

Research Article

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MatteRealities: Historical Trajectories and Conceptual Futures for Material Culture Studies

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“No ideas but in things!” William Carlos Williams’s leitmotif for the modernist epic *Paterson* seems to anticipate the current renewal of academic attention to the materialities of culture: When the Smithsonian Institution accounts for *The History of America in 101 Objects* (Kurin) or when Neil MacGregor, designated director of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, aims at telling *The History of the World in 100 Objects* (2011), they use specimens of material culture as register and archive of human activity. Individual exhibitions explore the role of objects in movements for social and political change (*Disobedient Objects*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Large-scale national museum projects like the new Humboldt Forum in Berlin or the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., draw attention to the long existence of collections in Western institutions of learning and reveal the inherently political character of material culture—be that by underscoring the importance of institutional recognition of particular identities or by debates about provenance and restitution of human remains and status objects. The plethora of objects assembled in systematic as well as idiosyncratic collections within and outside the university is just beginning to be systematically explored for their roles in learning and education, funded by national research organizations such as the German BMBF.¹ In theatrical performances, things function as discussion prompts in biographical work (*Aufstand der Dinge*, Schauspielhaus Chemnitz) or unfold their potential to induce a bodily experience (*The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects*, GK Arts Center, Brooklyn, NY). Things are present: as heritage, as commodities, as sensation; they circulate in processes of cognition and mediation, they transcend temporal and spatial distantiations. Things figure in narration and performance, in our everyday life practices, in political activism. They build knowledge of ourselves and others, influence the ways in which we interact with our fellow human beings, and in which we express or control our feelings. They combine the apparently concrete and the fleetingly abstract. Overall, things make us do things.

1 In the first phase of its current call, “Vernetzen—Erschließen—Forschen [Networking—Unlocking—Exploring]” (2017-2020), the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) is funding 15 research designs in an alliance for university collections based on the perception that they present a fundamental research infrastructure for various disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Immediate work with the objects and reflection of the classificatory ordering principles to which they are subjected in collections leads to new questions and, it is hoped, to finding more valid answers to unresolved issues of research in anthropology, archaeology, ethnography, the geosciences, art history, as well as to issues pertaining to the history of technology, medicine or science.

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MatteRealities intends to contextualize and put into a historical perspective matters of culture, while also mapping conceptual futures for the study of material culture. Intending to increase the interdisciplinary discussion made possible by artifacts, we opted for retaining the overarching label *Material Culture Studies*, which we use in recognition of the diversity of approaches applied and as a common roof under which we see the increasingly sophisticated articulations of investigation into and reflection on the objects, things, or materialities of culture cohabit and interact. We hope to highlight the different perspectives and positionalities of our contributors at the same time that we foreground their shared concerns. The contributions present a coupling of case studies and theoretical reflection which we think provides a future orientation for doing cultural studies—taking seriously the network imagery of culture and thus possibly resolving the still extant binaries in a trialectics and trialogics of *MatteRealities*.

Objects. Things. Materiality. This trio of terms has been central in efforts at foregrounding the oftentimes taken-for-granted material foundations of contemporary societies, efforts ultimately aimed at reinvestigating the assumptions guiding the relations between humans and their life worlds. Each of these terms suggests a specific emphasis in accounting for the physical dimension of human experience at the same time that it marks a historical phase in the scholarly concepts addressing it: in a first impulse, a search for meaning “sedimented” in objects, followed next by the acknowledgement of the semiotic openness and affordance of things which eventually leads to explorations of the reflexivity and relationality prompted by a focus on materiality. The different theoretical framings and necessarily different methodological approaches to “the tangible products of human activity” (Rubin and Casper 694) originate in the concern to appropriately explore and explain the manifold material manifestations of cultures through time. With the eponymous neologism of *MatteRealities*, this special issue of *Open Cultural Studies*—as well as the conference from which it hails—reflects the dynamic tension between the poles of “old” and “new” Material Culture Studies and offers avenues of investigation that address the question of where the study of cultural matter might take cultural studies as a whole. In our view, the renewed focus on culture in its concrete physicality and embodiment takes us to the very root of transformative debates that have characterized the postmodern reorientation of scholarly reflection and practice in the humanities and indicates that the issues raised are still not satisfactorily resolved. To the contrary, we yet need to address the predicament captured in academic debate as the crisis of representation.

We refrain from reiterating here the insights offered by the histories of Material Culture Studies which have been presented by Hahn (2005; 2014), Hicks (2010), Tilley (2006) or Woodward (2007), to name but a few. Similarly, we do not want to duplicate the terminological agreements accompanying the evolving discussion. For German academia, this has been done competently and comprehensively by, e.g. Herbert Kalthoff, Torsten Cress, and Tobias Röhl in their edited anthology *Materialität: Herausforderungen für die Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften* (2016) or by Julia Reuter and Oliver Berli with *Dinge befremden: Essays zu materieller Kultur* (2016). Their programmatic introductions critically contextualize the perspectives for Material Culture Studies and thus impressively document the renewal of the field within the humanities in Germany. With this special issue of *Open Cultural Studies*, we step into the space opened up by these predecessor publications. Therefore, when we suggest terminology and a historic trajectory here, it serves to offer some signposts in the terrain staked out by our conference and mapped in the present volume.

An academic periodization of approaches as suggested by the three terms would take the term “object” to mark the first stage. Speaking of objects suggests to study culture as a composite phenomenon, and the term has thus been used in e.g. archaeology, anthropology, art history or museum studies. Objects played a central role as a foundational practice in anthropology, used metonymically for entire groups of people and providing evidence of the collector’s/ethnographer’s presence in the field. In such a reading, they are privileged over other physical, usually inanimate elements of the environment as imbued with cultural value or “purposely shaped” indicating “a culturally dictated plan” (Deetz 7). Because they are made meaningful through established codes of cultural interpretation and therefore hold a culturally determined position in discourses (cf. Geismar et al.), objects have been used as ‘alternative sources’ in historical disciplines.

Reading physical objects as primary data—as evidence, legacy or archive of human activity—nevertheless underscores a conceptual divide between the world of objects and the world of humans as well as a divide between the processes of making and interpreting objects. In this reading, objects merely offer clues to the processes of their creation as well as to their function and usage to be uncovered by the researcher, who thus at the same time also recovers the concepts within which the objects originally were seen as meaningful.²

In contradistinction, the term ‘things’ refers both colloquially and theoretically to entities that are not as yet precisely designated, not as yet specified, which therefore often function as a place holder. Things oscillate between significations; they are categorically open and polysemic. Because their systematic position is less clear, they invite approaches that foreground sensual perception. Things are also particularly mobile material entities. They circulate within social relations by way of specific transactions, e.g. gift giving, which endow them with social lives. Yet things do not permanently retain the properties invested in them by such transactions: “Today’s gift is tomorrow’s commodity. Yesterday’s commodity is tomorrow’s found art object. Today’s art object is tomorrow’s junk. And yesterday’s junk is tomorrow’s heirloom” (Appadurai, “Thing Itself” 15). Things have an “inherent tendency to move on to some new state in their social lives” (e.g. from useful item to waste) because their materiality allows for a wider range of imaginative, creative uses than their meaning (objecthood) might suggest (16). While they appear as a frozen moment of materiality, producing an illusion of permanence which conceals the production process, things are conceptually and materially fragile (15). Consequently, the term implies a conceptual shift toward relationality, for things disclose “the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 4). The thing character of cultural matter emerges especially in situations when the order of objects breaks down, as Bill Brown points out: a differentiation of objects and things becomes necessary when objects “stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (4). Thingness becomes perceptible when the reliability, expedience and disposability of things in practical use gives way to dysfunction and material resistance and thus foregrounds the materiality of the things with which we are used to working (cf. Kalthoff et al. 21-22).

The third term, ‘materiality,’ indicates the concrete physicality of phenomena not as a property of clearly delineated entities but rather as a different mediality of matter. Kalthoff et al. point out that it has been used lately to encompass physical phenomena, organisms and substances as well as signs, writing and graphic systems (12). Materiality goes beyond the artifact or the body; it challenges the reduction of matter to meaning or social relation and indicates the limits of human-centered approaches to material dynamics. Similarly, Brown suggests that the concept serves as an organizing principle to elucidate the interplay of material, surface and usage, shifting our attention to “the signifying effects of matter itself” (“Materiality” 59). From yet another angle, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s reflections on the *Production of Presence* (2004) reminds us to thoroughly reinvestigate the philosophical/epistemological underpinnings of the search for meaning (i.e. ‘interpretation’). The ‘presentism’ in recent approaches to materiality marks a significant departure from earlier models of analyzing material culture as a mute archive of meaning.

The three terms reverberate with fundamental issues of humanities discourse—mind and matter, culture and nature, subject and object, realism and representationalism, empiricism and constructivism—and embrace the complexities of cultural practice in an effort to account for the richness of cultural expression. They invite a retrospective sketch of the central assumptions informing cultural analysis throughout the twentieth century. In this long-range perspective, E. B. Tylor’s holistic concept of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871; qtd. in Kroeber 43) serves as a point of departure for cultural studies, both for its championing of descriptive rather than normative approaches to culture(s) and for

² While often used synonymously, the term artifact somewhat counterbalances the perceived passivity implicit in the concept of ‘object’ by insinuating maker(s) and usage and thus indicating not just function but human agency. The artifact perspective expands the concept by implying participation and relationality and thus points to approaches that address the relevance of matter in/for social analysis.

its focus on the particular in cultural analysis in contradistinction to the universalizing explanations that had characterized nineteenth-century cultural theory. Next, Franz Boas' definition of culture as "all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individuals as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits" (1930; qtd. in Kroeber 43) integrates aspects of the social, the behavioral and the material into the analysis of culture and provides a trajectory to Raymond Williams's foundational proclamation of culture as a "whole way of life" (xiv, xvii). A second trajectory pertains to the uses and function of objects in establishing and maintaining social relations, departing from Marcel Mauss's patterns of exchange as outlined in *The Gift* (1925). The entanglement of social and material phenomena reappears in network-based readings in current cultural theory and justifies reconceptions of material culture as socio-materiality.

In our understanding, three moments between the 1950s and the 1970s prepared the intellectual ground for (New) Material Culture Studies: Firstly, the emergence of post-structuralist approaches to the study of culture in its anti-essentialist insistence on the instability of ascribed meanings and on the interchangeability of thing, text and image, as reflected for instance, in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1950). Secondly, the constructivist perspective on cultural phenomena expressed in Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). And thirdly, the application of semiotics which allows to understand things as signs and which thence leads to an expansion of the idea of 'text' and, eventually, to Clifford Geertz's reconception of cultural observation as "thick description" (1973) with its emphasis on culture as text and the institution of interpretive approaches as a viable methodology of cultural analysis.

Until the late 1970s, while things were conceptually established as integral to social and cultural processes, objects were still primarily investigated as register and archive of meaning. Therefore, the early 1980s mark a turning point: Jules David Prown's seminal essay "Mind in Matter" (1982) departs from the duplicity of the field as both topical and conceptual with his concession that "the term *material culture* [...] refers quite directly and efficiently, if not elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, *material*, and to its purpose, the understanding of *culture*" (2). In an effort at synchronizing scholarly theorizing and practice, Prown summarizes the classical formula of Material Culture Studies which explore physical objects as primary data. Yet to him, "the gift and the promise of material culture" lies in transcending the view that artifacts communicate sedimented information and that, instead, realizing their indexicality allows access to meaning across time and space through affective and sensory experience (16).

With *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Appadurai places a further landmark in the field of Material Culture Studies: in tracing the global entanglements of commodity flows, his anthology repositions material culture, highlighting its mobility through space and time and emphasizing the concomitant semiotic and economic flexibility. His concrete materialist stance reinforced the epistemological issues which inform the reflections on ethnographic representation assembled in James Clifford and George E. Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986), as well as in George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986). Especially the reflexive dimension of cultural anthropology, the auto-ethnographic impulses and the efforts at defamiliarization are translated to the study of material culture in order to unsettle the dichotomies inherent in the term.

These calls for reflexivity and dialogicity in the theory and methodology of studying human life result in a redesign of interaction in fieldwork situations during the 1990s: Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (1995) suggests to de-hierarchize cultural encounter by crediting things with agency in an effort to recalibrate the uneven distribution of power in fieldwork situations. The network becomes method and metaphor in his repositioning of the material in the interaction of humans and things. Latour proposes sociocultural networks which endow objects with agency and thus de-hierarchize human and non-human actors.

Present-day Material Culture Studies subscribe to a wide reading of material culture which encompasses natural entities and organisms, substances, along with the established understandings of object, thing and materiality. They have retained the focus on the contexts of usage of things, on the meaning-making processes that we can observe and deduce from objects, and on the practices with things that entangle humans and "stuff." Seeing the older tradition in Material Culture Studies enmeshed in the conundrum of how to avoid or at least properly account for processes of "dematerializing the material" owing to an insistence on a distanced analytical perspective and methodology, new approaches strive to consistently develop the dialogue between

empirical and theoretical approaches to matter with a strong regard for ontological and epistemological questions. The heterogeneous perspectives assembled at present under the roof of Material Culture Studies are characterized by the tension of the physical and the symbolic in cultural matter, the material and the social in life worlds, between distance and proximity of the observer, between realism and representationalism in the mediation of insight. As a result, New Material Culture Studies have led the field to a new degree of dialogicity and reflexivity that opens the conceptual categories to more empirical approaches (cf. Kalthoff et al. 29). They are dedicated to exploring the mobility and circulations both of cultural material proper and of the categories used in accounting for it. They address the entanglement of the social and the material as existing under conditions of embeddedness and relationality rather than opposition and isolation. They strive to acknowledge the interplay of the concrete and physical dimension of matter with the meaning-making efforts they reflect. The New Material Culture Studies embrace socio-materialisms that deal in relationality and entanglement. They read cultural matters for the temporalities of objects which are both marked by and structuring of time, for the circulation of objects through various signifying practices, for the experience of the non-present offered to the senses by the immediacy of artifacts, for the distribution of power implicit in uses of natural resources, for the morality of objects—characterizing artifacts as neither neutral nor innocent. The New Materialisms remain open to new perspectives on what they do, how they do it and what they deal with in doing it (cf. Kalthoff et al. 26-30).

These New Material Culture Studies epitomize the theoretical shifts of cultural studies which Andreas Reckwitz outlined in his *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien* (2006), namely a shift from cognitive constructions (language) to textual orders (landscape/culture/etc. ‘as text’) to, eventually, social practice—thus from Prown to Brown. The oppositions of culture/alism and material/ism seem to weaken and possibly dissolve as do the oppositions of mind and matter, person and thing, subject and object (Reckwitz 713). The theoretical realignment has been ongoing since roughly the late 1980s, and Material Culture Studies continue to share concerns of cultural studies when they emphasize the particular over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, or the sensual over the intellectual. Materiality, therefore, refers to a different dimension of experience, it calls to witness the concrete, empirical, physical which we can sensually perceive as against the abstract, phenomenal, virtual, or intellectual which we are accustomed to in our making of cultural meanings.

From the vantage point of the majority of its contributors, practitioners of English and American cultural studies in the wider sense, in its individual contributions and as a whole *MatteRealities* documents the richness of insight gained by exploring human existence through objects, things and materialities. We believe that *MatteRealities* heeds the call to document the analytical productivity of a consistent integration of materiality into our investigations of culture in all its observable manifestations, a call also to widen the circle of contributors to the discussion about the potential of previously overlooked explanatory contributions of Material Culture Studies to the various practices of cultural studies assembled. Eventually, it is the call to reflect—again—on our own theoretical assumptions, intellectual structurations and scholarly practices and to develop both new sensitivities and new methodologies commensurate with the dynamics and specificities of encountering humans and their productions.

While some of the collected essays originated in projects presented and discussed during a lively international conference at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg in late March 2017, some essays were specifically written for *MatteRealities: Historical Trajectories and Conceptual Futures for Material Culture Studies*. The individual essays integrate discussions conducted across the spectrum of New Material Culture Studies. They speculate about the historical, political, and epistemological implications of cultural objects, and they map future courses: by exploring how matter/material exerts itself in the building of knowledge about ourselves and others, how things become meaningful objects integral to social reproduction; and how, in the face of the alleged dematerialization through the transformation of any material object into something virtual or digital, the presence (or absence) of matter changes what we experience and how we come to make sense of it.

Erika Doss's opening essay reflects on how market forces and the monetization of art influence and alter the cultural potential of artistic expression. Reading Jackson Pollock's 'Mural' through the lens of Arjun Appadurai, she highlights the mobility, circulation and mutual interdependence of literally "moving images" on the global art market, asking for the consequences on cultural production and consumption. Doss highlights the pervasive need to theorize the material turn also with regard to the systems of cultural production which she considers still insufficiently understood. Museum spaces may function as complicit in market processes, but they also contain a potential for resistance to such a dynamic if they employ their power to make visible and communicate value as a function of cultural processes rather than as an intrinsic property of objects.

In her discussion of the "actants, sociability, and form" in Jane Austen's *Emma*, Nikolina Hatton explores the nexus of materiality and narrative agency. Hatton investigates objects for their potential to subvert established cultural and social practice, thus challenging a purely instrumental understanding of objects and commodities in fictional texts. Reading two pianos as actants rather than symbols gesturing towards class or objects supporting the self-fashioning of characters, Hatton detects an idea of "the collective" in Jane Austen's work where objects not only act as signals of social mobility but also exert specific (behavioral and affective) demands on the individual. In her assessment of Austen's material aesthetic, things function as sites for interpretive ambiguity and thus enable a critical expansion of the concept of narrative agency.

Ulrike Zimmermann investigates the prolific material legacy of the British naval tradition in her essay "On Things from Sea and Shore." She takes into view memorabilia ranging from the ideological/patriotic implications of "'mind-setting' work" like girls' needlework samplers to what today we would call fan merchandise, including souvenirs and other early vestiges of mass-produced objects celebrating the British Navy and the exploits of Admiral Lord Nelson. Moving from an assessment of their status as artifacts of power to the undeniable power of the artifacts in producing knowledge about British maritime culture and its major protagonists, Zimmermann discusses the objects' role in popularizing the expansion of the British Empire. She convincingly argues that the deceptive presence of the souvenir functions as an unspectacular suggestion of participation in a historic event turned nationally significant. Mundane objects thus not only teach the public about events, or stand as reminders of the exceptional and heroic; as fashionable artefacts they manage to infuse everyday material culture with a feeling of cohesion and social participation in the face of events given national importance.

In a materialist ecocritical approach, Ursula Kluwick looks at Victorian engagements with water, especially the representation of various aquatic bodies and forms such as rivers and lakes, fog and rain, as well as effluents like e.g. sewage. She argues that for Victorian literature, water is important not just as a motif or symbol but as matter. The peculiarity of water, as expressed in its various and sometimes anomalous material properties in Victorian writing, influences the literary representation and role of this element as a substance. Kluwick shows that Victorian writers often depicted water as an agential substance with which humans interact. She takes the treatment of natural matter in Victorian literature to indicate a new awareness for agency shared by humans and their environment.

Bärbel Tischleder takes on the New Materialisms' general tendency to theorize objects by highlighting their agency, independence, and withdrawnness from human actors. Her essay takes issue with Jane Bennett's and other New Materialist thought, especially their propensity to invoke the activities of "nonsubjects" to marginalize questions of human subjectivity and focus instead on the trajectories and propensities of material entities themselves—framed discursively as "thing power"—and it also offers a critical engagement with Bruno Latour's notion of nonhuman agency. In his recent work, Latour has been concerned with the question of how we can tell our "common geostory." By way of literary examples from Mark Twain and William Faulkner, Tischleder argues that our understanding of the powers of rivers and other nonhuman agents remains rather limited if we attend primarily to the mechanics of storytelling, in the way Latour does. In her view, it is the aesthetic and experiential registers of literary worlding that offer alternative venues for imagining nonhuman beings and our interactions with them in the era of the Anthropocene.

In his discussion of Bessie Head's novel *When Rainclouds Gather*, Gerd Bayer probes the material grounds on which discursive difference was built in colonial situations. Integrating ecocritical and postcolonial approaches, he reads Head as positioning the physical properties of a local ecosystem and concomitant (agri-) cultural practices as an alternative to territorialism and cultural essentialism in efforts at decolonization. The

novel foregrounds progressive approaches to the physical realities of the land and highlights the incalculable physical productivity of liminal spaces. In Bayer's reading, the novel juxtaposes the material realities of human interaction with the environment and the substantial elusiveness of ideological constructions. Bayer suggests that Head may have anticipated current trends in environmental thinking when proposing the physical materiality of space as a way of overcoming culturally over-determined conflicts in post-colonial contexts.

The "Multifaceted Role of the Body in Visualizations of Earthquakes" is at the center of Susanne Leikam's essay. She explores inter pictorial correspondences of the portrayal of human bodies in three earthquake pictures and exemplarily demonstrates how the academic attention to the (in)visibility and the staging of human bodies in earthquake visuals expose often highly contested contemporary political, economic, and social matters. Owing to their potential for affective identification, visualizations of historical disaster experiences in popular types of disaster illustrations have been culturally and conceptually effective since at least the early modern era. In this view, human bodies served as pictorial seismographs indicating the physical intensity of the shaking of the earth and the resulting emotional distress, but they have also worked as proxies for the disruption of contemporaneous political, economic, and ideological agendas.

Katharina Fackler seeks to complicate the popular notion of photography's perceived materiality as well as its supposed dematerialization after the digital turn. Her essay "Of Stereoscopes and Instagram: Photography, Materiality, and the Senses from Analog to Digital" traces how digital photography (re-)invokes the material and may continue to challenge our understanding of photography at large. Scholars from Roland Barthes to Geoffrey Batchen and Elizabeth Edwards have emphasized the status of (analog) photographs as multisensory, three-dimensional objects that exist in time and space and have a tactile, physical presence whose materiality shapes processes of intention, production, consumption, and usage. Focusing on the new infrastructure created through digital photography, omnipresent smartphone cameras, online social media, and their transnational implications, Fackler's contribution skillfully exposes how new technologies have, or much rather have not changed photographs' material and presentational forms and social uses.

The special issue closes with two commentary epilogues from the perspective of cultural anthropology by Hans Peter Hahn and American Studies by Martin Brückner, respectively. These statements, together with the articles collected in this special issue reflect on the significant debates and document that from whichever angle we approach our 'object' of study, we benefit from accounting for the material dimensions in our efforts to arrive at valid explications of culture.



Fig. 1: Wilhelm Frederking, *Theories of the Deep Understanding of Things 2*, 2016, oil on canvas, mixed technique, 210 x 135 cm. Private collection. Photo by Wilhelm Frederking, 2017. With his series of collage-like superimpositions, Wilhelm Frederking reflects on processes of imagination in signs, language, and representation. Frederking's artwork aligns with the purpose of our conference proceedings for he challenges us to question the overlay of meaning, to penetrate the surfaces of things, and to develop a sensibility for the simultaneity of substance and representation. In his experimental approach as well as in his insistent questioning of the legibility of things, images, and texts, Frederking's artistic idiom resonates with the ideas assembled in this special issue.

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