

Research Article

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The Place of Objects and Things in the Age of Materiality

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Abstract: This essay reprises the status of objects in relation to critical conversations that favor things and thing studies over other methodologies of material culture studies. Recent discussions have dismissed objects as passive foils that lack in meaning. Glossing the factor of representation, however, these discussions have also glossed over a factor crucial in shaping the way in which the distinction between objects and things is made accessible in theory and practice. Two examples taken from eighteenth-century American literary culture, an anecdote by Benjamin Franklin and a sales ad published by the Pennsylvania Gazette, illustrate how in the process of representation objects become imbued with significance that reaches beyond mere signification and object classification. Once conceived as 'material signs,' objects become participants in cognitive environments in which seemingly meaningless symbols foster meaningful engagement with materiality.

Keywords: objects; representation; material culture studies

As the essays collected in this special issue explore new paths for navigating the at once conceptually exciting and confounding space in which materials become meshed with realities, they also re-examine the status of "objects" and how this affects current critical conversations about material culture studies. Throughout the issue, the essays implied definition of "objects" is conceived in the broadest terms possible. As if invoking W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding that "objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science" (156), the essays' selected objects run the full gamut: from the hard, easy-to-see, easy-to-name piano forte, naval tableware, or photograph, to the more protean, functional rather than empirical materiality of electric light, money, seeds, or water and its constitutive elements hydrogen and oxygen.

On first sight, pairing the above object definition with the essays' object choices points to a conceptual as well as practical conundrum familiar to students working in the field of material culture studies. Regardless of what is being scrutinized, and I purposefully avoid the terms "anything" or "everything," each and all fulfill the form or function of objects, be it as physical matter or the intangible, as a spatial or temporal configuration, or as something particular or a system. While the objects' material range can be baffling, academic conversations treat this ambiguity as a virtue of material culture studies (Candlin and Guins 1-5; Miller 1-8), and unlike in many other fields of inquiry, the definitional latitude surrounding "objects" has invited interpretations shaped by a plethora of theories and methodologies. Not surprisingly, the issue's playfully spelled title "MatteReality" anticipates the way in which the essays engage with a highly diversified discourse that has been shaping material culture studies in recent years, activating Igor Kopytoff's object biographies, Michael Fried's forms of objecthood, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Daniel Miller's view on stuff, or Jane Bennett's vibrant materialism. Above all, as the authors marshal the at times dizzying array of concepts and voices—and significantly, before fully leaning into their respective

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object examples—many take a moment to reflect on the relationship of their objects to "things" and the discussions spurred by Bill Brown's "thing theory."

Since the early 2000s, to engage with the field of material culture studies has meant to engage with the conceptual tension between objects and things. As even the most cursory survey of recent publications reveals, many projects—too numerous to list here—have done so with gusto. Delving into theories launched in fields ranging from philosophy, art, and art history, to anthropology, literary studies, and environmental humanities, reading the above essays comes at the critical moment when "things" are held up less as an intellectual proposition but more as a consensual maxim perhaps best formulated by Jean-Francois Chevrier when he states "every object is a thing, but not every thing is an object" (117). Invoking Martin Heidegger's "thingliness," Jacques Lacan's "unnamable or unknowable" thing, Latour's "Dingpolitik," or Bennett's "thing-power," the perception of a "thing"—be it a shoe, a desire, a missing mass, or a heap of trash—is that it stands for more than an object, for something categorically broader and more essential. The "thing" differs from the object because it is inherently more autonomous, self-supportive, and above all self-assertive; in our age of neoliberal ideology, things have come to embody attitudes and experiences like independence or resistance; indeed, short of assigning them the capacity for acting according to their free will, things are cited for having unique agency and a life force of their own.¹¹

By contrast, "objects" are measured in opposite terms and described as being dependent, unhelpful, accepting, subordinate, incapable of standing apart. Unlike things, "objects" are passive, easy to know, operative foils that lack in meaning and significance precisely because unlike things, to paraphrase Bill Brown, objects lie inside the "grid of intelligibility" and can never quite leave the "order of objects" ("Thing Theory" 5). However, as the essays pick their way through their respective disciplinary fields ranging from literature and cultural studies to ecocriticism and art history, looming in the background are critical frameworks not content with the passive object status, in particular those developed by proponents of an object-oriented ontology or speculative realism (Bennett; Morton; Harman). According to the latter's precepts, things become part of the object definition because they effectively inhabit "a world where the object, whether thing, tool, commodity, thought, phenomenon or living creature, has regained its rights, freed from the subject's determining mind, body and gaze" (Hudek 16).

Notice the syntactic slippage that at once reshuffles and equalizes things along with objects, the human, or the nonhuman? For contemporary artists, as suggested by Antony Hudek's volume The Object (2014), the thing-object binary appears to have lost its oppositional fix and has become recalibrated, subordinating things to a larger object world defined at once by materiality and immateriality rather than by the entrenched juxtaposition of agency and passivity. Backed by Latour's actor-network theory and the poststructuralist perspective that the material world is in flux rather than contingent on human subjectivity, things are now reconsidered to be part of a continuum defined by their object disposition. On the one hand, in an intellectual world writ large by materiality, objects wield the kind of vitality described by Bennett: "if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality is elevated" (12). On the other hand, such an object world defined by shared materiality does not propose another return to thingly alterity or hypostatized objecthood. Rather, the speculative return to objects proposes a participatory model populated by "almost-objects" and "almostsubjects," both of which are circulating in and out of systemic networks, energy flows, or states of being.

To say that the essays of this issue argue for a return to objects as the guiding principle for doing the work of material culture studies would be an overstatement. But to emphasize objects over things—as many of the issue's contributors do—in a critical field that has become increasingly defined, even dominated, by thing studies is to make a case for the objects' participatory disposition and its attending practices revolving around accessibility and legibility. In current efforts that rethink the status of objects, these factors are key to both the definition of the object and the future of material culture studies. But in contrast to theories of

¹ For summaries of how "things" resonate in critical debates see Mitchell (156) and Hudek (14). The conversation about things is similar to that surrounding the concept of materiality. "According to the new materialism, if everything is material inasmuch as it is composed of physicochemical processes, nothing is reducible to such processes, at least as conventionally understood. For materiality is always something more than 'mere' matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (Coole and Frost 9).

speculative materialism, which ultimately dismiss "philosophies of access" because all paths promising better understanding are inherently compromised by anthropocentric values (Harman; Meillassoux 5), most of the critical practices surrounding the study of objects and material culture are inextricably bound up with theories and practices of mediation. As the collected essays show, objects from the piano to money, from the photograph to water, can only become the focus of attention because as much as they are non-human actants performing variable roles inside networks of materiality, they are inadvertent participants in material practices predicated on the processes of representation.

Indeed, representation informs even the most intricate theoretical argument parsing the status of things or objects. Although the unspoken premise seems to be that we have unmediated access to things like a Berlin key or postmodern artwork or to objects like a vase or a collection of vases, theorists from Latour to Brown to Bennett can only make their case using verbal and/or visual representations, ranging from single word entries to lengthy verbal descriptions, from hand-drawn sketches to high gloss photographs. The same is true for the essays in this special issue. Turning to the media landscape that informs them, the example of the piano illustrates how its discussion as an object hinges on two different modes of representation. The printed word "piano" and the photographic image showing it are the sole source for communicating the piano in all its materiality and attending attributions of significance. According to current conversations about the thing-object nexus, the piano's representational formats would do nothing more but reify its classification as a "mere" object because it is beholden to systems of signification (word, image) that cannot stray much beyond the coordinates of orthography and semantics, or iconography and semiotics. But as this essay will show below, as soon as objects are reclassified in terms of their participatory disposition their very representation becomes a materially constituted act of signification.

For the seasoned practitioner of material culture studies the place of representation is nothing new. After all, as Kenneth Haltman observes, "Material culture begins with a world of objects but takes place in a world of words." Summarizing the critical methodology developed by Jules Prown ("the Prownian method"), he writes "while we work 'with' material objects, i.e. refer 'to' them, the medium in which we work as cultural historians is language. When we study an object, formalizing our observations in language, we generate a set of carefully selected nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and verbs which effectively determine the bounds of possible interpretation" (Haltman 4). In this line of reasoning, all objects are products of sign systems that, predicated on words or images, will render objects like the piano unambiguous, predictable and unresponsive, thus fulfilling the critical expectation, to invoke Brown, that objects are indexical constructs at best, and locked inside "the grid of intelligibility" or as symbolic icons inside the "order of objects."

This referential approach to objects does not square well with some of the basic understandings of more recent studies in material culture according to which "the world of objects, however ordinary, is a trove of disguises, concealments, subterfuges, provocations, and triggers that no singular, embodied and knowledgeable subject can exhaust" (Hudek 14). One disguise or provocation to be reckoned with is the fusion between the objects' materiality and their representation. The piano, the dollar bill, the drop of water, and for that matter even the "thing" is fundamentally woven into a "material" sign system in which the object's representational reach is as much connected to as it is capable of moving beyond the grid of intelligibility. Or, to build on the older literary turn in material culture studies, if we transpose language and description into semiotic terms the material sign of the "piano" would stand for an equation that looks like this: sign (signifier/signified) + X (n1). While the letters "p/i/a/n/o" encompass the object's representational sign, the "X" stands for the materiality of the object, and the multiplier "(n1)" for its passive or active participation in relationships marked by material use, social rituals, emotive attachments, economic activities, and so forth—in short, the combination "X(n1)" marks the surplus of signification resulting from

² It is fascinating to observe that thing studies often uses literary works as explanatory evidence but in so doing skips over the question of mediation and mediality as factors shaping our understanding of material life or materiality as such. Take for example Bruno Latour's praise of literary theory in *Reassembling the Social*, where he argues that unlike empirical data fiction provides a more liberal ("freer") environment through which to explore material life, but glosses over the fact that literary form, tropes, figures of speech are not only products of language but bound up with representation (Latour 54).

the object's material encapsulation in its usage and attachment, circulation and accessibility.³

Materiality in itself does not guarantee access to objects. On the one hand, and fundamentally, the semiotically constructed sign can easily transcend the grid of intelligibility because it is always baffled by the object's own residual materiality; that is, the object's mass, material composition, gravity, or friction the "X" factor—will always fail to register in words or images, and is thus likely to turn the object into an incomprehensible thing without a material code and thus push it beyond the comprehension of materiality. But on the other hand, when we consider the space that opens up between the object's matter and its medium of representation, the object itself becomes a material sign offering an interpretive model that takes into account the objects' materiality, because, as suggested by anthropologist Lambros Malafouris's study How Things Shape the Mind (2013), it "operates on the principle of participation rather than that of symbolic equivalency" (97). If meaning is "the ongoing blending between the mental and the physical, in the case of material signs, we do not read meaningful symbols; we meaningfully engage meaningless symbols" (117). In this participatory understanding, objects and their representation provide an alternative way of fusing empirical and historical evidence. Addressed as material signs, objects are participants in the process of cognition itself; or, as Malafouris writes, "The material sign instantiates rather than symbolizes. It brings forth the concept as a concrete exemplar and a substantiating instance" (97).

Two examples from the early American media landscape—a biographical anecdote and a newspaper advertisement from the eighteenth century-showcase how objects become material signs capable of jumping interpretive frames or representational grids. In both examples, objects emerge from the triangulation of materiality, participation, and representation. But as the examples will show, letting named objects intersect with the rules of signification and the habits of interpretation just as easily complicates their object status as it also plots out new paths towards understanding objects as they emerge from within the interstices of materiality.

The first example is derived from an anecdote told by Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson about the creation of a shop sign and the literary process of making a verbal sign become material. According to Franklin the sign emerged from the following process:

When I was a journeyman printer, one of my companions, an apprentice hatter, having served out his time, was about to open shop for himself. His first concern was to have a handsome sign-board, with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words, 'John Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money,' with a figure of a hat subjoined; but he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments. The first he showed it to thought the word 'Hatter' tautologous, because followed by the words 'makes hats,' which show he was a hatter. It was struck out. The next observed that the word 'makes' might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good and to their mind, they would buy, by whomsoever made. He struck it out. A third said he thought the words 'for ready money' were useless as it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit. Every one who purchased expected to pay. They were parted with, and the inscription now stood, 'John Thompson sells hats.' 'Sells hats,' says his next friend! Why nobody will expect you to give them away, what then is the use of that word? It was stricken out, and 'hats' followed it, the rather as there was one painted on the board. So the inscription was reduced ultimately to 'John Thompson' with the figure of a hat subjoined. (Jefferson)

On first glance, the anecdote seems to locate the shop sign inside older object definitions as well as traditional approaches to objects fostered by material culture studies. The sign emerges from a process circumscribed by the basic rules of signification and legibility. The visual "figure of a hat" painted on the board remains constant, serving as a kind of sign vehicle whose distinctive graphic shape relates to material forms much like a token or replica of the same type: here the image of the hat stands for all objects called "hat" (Eco 178ff). But if the hat image makes up half of the sign's signifier, its other verbal half—the signified—does not necessarily correspond. As Franklin's impromptu media critics weigh the value of each descriptive word ("John Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money"), they never entertain using the linguistic

³ Here I build on Timothy Morton's observation that we hear "the piano as object... [Its] Strings... have been liberated from telling a human story. They tell their own story, pronounce their own doom" (167). As the piano-object tells its story it enters a process in which "an object [is] seen from a standpoint that is 1+n dimensions lower than the object's dimensionality" (Morton 72-73).

equivalent to the painted hat and all its associated qualifiers, nor do they opt for adding Mr Thompson's picture. Instead, after a process of elimination rather than substitution they settle on the name of the shop sign's owner, "John Thompson."

Of course, the material (physically "real") object of the "sign-board" is absent. But in its narrative form—and considering the various narrative frames with their respective relationalities and temporalities—the piece of wood containing a painted image and two hand-painted words transforms the figure of the hat into more than a conventional object. By the same token that the image will not fool readers into thinking the sign stands for the person of "John Thompson" or vice versa that the name becomes a synonym suggesting the man is a hat, the material sign of the "hat" conceals as well as triggers a host of social conventions and relationships: while the story is clear about what will happen to hats, namely that they are commodities or saleable goods, the hat sign invites gestures of material speculation on what else is being disguised, whether the sign also represents gift objects, pawned goods, damaged hats, fashionable souvenirs, and so forth—all of which will only become fully accessible through the named object, "John Thompson," the sign's owner and, for prospective shoppers, the hats' interlocutor.

In the course of this anecdote Franklin outlines the workings of material signs: upon its completion, the sign-board not only contains word (name) and image (hat) as well as subject (name) and object (hat), but also its materialities consisting of wood, paint, and an implied though unspecified mass of hat fabrics. Thus constituted, the material sign here moves the shop's significance (trade and the object sphere of other shop signs) into a much broader representational sphere (the "n1" factor). It embodies the process by which meaningless symbols become meaningful through participation; the representation of the hat contains a host of negotiations that come with sourcing raw materials, labor, and designs that go into the hat's production as both the real and imagined object. In the end, Franklin's anecdote engages with objects that if they are considered as material signs will rattle the perceived order of representation; at least in narrative accounts like this, the object is no longer transfixed by a singular sign but instead fosters alternative routes towards object legibility.

In the example of Franklin's anecdote, the material sign of a shop advertisement carefully constructs the object of the hat as a singular representation that at once substantiates its meaning and makes manifest its imbrication in the cognitive processes of representation. Expanding on this anecdote, the second example—lifted from the advertising pages of eighteenth-century newspapers like the *Pennsylvania Gazette*—illustrates how objects, including hats, were able to register as "material signs" *en masse* in the everyday discourse of material culture. Between the 1730s and 1770s, and thus during the time of Franklin's hat anecdote, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* ran hundreds of sales ads, posted by shipping agents, wholesale merchants, and small shopkeepers, that addressed objects using the signs of the printed word without the representational benefit of pictures. Many of these ads took on the shape of epic lists similar to this transcription of an advertisement posted by *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on November 1, 1744:

JUST imported from London,... Superfine broadcloths in suits with compleat trimmings, low priced 6 qu. broadcloths with superfine black, blue and scarlet in pieces; bear skins, friezes, kerseys, halfthicks, duffils, strouds, lintseys, strip'd flannels, plain white and scarlet ditto spotted and mix'd, rugs, blankets, bedquilts, womens scarlet and coloured short cloaks, fine camlets, cheverins, damasks, flower'd russels, black coloured callimancoes, temmings, stript camletees, with silk ditto, grassets, starrets, cypress crape, worsted check, double and single allapines, sagathees, everlastings, mill'd shalloons, barragons, corded druggets, flour'd silk and incles for womens gowns, strip'd turketies, an assortment of buttons and mohair of all colours, white jeans; coloured, tufted, and double ribb'd fustians, glaz'd linnens, cotton counterpains, wadding, haircloths, dimities, and fine flour'd demothoys, floor and bed-side carpets; mens, womens and childrens worsted stockings, mens low pric'd yarn ditto, worsted, cotton and silk caps, a neat parcel of womens worsted & silk shoes, childrens morocco pumps, mens london shoes and pumps, cherryderries, spittlefield indians for gowns, black granderel for mens vests broad and narrow, silks, sergedusoys, womens diaper'd sowed petticoats, burying crapes, tiffany, womens newfashion'd capuchin cloaks, black laces for hoods and mantelets, leghorn hats [...]. (*Pennsylvania Gazette* 4)

The list of saleable goods goes on, doubling the number of items tallied above, but I stop at the referent for the objects called "Leghorn hats" to examine the efficacy of material signs for bridging the gap between the objects' representational form and their materiality. The objects called "Leghorn hats" were wide-brimmed, finely plaited straw hats originally made from a special kind of wheat found only in Italy

(Figure 1).⁴ While the list entry "Leghorn hats" has modern readers scramble for dictionaries and online hand books describing eighteenth-century textiles and fashions, the ad's choice of wording "Leghorn hats" suggests these objects were unambiguous and fully legible to eighteenth-century American readers (or listeners). Indeed, considering the fact that the ad is listing fairly specialized clothing articles without additional explanation or description indicates that the objects' verbal signs not only made them legible but activated knowledge of material characteristics, production processes, and the contexts of their usage. Placed inside the text of a commercial advertising, the entry "Leghorn hats" here becomes a material sign in that it engages the object and the subject in a two-way "scriptive" process of accessibility, a process that unlike older material culture approaches that focus on the unmediated object now calls attention to the "reading" of the object (here in list form) as a phenomenological endeavor complete with the inferences of relationality and personal selection, aesthetic evaluation and economic pricing.⁵



Figure 1. Poke bonnet worn by Mary Ann Williams (Mrs. Preece) in 1828. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The question is, how does a set of printed words like "Leghorn hats" enable objects to jump their lexical grid and become material signs indicative of a participatory materialism and the experience of materiality? Named items like "broadcloths," "damasks," "jeans," or "silks" invoke a representational system in which the meaning of signs is at once specific and differential. While the single word "broadcloths" could be applied to a whole range of objects and still not differentiate them, the ad writer provides one more term to give it definition. Adjectival qualifiers like "superfine," "compleat [with] trimmings," "black, blue, and

⁴ On examples of Leghorn hats in other American records, see Baumgarten (118); for a visual referent to a hat explicitly called "Leghorn hat," see the example posted by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts at https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/a-leghorn-hat-65599. The hat shown in Figure 1 is a "poke hat" which has a slightly different shape but is still made of Leghorn straw.

5 Robin Bernstein's concept of "scriptive things" is helpful for recasting the status of objects. According to her, "A scriptive thing, like a playscript, broadly structures a performance while allowing for agency and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable. Items of material culture *script* in much the same sense that literary texts *mean*: neither a thing nor a poem (for example) is conscious or agential, but a thing can invite behaviors that its maker did and did not envision" (12).

scarlet," and so forth turn generic broadcloths into singular objects whose textile materiality projects their future use and bodily engagement. The same logic applies to the words "Leghorn hats"—to just write "hat" would have meant little by way of differentiation; but to add the Italian place name "Leghorn" gives the object semantic depth and distinction within the order of objects.

Lacking further description, the term "Leghorn hats" invokes a simple visual understanding of objects. As if invoking a one-to-one correspondence between the present words and the absent material object, the term works like a metaphoric placeholder and as such would have enabled American readers to navigate the list of goods similar to the way in which modern readers today browse online shopping catalogs. In this understanding, and here I take the Greek word *metaphor* literally, the term enacts a "change of place" conflating the denotation of the hat with its connotation. If we were to look at modern illustrated sales catalogs, the objects of "Leghorn hats" would have also emerged from photographic images and thus at the intersection of two meanings, which according to Roland Barthes, comprise the "denoted message, which is [the object's] analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the way in which society represents, to a certain extent, what it thinks about the analogon" (6). While the word entries in the Pennsylvania Gazette's were not pegged to actual images and considering the laconic enumeration of list entries, advertisers seem to have approached objects true to the modern critical expectation that "we look through objects" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 4). Each object entry-from "broadcloths" to "Leghorn hats"-emerges from a deep and abiding structure of representation in which word signs make transparent the objects' radius of significance (or, to keep the analogy to semiotics in play, this is the factor of "n1"). In the case of the ad, the addition of one word renders valences defining the denoted object in relation to gender, class, even racial connotations; by way of differentiation, they hint at social rituals like those revolving around cultural refinement or funerary customs; indeed, in this reading the whole lot of objects is nothing but an assemblage of material coordinates (call it "artifact" or "commodity") predictably pointing out familiar frames of social reference, the most prominent one being economic and spelled out by the ad itself: all objects are "to be sold very cheap for ready money, or short credit."

Yet, by the same token that the linguistic representation of "Leghorn hats" reaffirms the narrow definition of objects, their object status changes from the moment that we allow Leghorn hats, or for that matter any of the other listed objects, to register as material signs. Readers would not only have looked at the words "Leghorn hats" but would have engaged with them by touch, holding the paper's edges or rubbing their fingers over the printed words. The tactile engagement with linguistic signs automatically includes the material experience of the sign's materiality, here the inked printing paper (or to recall the first example, the painted surface of a wooden board). In 1744, newspapers like the Pennsylvania Gazette were using low quality paper whose coarse surface would on occasion reveal bits and pieces of the paper's raw material, the paper pulp made of discarded textile rags. Represented on rough paper, named objects like "Leghorn hats" bear the imprimatur of the remembered touch and other sense memories. ⁷ The tactile experience of rubbing fingers over smooth or rough paper surfaces recalls other bodily memories of wool, linen, or for that matter, straw. Such sense memories may include remembered images of different straw hats; mental images of gold-colored wheat; the anticipated fit of the hat; the imagined head and body posture when wearing it; the anticipation of trimming the hat with decorative accessories (see Figure 1); the social events and emotional experience when showing off the hat; in short, as a material sign, the simple words "Leghorn hats" here embody hat-induced associations (call it disguises), cued by the idiosyncrasy of subjective experience, bodily engagement, and cognitive behaviors such as proprioception.

In view of these two samples—the shop sign and the Leghorn hats—the materiality of representation is an inherent part of the objects' calculus of interpretation. According to this calculus the object translates itself into immaterial form while at the same time the absent, immaterial object translates itself into material forms like newspaper ads or painted signs. Once addressed as material signs, the meaningful engagement

⁶ Paper quality depended on the quality of the rags "finest and whitest linen-rags are always the best, because, the finer the thread is, the more easily it is whitened," while "Woollen and silk rags are only used for brown paper." See "The Art of Making Paper," 12. On eighteenth-century paper production, see Hunter; Hills; and Krill.

⁷ See Smith; Classen.

with seemingly meaningless symbols enables objects to exceed their verbally and visually prescribed sum of referents. I have purposefully channeled the discussion of objects through structuralist theories of language because they best reflect the current attitude towards objects; because signs are relational and meaning emerges via differentiation, each and every object is captured and thus made legible from within a linguistic grid dotted with a finite set of assignations. If we were to stay in the representational world of advertising, the structuralist assessment of mediated objects would uphold the passive definition of objects. In this case, what matters most in printed ads and wooden or painted signs in the eighteenth century is the position of objects in relation to each other; what does *not* matter is the relationship of advertising signifiers to real-world referents, but rather the differentiation of each sign from the others to which it is related. But in the world of the reexamined object, the ads—like many of the essays in this issue—appear to approach objects as much through their materiality as through their representational formats. As material signs, objects are thus as much part of the process of signification as they are sign vehicles defined by co-materiality. This is not another form of fetishization (a critique frequently leveled at object-ontological thinking) or another instance documenting experience, such as hyperesthesia (a condition invoked when calling out things in opposition to objects). On the contrary, what the examples of the shop sign and the Leghorn hats show—and this extends to the above essays' discussions of pianos, money, or water—is that we cannot discuss objects in a vacuum defined by abstraction only, but must consider their participation in material representations. We have to reckon with the objects' immersion in the materiality of signification. As material signs, objects allow us to brook the gap that separates them from things and subjects by looking "with" or "into" objects rather than "through" them.

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