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The Interconnectedness of Objects and Imagination

Review by Lin Bentley Keeling

Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning

by Øivind Fuglerud & Leon Wainwright (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

Physical objects have tremendous associative power embodying more than remembrance and mental connections. They connect with us individually, affecting us bodily through all of our senses creating strong feelings through their use and presence and collectively as they create and re-create our social relations. This is the premise of Øivind Fuglerud and Leon Wainwright's edited volume, *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning*, which proposes a new integrative approach to the study of the social aspects of art and material culture. Each of the contributors focuses on the relationships between the physical and ideational realms, examining the ways individual imaginations combine into shared imaginaries in which objects are created and, in turn, how objects create and maintain social relations.

Objects and Imagination grew out of a series of meetings and conversations spanning 2010 to 2013 and is the third in a series of volumes edited by Birgit Meyer (who contributes chapter 8 to this volume) and Maruška Svašek (who is a coauthor of chapter 10) titled, *Material Mediations: People and the Things in a World of Movement*. In this series, theoretical debates grounded in ethnographic studies, look at the "dynamics of material production and cultural mediation in an era of intensifying globalization and transnational connectivity" (p. ii)." The contributors and editors of *Objects and Imagination* come from a variety of backgrounds including social anthropology, cultural history, the anthropology of religion, and contemporary art history and bring their diverse perspectives to focus on specific contexts which illustrate the ongoing relationships created and perpetuated by the objects we

make and use.

In their “Introduction,” Fuglerud and Wainwright outline their theoretical perspectives pointing in particular to the work of Birgit Meyer who invokes Aristotle’s concept of *aesthesis*, the use of all our senses in perceiving the world, in her emphasis on the importance of the mediation of our perceptions through material objects. Other theoretical perspectives cited by Fuglerud and Wainwright include Alfred Gell’s theories of art and agency, ideas of embodiment, practice theory, Actor-Network Theory, as well as perspectives from art history, particularly the study of evolving contexts for ethnographic objects as well as artworks in the globalized world. For Fuglerud and Wainwright, “what is at stake in this volume is the specificity of the social imagination as it produces human relationships and comes to have a distinctive impact on them” (p. 20).

To illustrate their approach to objects and imagination, they conclude with a diagram (p. 21) of a set of concentric circles: the central circle is the “Object,” surrounded by “Situated production, creativity, individual imagination,” surrounded by the “Institutional field,” surrounded by the “Field of the socially imagined.” This diagram points to the privileged place they see for objects in the creation and perpetuation of our social worlds. As Fuglerud and Wainwright note, until recently linguistic approaches were privileged in social science research, particularly in the study of the semiotics of material culture. But the imagination is not necessarily language based and, as this volume asserts, understanding the imagination, particularly as it relates to social formation and perpetuation, must include ideas and values as expressed in non-verbal forms. In looking at ethnographic collections, for instance, Fuglerud and Wainwright argue that a semiotic approach to these artifacts is inadequate. However, the turn to aesthetics in more recent research should not turn away from ethnography. They argue that the need for ethnography and anthropology has never been greater, particularly now when ethnographic objects, contemporary art and the global art market combine into a “network of sites” working in new ways outside the defined settings for art, ethnography and commerce of the past” (p. 9).

Birgit Meyer’s work, as illustrated by her chapter in the volume, is very relevant to research into these new relationships between humans and objects as well as to how materials work in the creation and perpetuation of meaning and values. Meyer’s concept of “aesthetic formation” is a constructive approach linking individual imagination into shared “social imaginaries” which both represent and create the world. The complex interconnectedness of the imagined and the material manifests for her in

“the materiality of the imagination and the imaginary dimension of matter” (p. 179). Building on Tim Ingold’s formative view of imagination, Meyers argues that the imagination requires mediation and media and advocates for research which synthesizes an ideational approach relating to abstract meanings and values while taking into account the anchoring material forms of objects and practices with objects in the world (p. 179; 163). She joins these ideas and provides guidance which, whether explicitly cited or not, connects the work of the other contributors in this volume: “From the perspective of mediation, all pictures and objects act as media that are materially present *and* point beyond themselves; they are both immanent *and* transcendent, tangible *and* elusive. ...these material items are not just there, in their sheer materiality, but reach out to something else” (p. 179, italics original).

In this volume, Fuglerud and Wainwright have collected the chapters into three parts under the headings “Museums,” the representation of objects and art, often of the ‘Other’; “Presence,” the active use of objects and the ways objects act upon their users; and “Art,” the creation and use of objects with heightened aesthetic value. The headings “Museums” and “Art” imply traditional concepts of divisions between artifact and art, while “Presence” implies the ethnographic view of objects within fixed cultural contexts. Each of the chapters, however, moves well beyond these constraints and looks at contemporary instances of the tensions, conflicting drives and competing needs of individuals and the ways the objects in their lives affect them. Focusing on contemporary contexts for diverse objects within the framework of the volume’s theoretical discussion, these chapters provide nuanced and rich explorations of the relationships between objects, individual imaginations and social imaginaries. Objects act as a prism within each of these studies to focus attention on the interrelatedness of objects and human actions, beliefs and meanings. Several themes cross-cut the three headings including the continued struggles of “native” artists who work in continual dialogue between their personal experience as individuals and allegiance to their heritage (chapters 1, 9 and 10); the ritual use of objects which facilitate and renew connections to homelands for diasporic populations (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9); the transformation of art and value in the global art market (chapters 1, 9, 10, 11); and the agency of objects for their makers (chapters 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10); and for their active users (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11).

While I have focused here primarily on the theoretical underpinnings of this volume and the new ground it covers in the study of art, objects and the human imagination, I would be remiss if I failed to note that each of these chapters is an individual and important contribution to this discussion and

deserves in-depth examination not possible within the scope of this review. In this volume, Fuglerud and Wainwright and their contributors break new theoretical ground in the study of human-object relationships in a synthesis of ideational and material studies. The new material perspective of *Objects and Imagination* succeeds in synthesizing physical and ideational perspectives with a collection of ethnographic studies grounded in social imaginaries which lays new foundations for the study of human-object relations.

Lin Bentley Keeling is an artist and independent researcher focusing on the non-verbal communicative value of art. She exhibits her work nationally and teaches courses, workshops and lectures on art and culture; Native American fiber technologies; creativity and spirituality and the practice of contemporary art. Keeling received her MA in Anthropology from New Mexico State University in 2008..



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