth disorders, or the polio virus, this population benefited from improved medical care as well as an overall cultural interest in mobility and self-determination. Despite these improved conditions, however, many barriers existed. Public places lacked the ramps and other accommodations we now take for granted, while handles, thresholds, and narrow passageways could make the most basic daily tasks difficult.

In this paper, I explore a category of material objects that emerged in these postwar decades: so-called "tools for independent living" that helped bridge the gap between the inaccessible built environment and a newly mobile, independent population with disabilities. Decades before public accommodations became law, this population selected, adapted, and made their own gadgets to help navigate a world not designed for them. Solutions ranged from homemade wheelchair lifts and book racks for reading without hands to commercially made utensils, kitchen fixtures, and canes, crutches, braces and wheelchairs designed for more active use.

Looking at do-it-yourself guides, catalogues of manufactured tools, and surviving artifacts, I consider how people with disabilities found their own individual solutions within postwar American consumer culture. I question the idea that equipment for people with disabilities is a remote, "special" category separate from the "mainstream." As my research shows, people with disabilities chose from a panoply of options to find the best solutions: their chosen tools were as likely to come from hardware catalogs or the department store as from "assistive technology" suppliers. Carefully measuring their own needs against the options available, people with disabilities constructed their own material lives in a commercial environment that rarely acknowledged their existence.

Drew Sawyer, Columbia University (Art History and Archaeology)
"The Queer Life of Crisco"

Using Crisco as a case study, this paper will explore the productive intersection of "Thing Theory" and Queer Theory, or the queerness of things. Thing Theory is said to invert the longstanding study of how people make things by asking how inanimate objects can be read as having a form of subjectivity and agency of their own. Such an approach, however, has often been criticized as amoral for either favoring object histories over human and cultural politics or downplaying the role of power and human subjectivity in the social world. This paper is an attempt to wed such a sensitivity to the agency of objects with interpretations that stress their ideological and political social function as well.

While early marketing and consumption of Crisco helped produce and reinforce modern notions of domesticity and family under the increasing pressures of industrial change, the product's materiality simultaneously facilitated the public expression of deviant sexual acts and identities through its appropriation as a lubricant for anal sex. Thus, in charting the "social life" of Crisco as a thing-in-motion—from its invention in 1911 as the first all vegetable oil shortening to its later appropriation by gay men as a lubricant for anal sex and, finally, to its demise as a lubricant as a result of HIV/AIDS—I hope to reveal not only the complex and changing relationships between people and things, but also the way in which things themselves are social actors caught up in the production and subversion of sexual identities and gender roles. It is the contention of this essay that fooling around with slippery and slimy things such as Crisco may not only tells us more about the construction of gender, family, and sexuality but also gives us more opportunity to queer them.