

Extraordinary THINGS



“Americans have long been a materialistic people... To me, it means that Americans have invested goods with powerful meanings. Goods matter to them. Owning things, living with things, longing for things years ago became normal and accepted parts of American life. Studying Americans’ lives, then, necessarily means studying Americans’ things.”

-Kenneth Ames



THE *Project*

Material culture is a term originally used by archeologists to represent “the vast universe of objects used by mankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, and to benefit our state of mind” (James Deetz). Material culture studies is now an accepted and thriving discipline that considers every aspect of the ways people imagine, create, use, and interpret their physical environment. Material culture studies are diverse and range from traditional formal analyses of artifacts to more contemporary focuses such as gender, consumption, perception, and social self-definition.

The purpose of the *Extraordinary Things Project* is to create a visual and intellectual dialogue of contemporary art from a material culture perspective. Historically, materials can tell us more about a culture and can be more representative of a society because of their ability to survive through time. The underlying premise is that the objects made or modified by man reflect the values, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of the larger society which they belonged. In this respect, the project focuses on how contemporary artists work with, examine, and decipher objects and artifacts and create visual interpretations or reflections of their own physical world.

The *Extraordinary Things Project* seeks to look at how individual artists embrace the methodology of material culture within their work. The group of artists represented create their work in the spirit of examining our culture through its materials. Although the focus of the project provides for a common method for creating visual works, the language of the works are quite diverse and vary based on the individuals' own interpretations. Ultimately, the intention of the project is to create a dialogue for looking at and creating art through a material culture understanding.



FANS
FOUND OBJECT CONSTRUCTION

GERALD WECKESSER

Curator's STATEMENT

I initiated the *Extraordinary Things Project* in 1999 after realizing the importance of a material culture dialogue in talking about contemporary art. As a curator, I recognized that many artists worked with cultural materials as elements within their work or as references for their ideas. My intent in establishing a project of this nature was to involve artists and scholars in an interdisciplinary discourse with respect to contemporary art.

My own interest in material culture began in graduate school after taking a course in material culture studies. I was immediately attracted to the idea of studying culture through the materials produced and used by that culture. This method of investigation gave me a structure with which to approach my work and I have been drawn to materials ever since.

Creatively, I have embraced the methodology of material culture studies and that methodology has helped to expand my own artistic vocabulary immensely. Like an archeologist of sorts, I use artifacts and remnants from my surroundings to create works that become visual investigations of my own culture. As an artist, I am concerned with the potential meanings of materials and artifacts and rely on those meanings to enhance the visual language of my work. Each object or material or image that I use adds to the weight of the stories that I am relating through my work and the materials become a vehicle for meaning and expression. For the viewer, it is my hope that a recognition of those materials will allow for a greater interaction with the work.

The artists included in the *Extraordinary Things Project* have an intuitive ability to manipulate and transform cultural materials and in doing so, they build a connection to their work through recognition, memory, and iconography. We are all interested in the potential of objects and artifacts to express meaning and provide cultural insight and, through our work, a narrative quality is developed from our use of those materials. Bringing artists and scholars together through this project can provide insight into how contemporary artists interact with the world around them and transform ordinary, everyday objects into extraordinary things.



THE MUSIC OF MORTAL LIVES
OIL ON CANVAS

STEPHANIE BRODY LEDERMAN



EPERGNE
HAND-WIPED XEROX TRANSFER ETCHING

KAZ McCUE

MATERIAL CULTURE *and Art*

Exploring the relationship between material culture and the visual arts provides artists, art historians, and cultural historians with a meaningful opportunity to examine the centrality of objects in people's lives, past and present. Artists who incorporate material culture into their work as subject matter or as points of reference in the creation of their art make connections with their society and culture in significant ways. The original works they produce are both aesthetic statements and social documents—dynamic expressions of the time and place of which they are a vital part—and represent what is sometimes called the artist's autobiographical response to the fashions, foibles, and assumptions of his or her own time. How a given society and culture centers within the individual lives of artists and the degree to which it is reflected in their works is a subject of interest to the art historian and cultural historian alike. Cultural historians value art as historical evidence, and are likewise interested in the social function of art, the relationship between art and social criticism, how social movements express themselves through the arts, and what controversies over contemporary art reveal about the cultural wars of their own time.

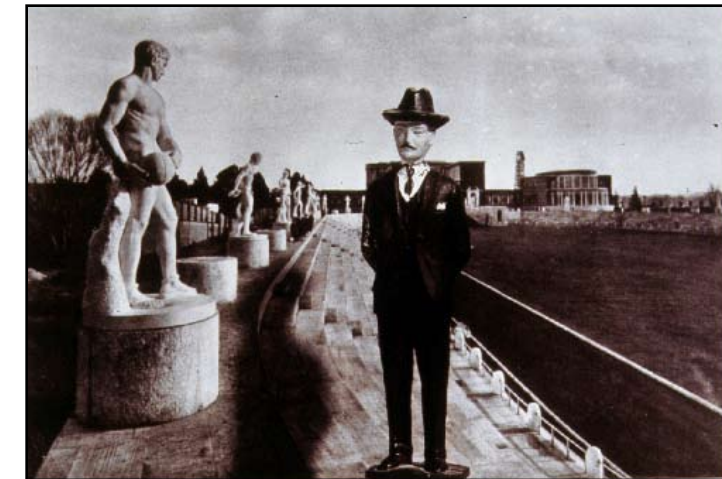
Art and cultural history intersect on many planes, not the least of which is the study of material culture. Artists who use images and artifacts as visual elements of their own compositions add narrative content by consciously selecting and arranging ordinary objects in their works. Those objects are readily recognized because of their commonness and because of the associations that people make with the objects. Art, especially popular art, is a part of material culture but not all of material culture is necessarily art when judged by its original function and purpose. Yet even the most common, unadorned, and utilitarian objects can become art if artists use them to make a personal statement through their art. One should not draw exclusive boundaries between art and material culture (they are permeable categories), but that is not to say that important distinctions are not to be made between them. Art and artifact differ from each other depending on the original function and intent of those who produced and used it. Artifacts were not necessarily made in the first instance as a conscious creation of visual art.

Defining what material culture actually is has not been among the least of the problems connected with its study. Material culture studies as a discipline or field of historical inquiry reconnects artifacts (things made by humans) to the social and cultural processes of which they were once an integral part. It is an interdisciplinary approach to the past and is usually nested within the fields of art history or cultural history, and in the United States is often part of the curriculum of American studies programs. The field relies heavily upon theories and methods pioneered by art historians, archeologists, and anthropologists. The devotees of material culture are a diverse lot: archeologists, art historians, cultural geographers, historic preservationists, architectural historians, museum curators, collectors of the decorative arts, and cultural historians.

TERRY A. BARNHART, PH.D.

Both art and archaeological artifacts can be read or interpreted as the residues of social processes that define the contexts in which the objects were made and used. Archeologists study objects as evidence of how prehistoric cultures used technology to produce objects to meet basic social needs, modify their physical environments, and to express ideas. Certain types or classes of objects are more closely associated with ideas than others, and in some instances may be regarded as the embodiment of those ideas. We know these objects as symbols or icons—tangible things which a society uses to communicate core beliefs and values. The objects are part of symbolic cultural discourse and might, as in the example of religious iconography, express cosmological conceptions. Artifacts are tangible expressions of human thought and behavior that were made to meet a specific cultural need. Material culture relates to the social or intangible aspects of culture in very meaningful ways. How we make those connections and explain them in large measure defines the field of material culture studies as an historical methodology and way of thinking about the past and the place of objects in American life.

The methods and perspectives of material culture studies also present us with another angle from which to view contemporary art. Scholars who study objects are not insensible to their aesthetic qualities, but that is not what motivates their interest in them in the first instance. They do not examine them as works of art per se but as cultural artifacts. And yet there are times when distinctions between art and artifact become blurred and familiar definitions and assumptions fail us. Artists, for example, often use cultural artifacts (materials produced and consumed by the society in which they live) as sources of inspiration, incorporate them materially into the composition of a particular artistic medium, or interpret them in a way that enables us to catch a glimpse of our individual and collective selves. Such pieces of art are both aesthetic and social expressions—art and social document, but not an artifact in the strict sense of the term often used by cultural historians. Contemporary art can be examined from this vantage point and, conversely, the ordinary things of everyday existence (cultural artifacts) often have aesthetic qualities that make them appear to be artfully conceived, executed, and designed. Design motifs found on even the most utilitarian and common place objects (agricultural implements for example) have aesthetic and symbolic characteristics that are also evidences of human thought and activity. One can make a distinction between artifacts and the visual arts for purposes of scholarly analysis and pedagogy but it is problematic in the extreme if those definitions and categories become too rigid or exclusive.



DANTE IN ROMA - APIAN WAY
SPLIT-TONED SILVER PRINT

ALYSSA C. SALOMON

DIANE LEVESQUE

AN AWKWARD COMPARISON
OIL ON CANVAS



Cultural historians—those who study artifacts, landscapes, and the built environment—have no particular authority to speak about specific trends in contemporary art or of its different genres and mediums, but may indirectly help us better understand the characteristics of the cultural materials used in their art by placing them within their broader social and cultural contexts. People use objects to order their lives, negotiate social relationships, create and reinforce social identities, and form what semiologists (those who study signs and symbols) know as the *langue* and the *parole* of a culture—a non-verbal form of communication through symbols that exists at the core of all societies. Objects are among the things that enable us to partially read a society, and enabling others to understand that connection illuminated the place of objects within their own lives. The very commonness of some of these cultural materials makes them historically and socially representative (as opposed to anomalous) evidences of human thought and behavior. Objects mirror the values, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, assumptions, and priorities of the larger society of which they are not an insignificant part. Cultural history in this manner may offer useful perspectives on how contemporary artists incorporate common objects (artifacts) in creating their art. ¹

Works of art that use material culture as subject matter offer artists a means of plumbing the depths of their own cultures. Art as social commentary, like all of the humanities,

challenge us to live examined lives and confront our commonplace assumptions. The study of artifacts can also indicate patterns of consumption and social identity based upon considerations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Contemporary art in time itself becomes historical evidence—a snap shot of social reality or criticism at a particular place and point in time as rendered from the particular point of view of the artist.

American arts and crafts as expressions of contemporary art and folk art often blur these distinctions. The creative vision of contemporary artists can be significantly influenced by the art and craft traditions of earlier eras, which serve as sources of inspiration for contemporary artists who modify or rearrange conventional subject matter through the creative juxtaposition of new cultural materials. One need only look at contemporary examples of quilt making, household furnishings, clothing, kitchen utensils, tableware, and pottery, to find abundant examples of continuities with the past in contemporary art. As Matthew Kangas has observed, “Each tradition invoked, however, is altered, rearranged, or satirized to suit the maker’s purpose. By alluding to past craft and art conventions, these [contemporary] artists draw upon their proud heritages and enrich and deepen their own brand of informed originality.” ² Cultural historians might recognize “informed originality” as a correlate of cultural innovation and adaptive use—something new emerging from earlier traditions but not entirely devoid of them.

Material culture informs the visual arts in other ways too. It offers the artist sources of ideas and raw materials to draw upon in their efforts to provide narrative qualities and social context to their works. The ordinary objects (common and therefore representative) that artists often incorporate into the still-life genre, for example, are selected and arranged with purpose. They have a narrative quality that speaks to the social experiences and identities of a wide range of people, depending on what objects the artist selects and how he or she arranges them. Janet Marquardt-Cherry has addressed the question of identity and shared experience in regard to the still-life works made by women: “. . . the objects and the correlation between them often spoke to a particular role and identity that women carry in our society.” ³ The individual and collective associations that we attach to objects, the way we use them to order our daily lives, the relationship between objects and personal identities potentially make them powerful political statements, depending upon how they are arranged and invoked in a particular work of art. We form personal associations with both the utilitarian objects we use as part of our daily existence, and with the decorative or purely aesthetic objects with which we consciously surround ourselves.

These assemblages are gathered for different reasons and in different contexts, but collectively center our lives through objects. It has been well said that “To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things.” ⁴



WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION

TATANA KELLNER

People consciously collect some objects as collectables—as antiques, family heirlooms, or curiosities—but accumulate others less personally as consumers of mass produced commodities. But consumers often invest seemingly impersonal commodities with personal meaning too. “Taste is about consumption and, in consuming, we reveal ourselves.”⁵ The origins of the American consumer society are traceable to the early phases of industrialization and the market revolution of the mid-nineteenth century. Mass marketed and produced commodities, as well as photographic images and lithographs, changed our relationship with objects, patterns of consumption, the relationship between work and community, and even how we communicate as a society. The communications and organizational revolutions of the twentieth century altered our perceptions of reality in significant ways. Vachel Lindsay observed in the early twentieth century that America was becoming a society of visual images, one that increasingly understood itself through signs and symbols that did not replace language but were non-verbal extensions of language.

According to Lindsey, America was becoming a “hieroglyphic civilization” through the mass marketing and consumption of images. The origin of that civilization dates to the mid-nineteenth century, where one finds its precursors in the consumption of Currier and Ives lithographs and the ultimate realism of photographs produced by professional photographers. Lithographs and photographs were the first mass-produced images of an embryonic consumer society that Lindsey would later call American hieroglyphics. The consumption of images became basic to understanding American cultural history from that day forward.⁶ From those beginnings through the mass marketing of the throw-away society of the twentieth century, we have produced and consumed our way to the present. We define ourselves and the society in which we live through the objects that surround us, not exclusively so but certainly to a significant degree. Historically, the things we left behind (those that were discarded and the keepsakes that were passed on as family heirlooms) are distinct forms of historical evidence. Contemporarily, material culture offers artists (for precisely the same reasons) subject matter for making personal statements about their lives and times through their art.

Material Culture and Art: An Historical Perspective



**FEMALE FETISH: IRON
BRONZE**

CLAUDIA DeMONTE

BETTY TOMPKINS

**FANNY
ACRYLIC ON MEAT CHOPPER**



Objects and images indicate the aesthetic sense or design ethic of their period. Collectively they represent a distinctive signature. Graphic and three-dimensional designs, color schemes, and the textures of materials are time-specific creations. It is an axiom among students of material culture that style is more than an aesthetic consideration; it is also the embodiment of preferences, traditions, and associated ideas. The decorative arts, no less than the fine art of the studio, function in similar ways. E. McClung Fleming identified the relationships between the aesthetic and physical properties of decorative arts and the cultural imperatives and priorities of the period that produced them. “The work of art bears the mark of its culture. It was made at a particular time and place, in response to a specific need, to perform a socially meaningful function, expressing values through design, ornament, symbol, and style, which were a part of a definite cultural tradition.”⁷ Style in the decorative arts, says Fleming, form part of a society’s “vital autobiographical comment.” Styles and motifs in the decorative arts are often most closely associated with concurrent styles and themes in architecture, style in

architecture in turn reflects the general aesthetic taste of a period that is also expressed in its music, painting, literature, and philosophy. Such synchronic interpretation places architecture, domestic furnishings, and the mood and texture of a period within a broad, nested, and humanistic context.

Thus considered, style in art and artifact is a type of historical evidence. Art historian Jules David Prown presented the relation between style in material culture and historical evidence as a hypothesis. “If the thesis that a society in a particular time or place deposits a cultural stylistic fingerprint, as it were, on what it produces is correct, two conclusions follow by which the thesis can be tested. First, we would expect to find shared stylistic elements in the objects—furniture, silver, architecture—produced in the same place at the same time. Second, we would expect find a change in style concurrent with a shift in cultural values.”⁸ Art historians have studied schools and traditions of art in much the same way, and, indeed, the method and theory of material culture studies owes a great debt to art history in this regard. The analysis of style, says Prown, does not necessarily add to the common stock of new information about “the engendering culture” that produced it, but rather what he calls a “more subjective, more visceral mode of understanding, an affective mode triggered by sensory perceptions.”⁹ It is precisely those affective, sensorial, and emotive characteristics that make artifacts such potent communicators about the past. The efficacy of historical artifacts is that they enable the dwellers of the present to have their own direct and personal encounters with the past—heuristic moments of discovery when we connect with experiences of a society that is removed from our own by both time and culture. Artifacts are time travelers. As George Kubler observed, “The moment just past is extinguished forever save for the things made of it.”¹⁰ Artifacts can, if artfully arranged and displayed in interpretive exhibits, convey the look and feel of an era as can be done in no other way.

Artifacts are part of a larger assemblage of signs, symbols, and ideas through which a society can be read. The symbolic characteristics of objects are among the means by which that society understands and communicates with itself and understands others who are different. Objects are non-verbal forms of communication because of the ideas and nuanced understandings that people associate with them as part of a larger cultural conversation. ¹¹ Taking a page from the semiologist Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), Michael Sherman has made the case that there can be "an historical sociology for the study of things. We are discovering that the materials, function, form, style, and decoration of things are important in informative, not merely illustrative ways." ¹² The meaning of objects is to be derived from understanding the social system that produced and used them. Semiotics is a means of decoding layers of social and culture meaning that people at one time attached to otherwise mute objects, and is an important part of material culture theory. The language of objects is to be understood within the rules of

usage that were originally attached to them. Semiotic analysis suggests that objects (as signs and symbols) have no inherent meaning. Meaning is imparted to the object by the observer, and that meaning is shaped by the observer's social milieu. Applying the principles of communications theory and semiotics to the use of things as non-verbal communicators gets at the inner workings of a society and has important implications for understanding how the public experiences art and artifacts in museums.

Material Culture and Art: An Historical Perspective



CRIPPLED EMOTION, SUSPENDED LOVE
FOUND OBJECT CONSTRUCTION

LINDA FOSTER LEONHARD

The same considerations involved in interpreting material culture as historical evidence explicate the relationship between contemporary material culture and contemporary art. Material culture theory and method can assist the artist in his or her attempt to plumb the depths of their own times by incorporating material culture into the subject matter of their own creations. It would be a narrow view indeed that did see that a reciprocal relationship exists between the material culture and art of all times and places, although contemporary artists labor under the additional burden of dealing with their own preconceptions and biases in trying to read the warp and woof of their own culture. Once again, Prown stated the problem concisely.

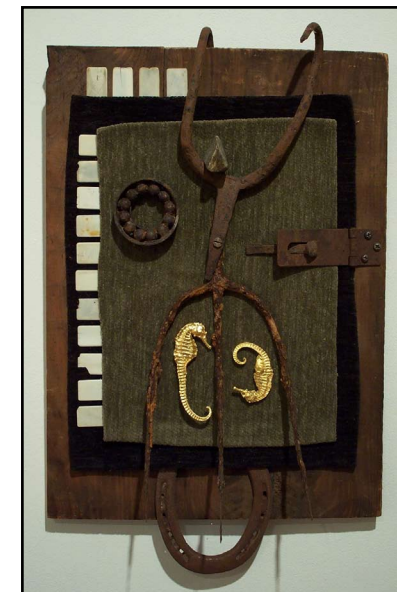
Style is as much reflective of the values of a contemporary and familiar society as of those far removed in time and/or place. It is more difficult, however, to perceive values we share, perhaps unconsciously. We are partially blinded by familiarity. If one is looking for reflections of culture in objects, one's cultural perspective is, among other distorting factors, a polarizing lens that reduces those reflections that resonate within one's own culture. And when we are looking directly for reflections of our own culture, it is as if the polarizing lens were revolved to the optimum setting for blocking out reflections. ¹³

That is no less true of cultural historians who examine what is sometime called contemporary history. We do not have enough temporal separation from our own personal experiences and predilections to be as objective as we might otherwise be, even though we always filter the past, remote or otherwise, through the concerns and assumptions of the present.

Artists and historians have different frames of reference, the former is primarily and essential aesthetic and the latter cultural. These are not mutually exclusive categories (they can actually be quite permeable) but in terms of scholarly analysis and pedagogy do make important distinctions and differentiations. Historians study objects primarily in relation to their cultural values and ideas rather than their form and design, except in the numerous and significant instances in which design or style reflects culture as previously noted. Artifacts under this view are social and cultural documents that reflect the attitudes and values of those who made and used them, and of the larger culture in which the maker, consumer, and object meaningfully interact on many levels of existence. Cultural historians are interested in the material composition of artifacts and the manufacturing techniques used in their construction, which add dimension to the artifact's social function and the our understanding of the conditions of everyday life existing within the society at a particular point in time. ¹⁴ Both the art and the artifacts of a period serve historians in their effort to provide a more complete representation of social conditions in the past, one that is not entirely dependent upon written sources and that speaks to larger realms of shared experience by largely anonymous people.

LINDA HOFFMAN

HARBOR
MIXED MEDIA



Such an approach, however, serves the historian's needs better than those of the artist, for the historian's frame of reference is so concerned with contextualizing the art against the broad background of its times that the actual artwork itself can become a secondary consideration. An artist's work is an autobiographical statement or response to his or her own time. When the unique characteristics of works of art are made to serve a different master, the aesthetic frame reference and personal statement of the artist takes a back seat to cultural context of the historian. James S. Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter made this point in *Art and Archaeology*, when they noted that "historians do not necessarily broaden our perspective or contribute to the enrichment of humanistic studies by divesting art 'documents' of the [aesthetic] qualities that are peculiar to works of art and that differentiate them from other products of society." ¹⁵ Art, then, does have distinguishing and differentiating characteristics. Art is an artifact but not all artifacts art.

Visitors to art and history museums have personalized and subjective experiences with the works of an artist or a group of artists that consciously, at least, has little to do with the historian's objective categories of historical analysis (a humbling realization truly). Art galleries consciously take a minimalist approach to designing exhibit space, while history exhibits by comparison tend to be very busy and crowded spaces. The intent of gallery display techniques is to focus attention on the particular compositional characteristics of the work and allow visitors to interact with a minimum of textual interpretation. Sometimes the gallery experience is filtered with no text beyond labels that identify the artist, the title of the work, the medium in which it is presented, and the date of its delineation. How different from the text heavy interpretive exhibits of the history museum, which would not work as history exhibits (narratives) if history museum imitated the stark approach of art museums.



SCENE FOURTEEN: KITCHEN
PASTEL

BARBARA RACHKO

JANET ORSELLI

IMPEDIMENTA
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION

Material Culture and Art: An Historical Perspective



Is there a middle way to lead one from the thicket? Is there an approach that does justice to both the formal aesthetic qualities of art and its historical dimensions? A student of the problem has called for a mixed frame reference: one that does not validate or invalidate either the aesthetic or cultural frames of reference at the expense of the other.

Museum curators and visitors fail to realize that a number of objects in the history museum are of unique aesthetic value; a number of objects in the art museum are of historical significance. Despite attempts at rigid classification, there are instances in which the historical specimen and object of art are one and the same. . . . The task, then, is not to amalgamate the museums of cultural history and art into larger unmanageable institutions with a sure increase in internal political activity among the specialists, but to redirect the viewpoints of these specialists toward a mixed frame of reference. Such a new attitude would make more of the common ground between specializations without undoing the specialized viewpoint itself. ¹⁶

Many students of material culture are committed social historians, for the things of history provide another angle from which to study childhood, the family, the world of work, and the larger issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The Annales School of historians probed into the deep structures of societies and was not concerned with historical events as traditionally encapsulated in historical narratives. Historians of the Annales School concerned themselves with history as long-term processes and not as history as events; with the collective "mentalities" of societies and not with the formal thought of educated elites. Artifacts are a way of getting at that deep structure of communities, for they bespeak of social experiences common to all: the home and family, work and leisure, and the experiences and social identities of groups. Artifacts are certainly not the sole historical evidences relating to these concerns, but can supplement and compliment literary sources in many instances.

GLORIA DeFILIPS BRUSH

(7460) FROM THE LANGUAGE / TEXT SERIES
DYE SUBLIMATION PRINT ON PAPER FROM DIGITALLY
MEDIATED SCALE MODEL ARCHITECTURAL CAMERA SOURCES



speaking of folk artifacts, Simon Joseph Bronner noted the perils inherent in making definitions and categories of art and artifacts that are too rigid or exclusive. "All objects are not created equal. Whether made by hand, by tradition, by whim, kit, or assembly line, the object is evidence of different cultural experiences. The categories folk, popular, and elite commonly are used to describe and separate for analysis such cultural experiences, their settings and products. The categories are never as neat or separable as we would hope. Folk, popular, and elite are abstractions—narrow labels imposed on the concrete object. The object cannot be folk or popular in and of itself." 17

"Extraordinary Things: A Study of Contemporary Art Through Material Culture" challenges us to think about these meaningful inter-relationships as we experience the art exhibited there. Kaz McCue, the originator and curator of the project, has brought together the works of artists who either use cultural materials (images and artifacts) within their visual art or use it as points of reference for its creation. These works individually and collectively embody both the creative visions and aesthetic values of the artists, but are also tangible embodiments of human thought and what has sometimes been called the autobiographical response of the artist to his or her own times. Art historians and cultural historians will one day study these creations as historical evidences and as a means of decoding the langue and parole of the culture that produced them. The material culture that is either embodied in these works or used as references or models provide common ground for interdisciplinary inquiries into the timeless relationship between material cultural and art.

*Terry A. Barnhart
Charleston, Illinois
October 12, 2002*

The reciprocal relationships between material culture, the visual arts, and cultural history are important if we are to know the difference between telling a story around objects (using them as mere illustrations or props) and telling that story through objects (valuing them as historical evidence and expressions of culture). These are considerations of some moment for those who present material culture and art to public audiences. But it is also important that we remind ourselves not to draw the boundaries between the different kinds of material culture too boldly or imperiously. The arbitrary distinctions often made between folk art and folk artifacts are one such reminder, for they are constructions that we place on those objects as we try to make sense of them in relation to other cultural materials of a different kind. In

MARGIE KUHN

20th CENTURY ICONS
WATERCOLOR AND PRISMACOLOR



FOOTNOTES:

- 1 An excellent introduction to material culture studies as a province of cultural history is Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museum* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990). See also Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (Spring 1982), 1-2 and Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976" in *Material Culture Studies in America*, Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 3.
- 2 Matthew Kangas in *Material Vision: Image and Object* (Charleston: Tarble Arts Center, Eastern Illinois University, 1993), 4.
- 3 Janet Marquardt-Cherry, *Objects of Personal Significance* (Kansas City, Missouri: ExhibitsUSA, Mid-America Arts Alliance, 1996), 9.
- 4 Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1.
- 5 Stephen Bayley, *Taste: The Secret Meaning of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 39. See also Melanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould, "My Favorite Things: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage," *Journal of Consumer Research* 14 (March 1988), 531-547.
- 6 Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), xvii.
- 7 E. McClung Fleming, "Early American Decorative Arts as Social Documents," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (September 1958), 277.
- 8 Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Autumn 1980), 200. See also Prown's "Style in American Art: 1750-1800" in *American Art, 1750-1800: Toward Independence*, Charles F. Montgomery and Patrice E. Kane, eds., *Catalogue of the Yale University and the Victoria and Albert Museum Bicentennial Exhibition* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 32-29.
- 9 Prown, *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Autumn 1980), 207.
- 10 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 79.
- 11 See Kenneth L. Ames, "Material Culture as Nonverbal Communication: A Historical Case Study," *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Winter 1980), 619-640.
- 12 Michael Serman, "Artifacts as Historical Objects," *History News* 44 (March-April 1989), 27.
- 13 Prown, *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Autumn 1980), 208n.
- 14 J. Chavis, "The Artifact and the Study of History," *Curator* 7 (1964), 161.
- 15 James S. Ackerman and Rhys Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology* (Englewood, Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 221.
- 16 Cassandra Tellier, "What You See and What You Get: Frame of Reference in Museum Exhibits," *Curator* 29 (September 1986), 225-226.
- 17 An excellent statement of the premises of material culture is made in Simon Joseph Bronner, "The Idea of the Folk Artifact," *American Material Culture and Folklife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1985).

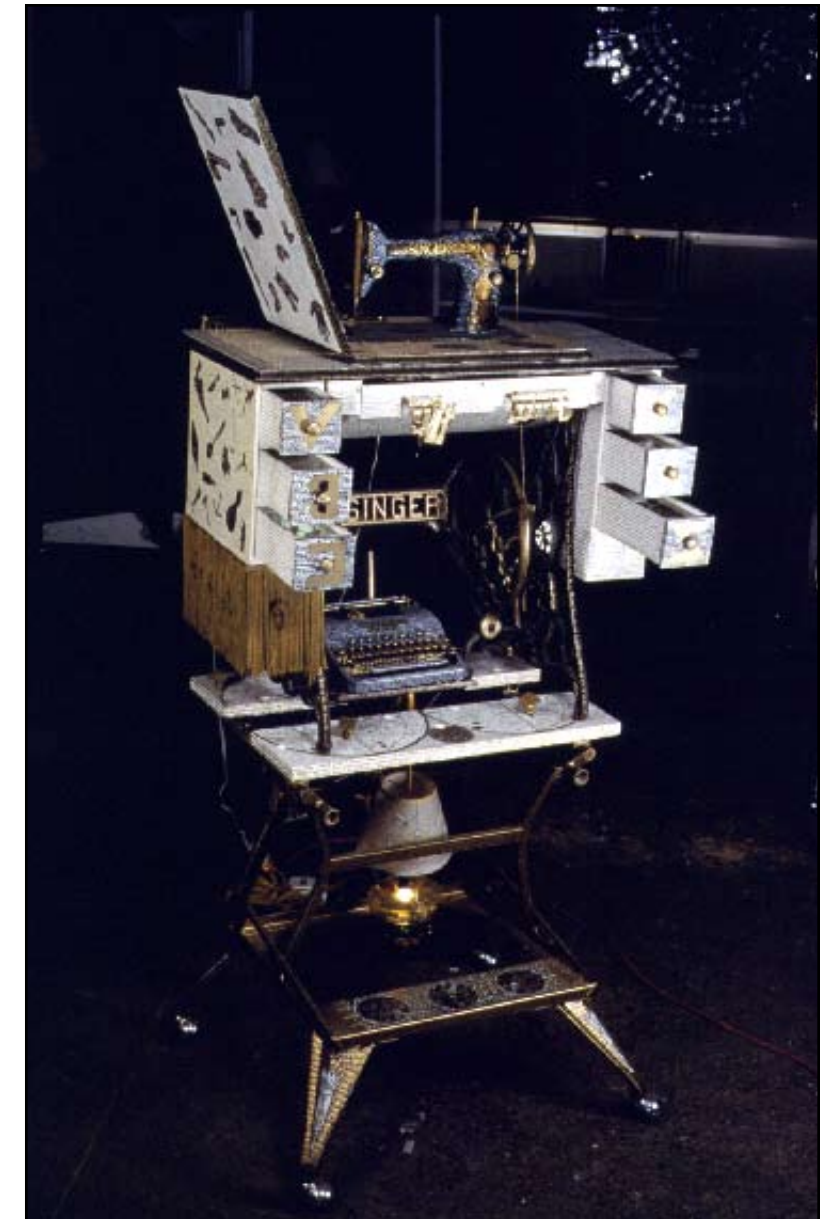
SOOK-JIN JO

RESURRECTION - II
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION



Anonymous, abandoned materials such as old doors, scrap plywood panels and other detritus of daily life are the collected mediums I use to create large scale constructions. The discarded materials I choose to work with have a transcendent, almost somber beauty. I sense people's traces, the motions of time and the eternal cycle of life and death in them. Guided by the material's intrinsic nature, I like to feel them in my hands and intuition, I construct and integrate different pieces: I drill holes into the wood, burn, dye or paint other portions. My work represents a universe of forms, an exploration of various elements corroborated to produce a harmonious result with a certain meditative quality.

- Sook-Jin Jo



(DIS)FUNCTIONAL OBJECT
MIXED MEDIA CONSTRUCTION

ROLAND SMART



From the collection of
Richard Higgs and Pearla Moler

WHAT'S YOUR TARGET
MIXED MEDIA WITH NEON

WADE ELDEAN

PALLI DAVENE DAVIS

BURDENS
SHOES, GRAVEL



Perhaps no other culture has produced as much stuff as America. Stores, attics, warehouses, and dumpsters of stuff. Objects of importance but such small consequence that we neglect, ignore or throw most of it away sooner than later.

This stuff is evidence, the physical artifacts of what we do and think. Artists, who value the process of making so deeply, know this. To us the artifact is more souvenir. Remembrance of energy spent, thought realized, material worked. No matter it is separate of time, utility or context that made it whole and gave it purpose. It is its self and object of intrinsic value. Its mass and meaning has an integrity that makes it material not media.

As artists, we attest to the essential nature of a thing. First, its physical fact pleases us, intrigues us, enralls us. We measure its cultural weight as symbol or signal. Then we work to understand what we want to say with it. Our mind's eye and hand give the object a re-attribution, embolden with the ambiguity of its pre/post form and the meaning of idea as object. We affirm the cultural weight of the object, offer it as common reference for our conversation with the viewer. While we particularize the object we reclaim the significance of the vernacular and the universality of visual language.

This is not to say commonplace objects make easy art. It is precisely the obviousness of the object that enlarges the metaphor of meaning, the responsibility of clarity. The recognition of the material object in a work of art tethers body, memory, circumstance and interpretation to the real world. It serves to implicate art into the very core of every day. Seeing things for what they are and more than what they are...the stuff of Life.

-Palli Davene Davis

ISAAC BOWER

SWOOSH PILLOW FROM THE NIKE DECOR LINE
MIXED MEDIA



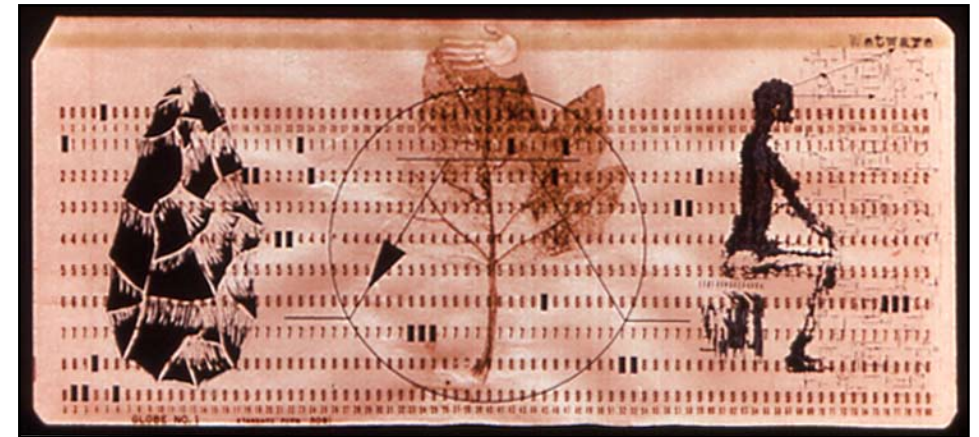
American consumption on material goods is currently framed as one of the fundamental causes of global warming and environmental change. Mass-produced items are closely linked to class-consciousness. This definite element of the American culture has received little attention from the American social scientists as compared to their European counterparts. American artists on the other hand, especially since the advent of Pop Art, have encouraged many viewers to explore their relationship to the material culture.

- Isaac Bower



REVISED STANDARD VERSION 42
PAINTED WOOD CONSTRUCTION

STEPHEN LITCHFIELD



WETWARE
IRIS PRINT

PETER PATCHEN

DONAVAN WIDMER

LEVEL HEADED
STEEL, GLASS, ALUMINUM, MDF



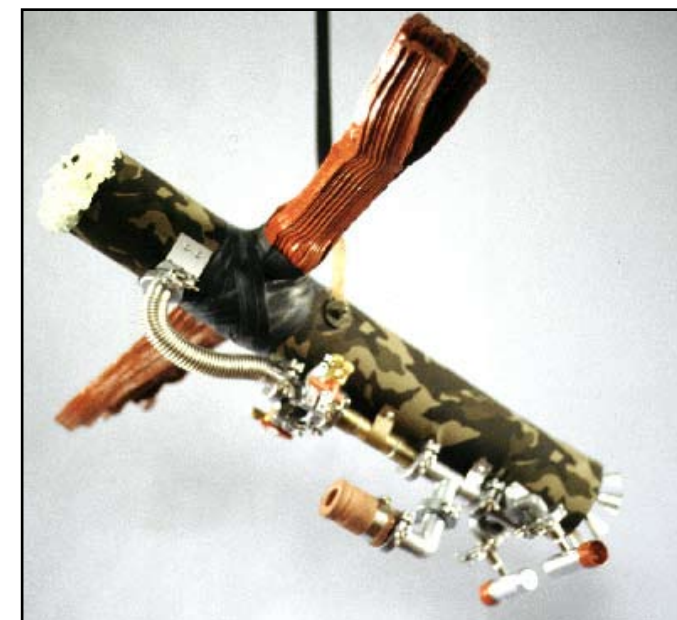
DEVORAH SPERBER

REFLECTIONS ON A LAKE
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION



The inspiration for "Reflections on a Lake" came from playing around with pixelated images in the computer. And, while a lot of art is moving from the physical world into the virtual world, I was more interested in actually reversing that process and bringing something that we think of as being virtual, meaning pixelated images – images that don't really exist beyond the compute, and bringing them back out into the physical world. I started looking for objects that were consistent in shape, reasonably inexpensive to buy, and intriguing to look at. I'm equally interested in the concepts I'm working with and also the way the piece actually looks. Thread spools not only came in over 300 colors but they were also square and very pixel-like in their quality.

- Devorah Sperber



MICHAEL TINGLEY

FLYING METH LAB
MIXED MEDIA



THE WRITER'S CHAIR
OIL ON LINEN

SUSAN BLATSTEIN

ROBIN ANTAR

BOOT IV, WORK BOOT
LIMESTONE AND OIL



My working procedure is to keep common materials or fabricated materials around (sometimes for years) until I find what I feel is the new role or the reinvented role, or the reconstituted role of the function. The idea of making work out of new materials is foolish, I think, in a society which is so saturated with language laden or object laden materials. So, in the case of this piece, the role of the material is the residue or artifact of a society that sees newspapers, for example, as throw-away materials. The newspapers in this work represent the newspapers I read in one month...in a kind of obsessive fashion. I read every word of them - the advertising, everything - with an equal democracy. But the artifact of the newspaper is interesting as well, because it ages, it's dated, it becomes something more and it becomes a sculptural object once it's placed in this formal physical relationship. So it's like marble, it's like stone might have played a role in an earlier age. Its function is transformed. And also, now that they're rolled up, you can't get at them again, so no one else can have access to read these forgotten newspapers... if anyone would want to. The chalkboard also is such a common symbolic element. It lives in our memories of school, of specific situations. So I think the idea of a "kicking in" of common characteristics of a common societal past transcends specific cultures or societies...meaning that whether you're in Europe, Japan, or America, there are specific references that are going to come across to individuals. So you can find, in my opinion, common cultural roots and it's interesting to play games with those things. It interests me a lot. It's much more active for me right now than to paint or to draw or even work with video or computers. It's much more interesting to me to have literal three-dimensional objects that have a long history unto themselves that I then get to add to them by combination. I can bring my own madness into the game, as it were.

- James Nestor



JAMES NESTOR

UNTITLED
MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION

Extraordinary Things: A Study of Contemporary Art through Material Culture
August 30 - September 30, 2000
The University Gallery, University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT

Panel Discussion: Material Culture and Art
November 7, 2000

Panelists: Kaz McCue, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Curator and Artist; Palli Davene Davis, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist; Gerald Weckesser, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist; Ken Marcione, M.F.A., Curator of Art, Stamford Art Museum.

Extraordinary Things: A Study of Contemporary Art through Material Culture
October 30 - November 22, 2002

University Art Gallery, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN

Panel Discussion: Material Culture and Art
November 7, 2002

Panelists: Terry Barnhart, Ph.D., Cultural Historian, Eastern Illinois University; Lisa Freiman, Ph.D., Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art; Janet Orselli, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist; Wade Eldean, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist.

Extraordinary Things: A Study of Contemporary Art through Material Culture
October 30 - November 22, 2002

Hartmann Center Art Gallery, Bradley University, Peoria, IL

Artists' Panel Discussion: Extraordinary Things
November 4, 2002

Panelists: Kaz McCue, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Curator and Artist; Janet Orselli, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist; Michael Tingley, M.F.A., Extraordinary Things Project Artist.

In addition to the exhibitions listed above, Kaz McCue has also presented numerous lectures on the subject of *Material Culture and Art*. The Extraordinary Things Project has also been the subject of a catalog published through the University Art Gallery at Indiana State University and a documentary program produced through Soundview Community Studios in Bridgeport, CT. To date, the Extraordinary Things Project involves more than forty artists from around the United States. Exhibitions, panel discussions and lectures can be arranged for a variety of presentation opportunities. Please contact Kaz McCue for more details.

© Kaz McCue, 2006. This catalog is published in connection with the *Extraordinary Things Project* an independent, interdisciplinary project conceived of and curated by Kaz McCue. Special thanks to Dr. Terry Barnhart of Eastern Illinois University for his scholarly contribution to this catalog and the Extraordinary Things Project.



Betty Guernsey
Detail #4 - Matchmania
Mixed Media Matchbook Quilt



Stephen Litchfield
Untitled Revised Chair
Stained Wood Construction