

INTRODUCTION

About the Agency of Things, of Objects and Artefacts

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Things are ubiquitous, they surround us, and today “vibrant matter”¹ increasingly enters our bodies. We are dominated by things; we talk to them and cultivate special relationships to them. Pierre Bourdieu has shown us to what extent important, prestigious things define our social standing.² Things with an inherent coerciveness determine vast areas of social and private life. Common opinion holds that, along with their industrial production and circulation in global networks, but also with their increasing complexity and diversity, things are losing their mystique or, as Walter Benjamin noted, their aura.³ This loss, which Benjamin viewed as a precondition for modernity, is accompanied by a seemingly insatiable hunger for ever more goods and wares. Along with this superabundance of things that exercise an increasing degree of control over people’s lives, the relationship between people and things has undergone profound changes in the past century. Things are perceived as simultaneously threatening, determinative, and alienated from us. We are no longer sure of them, a development also attributable to other experiences in the twentieth century. The loss of things and their meaning, which shapes national memory and personal identity, whether through wars or radical ideological upheavals, has forced the adoption of new valuations.⁴ Under extreme circumstances, things that were actually insignificant accrued the utmost value in securing and defining personal identities, as Marie Luise Kaschnitz has attested in her memoirs of the Second World War, or Nobel Laureate Herta Müller in her account of life in Ceausescu’s Romania.⁵

In recent years, scholars such as Amiria Henare or Esther Pasztor have gone so far as to propose a “thinking through things,” and it looks as if the animate and the inanimate world are becoming increasingly intertwined.⁶ Accordingly, the traditional Western dichotomy between humanity and non-humanity continues to weaken. In everyday life, a new sensibility for the strange existence of things, their unattainable alterity and hidden power, is emerging. Recent books on political ecology reflect on this autonomy and on how things act on humans in largely unperceived ways. Jane Bennett has postulated that “thing-power materialism is a speculative onto-story, a rather presumptuous attempt to depict the non-humanity that flows around but also through humans.”⁷ Bennett’s and others’ concept of a “...dynamic-flow of matter-energy that tends into various bodies, bodies that often join forces, make connections, form alliances”⁸ has its roots in Spinoza’s idea of *natura naturans* and is closely related to ancient and medieval concepts of unity between micro- and macrocosms. Bennett’s and—in a more

philosophical way—Silvia Benso's calls for an ethic of things emphasises thing-power, not things in themselves, as a force in human life.⁹

When we think of the technological evolution that has occurred since the nineteenth century, we become aware of how strongly things have left their marks on our behaviour, our social life and even our personalities. As Bruno Latour has pointed out,¹⁰ the increasing complexity of things entails an increasing immanence of humans within things. Thus a reciprocal connection exists between things, the ideas of their formal, functional conception, their estimation, and their users or owners. To go one step further: Things are not only created or configured by humans; things themselves participate in the formation of human beings.

Lorraine Daston¹¹ insists that things talk to us, but only through their "obdurate objecthood," which in turn causes us to talk about things. This obduracy manifests in many ways: not only in the sharpness that we sense when we hold a knife in our hands, but also the intriguing sense of disquiet that grips us when we view a work of art. Dealing with objects seems at first to be determined by their functions, but things are also appreciated for their inherent ideas, their social and individual values, which grow through anthropomorphic projections rather than practical functions or material worth. Objecthood and anthropomorphic projections coalesce in an energetic liaison with vivid reciprocity. Daston best summarised this amphibious character when she wrote, "things variously knit together matter and meaning."

Several recent trends in material culture studies, anthropology and art history motivated our choice of *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations* as a title for the lecture series held in the winter term 2009/2010 at Heidelberg University's Cluster of Excellence *Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows*. We asked the contributors to emphasise modes of cultural exchange for both concepts and things, and the result is a broad range of topics from objects of art and objects as goods, to ideas, knowledge, motifs, systems of technology, language, and persons. Our case studies focus primarily on pre-modern or even small-scale societies. Of course, today's technological innovations and worldwide communication networks did not exist at the time when these societies flourished, but a focus on the agency of things provides a context within which these different cultures can be compared. Our main questions are: What happens when things are displaced? If, as we have noted before, things do talk, how does their now-altered language become intelligible? How are these previously unknown things creating or changing sets of values or forwarding alternative forms of social organisation? What happens when these objects return to the culture from which they originated? What are the conditions under which objects are transferred, interpreted and accepted?

Things/objects/artefacts

“Thing is far better than any other word at summing up imponderable, slightly creepy what-is-it-ness ... Thing theory highlights or ought to highlight approaches to the margins—of language, of cognition, of material substance.”¹² The term’s randomness informs its illimitability, its oscillation between material objecthood and supernatural forces.¹³ In this volume we do not pretend to write a new theory of things, particularly since an exponentially growing literature on thing theory and material culture has produced extremely disparate positions. But gathering diverse ‘thing-case-studies’ in one volume does present an opportunity to outline some positions in this discussion and to examine their usefulness for our questions concerning the role of things in cultural processes.

The Cartesian opposition of spirit and materiality, a segregation that decisively defines the Western worldview, also determines methodological approaches in fields that deal with material objects, such as anthropology, cultural studies, history, and art history. This ubiquitous premise in Western thought separates concepts from objects, the material from the social, meaning and spirit from material. Such an opposition underlies even the common distinction between works of art, artefacts and ‘pure’ material objects, goods, or commodities. Works of art are, in this respect, to be understood as an artist’s materialised concepts, an act of creativity, while objects are viewed as merely practical or technological creations. Such a viewpoint juxtaposes technological creation with the ingenuity of an artist’s mental process, originality, and creativity—a concept of art dating from the fifteenth century, the consequences of which were articulated in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ In his pivotal work, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, published in 1962, George Kubler argues against the common categorisation of works of art, artefacts and objects. Instead he postulates a history of things. The familiar dichotomy of concept and thing—involving other common polarities like concrete *versus* abstract, signified *versus* signifier—proves too limiting for our questions concerning processes of exchange, adoption, and cultural transformations.

In the cabinets of curiosities of the early modern period, interest in the power of things is visible whenever they are collected and categorised as curiosities from other worlds. From the nineteenth century onwards, collectors and ethnographers were interested in material culture, an interest that gained new significance in the 1960s. Fernand Braudel’s *The Structures of Everyday Life*,¹⁵ the first volume of his trilogy, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siècle*, was certainly one of the most influential publications in this regard. Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault subsequently drew attention to symbolic meaning, social communication, the organisation of knowledge and structures of thinking.¹⁶ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood’s work on goods and Arjun Appadurai’s *Social Life of Things* further articulated the strong relationship between human actions and things.¹⁷ Mary Douglas in particular highlighted the fact that the consumption, possession and collection of things are individual yet primarily social acts. By the dawn of the new millennium, the number of publications, exhibitions and conferences on thing-theory had increased enormously.

Esther Pasztory's *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art* of 2005, as well as *Thinking Through Things*, published in 2007 by Amiria Henare and others, both demanded a new understanding of and approach to the strangeness of things. Both publications draw on Martin Heidegger's heuristic use of 'thing' and the term 'thingness'.¹⁸ Heidegger's thing-theory is attractive to these authors because it emphasises the seriousness of things and their thingness as deeply grounded in the places from which the things originated and were used. While some of Heidegger's critics understand this rooting of things in the local as a disguised form of 'Blut und Boden' (blood and soil) ideology, the paradigm is nonetheless useful for the aforementioned studies on things in non-Western and pre-modern societies. A thingness connected not only with societies but also with local places or whole spaces of society, with their own time and a specific 'landscape', opens a radically different view on things. Amiria Henare and others have called for an ontological turn in the sense of a holistic understanding of thingness.¹⁹ For them, a general perspective on concepts and objecthood requires a paradigm shift towards the things themselves.

Heideggerian thingness is attractive to this new empiricism, although contemporary authors have abandoned the strong dichotomy between thing and object stressed by Heidegger. He who described a jug as a pure object made for daily use contrasted it to the celebrated "thing," which "... stays the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold. ... Each thing stays the fourfold into a happening of the simple oneness of world."²⁰ Dissolving this dichotomy and accepting the thingness of objects turns things into matters of fact or—in the words of Bruno Latour—into "matters of concern."²¹ Things—according to Latour—will unfold not only in a factor of four but of thousands.

This project, therefore, gathers case studies on the thingness of things not only as they exist in very different regions and times, but also as they are captured in particular disciplines by distinct approaches and specific methodologies. The contributors examine a wide range of things, reflecting on their thingness and their interwovenness with place and time, on their role in confirming the identities of individuals and elites, and their importance in the transfer of knowledge and behaviour, as well as in the creation of desires, etc. The things discussed in this volume are ideas, concepts, imaginations and artefacts normally understood as works of art. Therefore, the following chapters investigate literature, language, music, textiles, garden designs, imagined prestigious commodities for a foreign culture, and architecture, sculpture and prints. All contributors reflect upon the thingness of 'their' things and 'their' things' agency in different time and places. Every chapter offers different methodological approaches depending on the author's discipline. For example, the thingness of the luxurious textiles presented by Lisa Monnas constitutes a gathering of material, technological, iconographical and linguistic items which may be transferred to different places regardless of the textiles' original meaning. Fascination with materiality also plays an important role in the contributions by Anna Contadini and David J. Roxburgh. In Contadini's and Roxburgh's articles, the attractiveness of things is not grounded in their mere materiality. The artistic ability and brilliant skills of Chinese architects, engineers, painters

and sculptors, who produced wondrous architectonic structures and lifelike images of magical power, are the most important impressions that the Timurid envoy describes in his journal. New technologies, the handling of foreign and expensive materials, and bold structures are the most eminent characteristic of these things' thingness and aura. Another concept of thingness is introduced by Charles Burnett, who follows the traces of music as a crucial agent in the play of thing power. His line of argument involves musical instruments, musicians and the impact of scholarly discourse on music in medieval Latin translations of Arabian texts, especially the transfer of terms for musical instruments. Marina Warner, Michael Stolz and Larry Silver focus on imagined things as projections of cultural fantasies. Michael Stolz shows how the mystic qualities of Arabian objects play an eminent role in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, for they are not only amplified but also confirmed in their authenticity by onomatopoeic imitations of Arabian words. In Marina Warner's interpretation of thingness, the things as they appear in the *Arabian Nights* form a complex of positive projections where 'Western Orientalism' mixes with a sophisticated consumption of Eastern must-haves like carpets or divans. Larry Silver investigates the collision of early modern European experiences of a 'real' India with the iconography that had long shaped traditional Western preconceptions and projections of India. However, both experience and imagination turned out to be equally deceiving, as is characteristic for all things derived from a fantasy shaped by literature. Timon Screech's contribution researches how a whole range of factors—knowledge, speculation, imagination and even normative *habitus*—influenced the production of commodities designed for prospective Japanese trading partners. The only modern thing treated in this book is the invention of the typical Japanese garden outside Japan, which Toshio Watanabe presents as the constantly changing reification of a complex set of imaginative regimes.

The power of things

Paraphrasing Heidegger,²² the power of things lies in their thingness, a property uniting the things of the world. In a more concrete way, a thing's power lies in its obduracy, its obdurate existence and human reactions against it. Iconoclasm, vandalism or destruction during military conflicts are, of course, among the most vehement forms of protest against things. David Freedberg's *The Power of Images*²³ investigates iconoclastic efforts and censorship that try to annihilate the object's forces, while Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, published posthumously in 1998, examines the agency of things as their capacity to exert power. Gell's theory of power is based on the presumption of a force inherent in the objects themselves that possesses agency. Robert Layton vehemently and successfully objects to this theoretical approach.²⁴ In his view, the implication of power dwelling in things is rooted in the Marxist concept of 'commodity fetishism.' Layton discerns primary and secondary agents: on one side, there are competent observers expecting a specific perception or performance of a thing, and on the other side are the things themselves. If social anthropology underlines the dominating power

of things, commodities, goods, artefacts and ideas, Arjun Appadurai, in his *Social Life of Things*, as well as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, point to the force that things as commodities gain by virtue of consumption.²⁵ The starting point here is not an inherent power but the reciprocal, dynamic processes between objects or goods and societies or parts of these societies.

In the last twenty years, the awareness of things and their power has mutated radically. According to Wim van Binsbergen, the dramatic changes of the 1980s—the end of the Cold War and the globalisation of markets in the wake of capitalism's victory—demanded radically new concepts.²⁶ After the 9/11 attacks, the public suddenly faced the present complexities of interconnected things as well as their consequences. With this extrinsic change in mind, Gell's approach to the force inherent in things was of essential importance for the way Bruno Latour views things. In a 2004 article,²⁷ Latour considers various strategies to combat recently emerged threats to humanity, a way of thinking that he shares with many other intellectuals. In Latour's opinion, things should now stand in the centre of intellectual inquiry, rather than less tangible approaches such as discourse theory.

This new awareness of the power of things has serious consequences for our perception of nature and culture. Things, normally understood as inanimate objects, as mirrors against which we reflect wishes, meanings, social signs, economic value and even obscure forms of religious power, now become agents in their own right. The constant transformation of individuals and their culture, of time, of places, and functions, leaves 'written' traces on the object; the interweaving of all these factors creates new stories around and new theories about the object.²⁸ These agents partake in a permanent interaction in which the things themselves act: "they too do things, they too make you do things."²⁹ Latour thus presents "a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence."

In the present volume, Nicholas Thomas, one of the first to argue for a methodological approach appropriate to the anthropology of art,³⁰ unfolds the historicity of power performed by works of art. His things—Maori sculptures and carved Maori houses—move between places and continents, and are implicated in a broad range of stories which in turn changes their meaning as well as their power to change their surroundings. Their mere presence in a new environment—be it Clandon Park near London, or a museum—introduces new significations to their surrounding spaces. In other words, the process of appropriation is reciprocal, reminiscent of a DNA-helix in which strands from different times, cultures and places tightly connect to a permanently changing complex. Nicholas Thomas's concept of the power of things thus illustrates how historicity is generated.

Different concepts of power are dealt with in this volume. Timon Screech's list of gifts and goods transported by the ships of the East India Company from London to Japan in 1614 can also be read as a story of reciprocal power. For example, royal portraits that were intended as gifts to the Japanese court—a common, centuries-old gesture among rulers—function as instruments of power. But, as we know from the presenta-

tion of the portrait of James I at the Mughal court, such attempts at visual colonisation could be thwarted. In the famous portrait 'Jahangir Enthroned on an Hourglass', James I stands among visitors and courtiers below the emperor's throne, positioning Britain among all of the other subaltern satellites of the Mughal Empire. An even more complex interaction between imagined forces and projected meaning appears to be concealed behind the denotation of 'lascivious paintings' in the cargo list. A body of expertise based on reports by a wide range of informants who had contacts among the Japanese had come to the conclusion that these paintings would appeal to Japanese taste and were therefore suitable as objects of trade. For the British, interest in artistic representations of lasciviousness was extraordinarily foreign and served therefore as a confirmation of the otherness of the Japanese. The sheer volume of these images on the cargo list attests to their function: to inspire additional consumer desire in their trading partners. By seducing the other with objects in order to increase the demand for consumer goods, or donating objects as visual signs of superiority, things unfold their power within a social frame. David J. Roxburgh, in his analysis of the Timurid artist Ghiyath al-Din's account of his travels in China, presents the different ways in which the perception of foreign objects emerge, depending on whether they remain 'legible', seemingly classifiable according to their own inherent system of codification, translated, changed, or evoking astonishment. Anna Contadini deals with the fascination of the material itself, above all the admiration of artistic and technological accomplishments such as rock crystals from the Middle East, the renowned bronze griffin in Pisa, and a Spanish or Iranian copper alloy falcon. All of these objects, were often relocated and reinstalled, and sometimes—primarily in the context of reliquaries, but also in the case of the griffin—experienced an inversion during the different phases of their reutilisation. And it is not merely the admiration of artisanal and technological qualities that becomes clear. These case studies reveal the power that resides in things; they are not just repurposed, but are also redefined by their new contextualisation. In the process of visually representing domination, locally transmitted traditions can be implemented in different dimensions with a conscious political strategy.

The contributions in this volume show that as agents the forces of things coin cultural gestures or combine objects and projections with existing customs, as in the case of the Eastern divan. Objects are—as readers of Bourdieu know—excellent signs of distinction from others (Screech). Craftsmanship, which Richard Sennett recently reintroduced as a valuable asset,³¹ is an investment in things and is mirrored by their hierarchy. In several essays, particularly those by Roxburgh, Burnett and Contadini, this quality is not only a curiosity to be imitated and appropriated, but at the same time signals cultural superiority. In any event, the technical reproduction of unfamiliar things is not only attractive, but rather is at least as appealing as the content-based models of these things. Toshio Watanabe's Japanese gardens are an astonishing example of cultural transfer. Initially invented for the public at home and later presented at nearly all World Exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these gardens were intended to bolster the national identity of a flourishing Japanese nation. Just the concept or even the label 'Japanese garden' seemed sufficient to conjure up a specific, stere-

otypical representation. In the *Parzival* epic, the mystic objects obtain—according to Michael Stolz—a distinctive agency of power solely through the Arabian sound of their names. Used like virtual spoils their authenticity is verified by these names and their diffuse haptic features. Thus the almost religious power of inscrutable things heightens the auratic dimension of the text.

The flow of cultural transformations

Most of the articles within this volume deal with things normally called luxuries: silk (Monnas), prints (Silver), ivories, metal works, reliquaries (Contadini), musical instruments (Burnett), sculptures (Thomas and Roxburgh) and designed gardens (Watanabe). They all belong to the realm of high art and are automatically associated with established elites in various societies. Some eighty years ago, Werner Sombart demonstrated the intimate connection between the demand for luxury goods and a flourishing economy.³² Luxury objects are 'engines' of exchange and contacts, of the flow of the things themselves and of interpreting stories to turn them into goods and must-haves. Demand is, as Arjun Appadurai, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, and Christopher Alan Bayly have indicated, essentially a social phenomenon, which explains why the consumption of things always amounts to an act of communication.³³ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood have pointed out that consumption also pervades small-scale pre-modern societies. Elites everywhere attempt to consolidate their rank by means of exchange, gift-giving, the buying or even plundering of luxurious artefacts. Objects move within the boundaries of a society, a social group, from person to person and diachronically. Naturally, they also move or are moved between neighbouring societies, but in most of the cases presented in this volume, the things in question come from distant, often unfamiliar cultural contexts. Things that have lost their place—either in a local-social context or even in time—achieve a new significance; their 'thingness' is transformed and eventually they will speak in a different way, too. Things get entangled in altered 'stories', but in turn alter the stories of their new environment. Timon Screech's cargo lists, Larry Silver's engravings, or Charles Burnett's musical instruments, Toshio Watanabe's model gardens and Marina Warner's animated objects in addition to documenting an increased flow of goods, also highlight confrontations between different systems and visions of societies and persons.³⁴ Humans appropriate things³⁵ and do so in an active and conscious way. Therefore, collecting things or buying prestigious objects has a social as well as an individual dimension. This explains the recent focus on the fetishistic potential in the relationship between individuals and things.³⁶

Bruno Latour writes that observing things on the move "unfolds thousands of folds."³⁷ By being permanently recorded in narratives and conveying new ones, things create a new montage, wherein they, too, experience alteration. An ambiguous object may be tamed by becoming part of a personal collection or a museum inventory, thus perhaps resulting in the loss of its erstwhile sacred aura or downgrading it to a cu-

riosity. Such a transforming appropriation of things, with constant recoding, illuminates transformational processes in styles, social contextualisation, knowledge transfer and—because individuals are always involved—the transformation of individual identities. ‘Thinking through things’ is a methodological approach, a micro-analysis which permits the description of the complexity of cultural contacts at eye level, an activity that many disciplines are not really used to performing. The outcome always affects both people and things, even in a narrow investigation of one thing in a specific context. The ongoing agency between persons and objects as agents, the continuous change in using, reassembling, and worshipping things and in diversifying their stories, creates a kind of multidimensional texture with ever-changing patterns.

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Notes

- 1 See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 347–72.
- 2 See Pierre F. Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), trans. by Richard Nice as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1: *Abhandlungen*, part 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 471–508, trans. by Harry Zohn as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–52.
- 4 See Christoph Asendorf, "Verlust der Dinge? Stationen einer endlosen Diskussion," in *Die Tücke des Objekts: Vom Umgang mit Dingen*, ed. Katharina Ferus, Dietmar Rübél, Schriftenreihe der Isa-Lohmann-Siems Stiftung 2 (Berlin: Reimer, 2009), 11–23.
- 5 Marie-Luise Kaschnitz, *Menschen und Dinge 1945: 12 Essays* (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1995); Herta Müller, "brisée' mais résistante," *Le Monde*, 4 December 2009: 9.
- 6 See Esther Pasztory, *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); the contributions to *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria J. Henare, Martin Holbraad, Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007); and Bill Brown, "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 183–217, esp. 186–94.
- 7 Bennett, "The Force of Things," 349.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 365.
- 9 Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics*, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2000).
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