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material agency in the urban material culture initiative

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MATERIAL AGENCY IN THE URBAN MATERIAL CULTURE INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This contribution to the discussion of collecting contemporary objects reviews the implications of taking seriously how and what objects communicate, especially how we can identify the ways messages are coded in the forms of familiar objects. Of special interest are the conceptual tools that are available to differentiate these messages when objects are arranged in assemblages, including emergent implicit messages, the messages implicit in sets of objects. I advocate an approach to collecting in museums based on the tactics people use to create these assemblages at home. What theorizing about material agency offers to our collection program is a focus on objects in use rather than objects isolated from use. [material culture, consumption, agency, assemblage]

What in our immediate lives could possibly interest the museum visitor of the 22nd century? I come to this discussion from the position of a linguistically oriented ethnographer of metropolitan life. I study the way people talk about their lives in cities. I am particularly focused on the various tactics that people use in ordinary conversation to accomplish their goals and actions, such as indexing, deferring, questioning, asserting, and assessing. The study of conversation has always had a concern with agency. I consider speech a form of material culture, albeit a rapidly fading one.¹ Agency lies at the heart of the productivity feature of speech, the ability of a speaker to craft a novel utterance out of common words. Material objects, Grant McCracken (1988) reminds us, do not have a feature of productivity. An automobile, regardless of the messages that we believe its form and function convey, cannot be twisted to form a new message without altering the integrity of the original automobile. The productivity function separates speech from the messages implicit in material objects as these messages shape the lives of people. This is where I begin in my understanding of material agency. I will explore the implications of how objects

communicate, identify the way messages are coded in the form of familiar objects, disentangle the fate of these messages when objects are arranged in assemblages, and finally suggest a collection strategy based on the tactics people used to create these assemblages.

AGENCY

Agency, of course, is a quality of human beings. It refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act. It is ordinarily understood as intentional and based on an actor's agenda. Action is socioculturally *mediated* when it connects both the production of action and the consumption (or reception) of action. That is, the actor intends a certain result to occur as a direct consequence of the act. Action becomes cultural because the actor is confident that the intention of the act will be understood by other people. Material objects enter into this exchange of meanings between people because their form contains implicit messages that can modify or augment the actor's intentions. These messages can be semantic, that is, differentiating one object from another; representational, that is, identifying the object with its maker or owner; or functional, that is, connecting the object with a practice or procedure. More often than not, objects communicate all three types of messages.

These messages are more than merely signs inscribed on the surfaces of the objects. For example, we recognize a hammer by its surface signs: its handle and its head. The barest outline of these elements is enough for us to recognize a hammer. We may also recognize that a specific manufacturer produced the hammer from the maker's mark. We may notice that the hammer has a certain heft that makes it more appropriate for a roofer, a carpenter, or a hobbyist. The head of the hammer may have been finished with a gloss or annealing that gives it a particular attractiveness, contrasting perhaps with the color of the handle. The handle may have a particular arc or padding that presents itself to us as more or less comfortable for the hand. None of these observations have anything to do with the capacity of the hammer to drive a nail. Instead, they are implicit messages about who should hold this hammer and for what purpose they should use it. We care about who should hold the hammer because we occasionally must decide what hammer we want to hold. This is where we can begin to understand the agency of the hammer. The

tool enters social life and takes on a particular social role even though this role could never be realized without the help of the human being who produced it (with a particular human consumer in mind) and the human being who consumes it (with a particular implementation in mind). The messages in the hammer mediate between the humans who made it and humans who consume it. Objects arrive in our markets preloaded with social messages, waiting to be read, purchased, and used by the appropriate person—the one for whom those messages are meaningful.

Laura Ahearn (2001) points out that there are many areas in which agency can be ascribed to animals and objects. Nonhuman primates have been observed to exhibit versatile agency often and in varying contexts. Machines, and technologies, like the electrical grid responding to a cascading blackout or a crashed hard drive, can be seen as exhibiting agency unrelated to their implicit messages. The unexpected, inexorable impact of these actions on our lives cannot be predicted or resisted. Some communities impute agency to the spirit world as a feature of how they understand reality. A focus on the agency of material culture is critical to understanding our relationships with the world of objects we fabricate.

Agency need not be limited to the individual or isolate. Agency can be supra-individualized, as when families, department faculties, or corporations exert their collective will. Agency can be subindividualized, as when someone is “of two minds” over which action to take. Agency can also be collaborative, as when someone is said to be an agent for someone else. Such collaboration performs differently than does the mere overlap of the intentions by two individuals. A focus solely on the agency of isolated material objects, though instructive, does not exhaust the possibilities of agency in material objects generally. It is possible for objects to combine to generate an outcome they could not have induced alone. It is productive to ask how material agencies combine.

In his review essay of several of Anthony Giddens’s published discussions of agency and social theory, Ivan Karp (1986) helps us distinguish between the actor and the agent. In his view actors are people whose actions are rule based and rule oriented, whereas agents are people who constitute and reconstitute a social world. The actor operates to reinforce structure. The agent operates in the emergent world

where structure has not yet formed. I find this distinction helpful for understanding the agency of material objects. We should not be looking for robotic mechanisms in objects as the basis for ascribing agency. It is more fruitful and more consistent with the usage of the term agent that we look for messages that invest the interacting humans with greater agency themselves. That is, instances of material agency that enhance the agentive human, especially as she operates on the fringe of rule-based spheres of socially constituted activities, are more interesting to identify and analyze than other forms of material agency.

No discussion of agency would be possible without some attention to the mechanisms of implicit messaging, the meanings contained within objects that we understand through our experience with them. The analytical system that best serves this purpose is that of Charles Peirce (1998), who acknowledges that an object is simultaneously a sign, the sign’s subject matter (what he calls the sign’s “object”), and the sign’s impact on the observer (what he calls the “interpretant of the sign”). An implicit message derives from all three of these. This is not merely word play. All hammers that are not toys will drive a nail. Yet all objects shaped like hammers possess the hammer sign, including toy hammers and doodles in the shape of a hammer. The hammer’s ability to drive a nail is the subject matter of the “hammer as sign”; that is, the specific meaning of the shape and weight of the hammer is simultaneously its capacity to drive a nail. The hammer and handle that are forged from a single piece of metal will last longer than a metal head fitted on a wooden shaft. The uniform forging is meaningful as a sign of the hammer’s longevity not its ability to drive a nail. Longevity elements are, therefore, implicit messages, or “signs within signs.” This is the impact of the sign to the observer and, therefore, the reason why one would buy one hammer instead of another.

If I am moved to buy one because I am looking for a hammer that will last a long time, then the sign of the hammer’s longevity had something to do with my action. The implicit message alone is not the agency of the object. Rather, the agency resides in the force of the message on my behavior. To qualify as agency, the implicit messages of objects must be meaningful to a person, who then reacts to the signal in culturally appropriate ways. Reiterating a point made earlier, an

object with agency must mediate between the producer and the consumer. I need familiarity with the object to know how to act appropriately. This experience is outside of that object's sign. Peirce (1998:402–409) spoke of this as collateral experience, collateral observation, or collateral acquaintance, all in much the same contexts. For that reason, implicit messages that mediate the actions of people might best be called “collateral messages.”

The concept of emergence is one of the characteristics of modernist culture theory, which I understand as the body of work that includes almost all poststructural theoretical systems. Emergence is not the only characteristic of poststructural theory by any means. However, the interaction between the emergent and the developed, between the conflicted and the consensual, or between the impugned and the affirmed underlies much of the theorizing about social life in poststructural thought. Given its place on the emergent side of the social experience, agency in material objects inhabits a world of ambiguity and indeterminacy. Different people can read (or not read) the collateral messages in an object differently. This frustrates any effort to grasp an object's agency as if it were concrete and fixed. Like a particle and a wave in quantum physics, the object and its agency coexist in the same moment but are apprehended at different moments. When the object is observed, its agency disappears, and when the agency is observed, the object disappears. I notice the hammer. Then, I notice the forged handle. When I am focused on the hammer, recognizing the hammer, I am not paying attention to the forged handle and vice versa. I am apprehending the sign and the collateral message at different moments.

Daniel Miller identifies this quantum effect in objects as follows. In defining material agency, he writes:

The surprising conclusion is that objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrained, or enabled, but the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not see them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene, and insuring appropriate behavior without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to

the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so. [Miller 2010:50]

Take, for example, the simple dinner plate. The function of the plate is to make our food accessible and to facilitate an orderly tidying up when the meal is concluded. This is the plate's function. When we apprehend the plate, we are focused on serving the food in the rule-based structure for which the plate was acquired in the first place: to hold food while it is being eaten. This is merely the beginning of the role the plate will play in our social lives and in our eating. The plate has several layers of collateral messaging that can now be uncovered. It is a canvas on which the food is arranged in a way that will be pleasing to the diner. The collateral message of the plate is: “You are now free to arrange your food on me in any way that you choose as long as you do not exceed my perimeter.” Are there rules for arranging the food on the plate? Certainly for some diners strict separation of elements is a rule. For others it is not. What role portion size, texture, color, viscosity, or aroma may play in the decision of how to arrange the food speaks to the emergent nature of activity. When food is served on platters and diners can arrange the food on their plates as they like, no plate looks the same. When food is served on plates from the kitchen, the cook creates an arrangement that takes several different features into account, as well as the known preferences of the diners. After the canvas is thus filled, the canvas falls away as “ground” to the food's “figure.”

As the plate is placed on the table in front of us, we apprehend the plate's perimeter. That perimeter defines our food and separates our food from the food of others. The perimeter of the plate becomes an extension of our bodies. It doesn't matter that the food came from the same pot or that our forks or fingers have not yet touched a morsel. The moment the plate is placed in front of us, that small bit of territory becomes as personal to us as the inside of our mouths. The plate says, “Eat only what I contain within my rim.” While children may delight in taking food from the plates of their siblings, adults respect the boundary of the plate. Indeed, the practice of sharing food while at a restaurant in order to sample the various choices made by the group is reserved for people who are on intimate social standing; sharing the food from a stranger's plate is stigmatized. Once this perimeter

is acknowledged, it disappears. The diner proceeds to eat the food that is knowingly his.

At the conclusion of the meal, the remains on the plate are redefined once more. Now, the plate circumscribes our waste. At least while the plate is still within the immediate vicinity of the diner, it remains an extension of his body that is now transformed from the desired to the rejected, from food to dirt. As with all rejected things involving the body, it becomes, in Mary Douglas's felicitous phrase, "matter out of place" (1966:35). Now the plate itself becomes dirty. Unlike the remains themselves, the collateral message of the plate at this moment is: "Wash me and re-use me." The plate's resilience as an object is never more evident than when it is ready to be washed. The message of resilience is washed away with the food stains, restoring the plate to its initial state, a canvas waiting to be filled with food.

Where do these messages of the canvas, the limits of the ingestible portion, and the resilient vessel reside? Plates do not come with a set of instructions. The messages must reside with our comprehension of the state of the plate at the different stages in the meal. There is no mistaking this state. It is dirty or clean, empty or full, set before the diner or stacked in the pantry. The integrity of the plate itself is not transformed by our use; the plate changes only superficially. Our experience of the plate at different moments in the meal calls forth the plate's agency. We respond to these messages as if they were inherent in the plate, but the plate cannot impose these messages upon us without our complicity. We call forth these messages at the right moment and in the proper sequence. We could characterize material agency as a conversation between a person and an object.

Why might the agency of a material object offer itself as a candidate criterion for a collection program of contemporary urban materials? If we can be certain of anything about the sophisticated museum visitor of the 22nd century, it will be that our modernist social theory will be viewed as the quaint musings of the intelligent, but tragically naïve, thinkers of the previous century. This is, of course, how we view our 19th-century forebears. We should be prepared for similar judgments by our intellectual great-grandchildren. So, it will probably not be the distinction

between emergence and structure that will grab their attention. In fact, that element of agency will likely seem curiously nostalgic.

What we can be certain about is that the visitors to an exhibit of the early 22nd century will be human. As such, they will have the same relationship to objects in their lives as we do to ours. This is an important, if obvious, point. They, too, will live in a world in which objects have agency, even if they might consider the theorizing about agency to be as quaint as, say, 19th-century views of diffusionism compared to contemporary theorizing about transnational flows. Then, as now, stuff moves. The 100 years or so have added complexity, nuance, and a fastidiousness born of an overabundance of data. We should expect a similar development in thinking about material agency.

Even the museum visitor of the present cannot retrieve the material agency of a dinner plate by looking at one in a glass case. The agency lies in the conversation between the plate and people in the midst of using it. If theorizing about material agency proceeds as I envision it, this conversation must be collected, as well as the plate. In sum, what theorizing about material agency offers to our collection program is a focus on objects in use rather than objects isolated from use.

THE AGENCY OF SETS

The exhibit of the future would hardly consist of a single plate, even if some sort of conversation between the plate and its owner could be attached. Instead, the plate would have to be seen as one of a set of plates. Therein lies a further complication to understanding material agency: the agency of sets reflects a collaboration or cooperation between objects that no single object could produce alone. To emphasize this collaborative potential of sets, theorists use the French term *assemblage*, following the introduction of this idea by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) as a rebranding to their original concept of desiring machines. Assemblages consist of a "multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they 'work' together as a functional entity" (Patton 1994:158). As George Marcus and Erkan Saka put it:

In contemporary anthropological or cultural studies writing, [the assemblage] reference can

shift from the cognition or textual plan of the analyst and writer, to the attributed cognition/ experience of the subject, to a perspective on the heterogeneity of a distinctive heterogeneity of a form, or an object in a phase of development or “becoming.” And of course, if not explicitly delineated, it can refer to all of these at once. [2006:101]

Assemblage is itself an example of a way of ordering and arranging knowledge that Deleuze and Guattari characterize as a rhizome, as opposed to a hierarchy, or tree. Tree-like arrangements are bounded systems of knowing that have first principles, or foundations, that produce unambiguous secondary identities within the arrangement. Think of a family tree, an arrangement that proceeds from ancestors to descendants. Rhizomes, on the other hand, are flat, unsystematic, and open. A rhizoid way of knowing focuses on thresholds or conditions that, once attained, bring about a transformation. Think of a crossword puzzle with only half the necessary clues. Those existing clues suggest how the missing clues can be devised. One can then finish creating the puzzle before solving it. Trees are about structure; rhizomes are about emergence. As such, rhizoid ways of knowing are more consistent with the counter-theories of modern social thought.

An assemblage is rhizoid because it can be seen as occupying two different states simultaneously: it can be seen as a whole or it can be seen as its parts. The thinking here is analogous to the way we understand bodies. They, too, can be understood as wholes, or as parts. When understood as wholes, the body occupies one kind of space and time. When understood as parts, the body occupies a different kind of space and time. The whole is animate. It moves, and in the process of doing so, occupies or constitutes space. The parts are inanimate. They can be thought of as moving too. But their movement is only conceptual. The threshold that permits the parts to function as a body is their cooperation. More importantly, what distinguishes one body from another is the specific way the parts work together to be or act in the world.

Although Deleuze and Guattari (1987) do not use the word agency, they do refer at one point to Spinoza’s (2001) notion of “affect,” or empowerment:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, ... either to exchange actions and passions with it or join with it in composing a more powerful body. [1987:257]

Substituting the word “object” for “body” in this quote, a substitution that is completely consistent with the logic of assemblage, produces an even more precise way of understanding material agency: “what it can do, ... how [it] can or cannot enter in composition with other [objects], with the affects of other [objects], ... either to exchange actions and passions with [them] or join with [them] in composing a more powerful [object].” This leads us to see objects no longer in terms of their (subjective) meaning to us as form or substance (i.e., a dinner plate) but in terms of their powers to shape the world, including other objects, inanimate and animate. The assemblage “de-subjectifies” the objects, imbuing them with a life apart from our own. Subjective objects, like the hammer or the plate, have agency because they mediate between a producer, who imbues an object with implicit meanings, and us, the consumers, who have specific needs that we want plates to fulfill. When de-subjectified, as a stack of plates, the source of the agency shifts from our lives to the life of the object itself, and especially to the contingent and emergent conditions around the production and consumption of the objects themselves. The stack of plates itself has the power to shape human action, apart from the agency of the individual plates.

This description of assemblage need not remain so abstract. This is a valuable tool of analysis precisely because it emerges from real experience. An example of an assemblage that exists in every one of our homes can show how this tool works. I’ve opened a pair of doors to my kitchen cabinets, and this is what I see (Figure 1).

How can we dig beneath the surface stability of these stacks to encounter a host of different phenomena and processes working in concert? That is what the assemblage tool offers us.

First, this collection of stacked plates and bowls is an ad hoc grouping. I did not set out to bring together this particular collection of plates and bowls. It just happened over a period of years that these were

Figure 1. My plate cabinet, June 2011. (Photograph by Robert Rotenberg.)

acquired and stacked in this cabinet. The origins of this collection are themselves a history, which I can narrate. However, because you could narrate your own history for your own collection, I will spare you the details. The point is that each set of dishes was acquired under a specific circumstance. There is no rule underlying the collection. Instead, it formed out of contingency: there was the moment, the opportunity, the means, and the desire. There was no necessity. Yet the origin of the collection in no way undermines or weakens the efficacy of the collection to be plates and bowls. In fact, they are very good at being plates and bowls.

Second, there are several ways in which this collection can be said to be coherent. That is, there is a unity to it beyond the unities of function, size, and shape. The number and variety of plates and bowls “as a whole” generate possibilities for action that go beyond any one of the sets. The collection permits me to choose to serve on this set or that set, or to mix sets with different courses. Indeed, I could even violate the features of the set and serve random plates and bowls. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would identify this last tactic as a countercultural, one that exceeds and confounds the coherence of the collection.

Third, each part of the collection enters the collection with a specific history that influences how they affect my choices. Each set has a different number of possible settings, from four to ten. Each set presents a different state: scratched surface, chipped edges, painted versus single color, white versus brown, salad versus dinner plate, or dinner plate versus bowl. There is no exact duplication among the sets. For that

reason, each set can be said to have its own trajectory or movement through the web of the collection, its own way of interacting or crossing the trajectories of other sets. These trajectories shape which pieces will be chosen, how often they will be chosen, and how they will (or will not) be combined with pieces from other sets. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would say that the power (to empower) is not equally distributed across the assemblage.

Fourth, there is no set that completely dominates the activities of the collection. No one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the assemblage on my actions. When I consider how I have used these plates over the last few weeks, I recollect that every set has been used. I did not set out to do so. I also recollect that some plates and bowls are used disproportionately for some kinds of servings. These are the “specialists,” so to speak. Others have served many different purposes and carried very different kinds of foods. If I found that a particular set was used less frequently, it would first be moved to the top shelf. In fact, the set on the top right is currently in that status. It is a set we have owned for over thirty years and was once used almost everyday. I recollect using it once in the past year. Its role has been usurped by more recently purchased sets. That one on the top right would be the set we would give away to our daughter or a graduate student starting a new household, a collection of plates and bowls being requisite for a fully functioning household. We would not miss this set. Still, it remains a part of the collection at this time.

Finally, this collection of plates and bowls is a captured flow of objects for which organizational forms outside my household are implicated. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call these “state forms,” and I understand why they would put such political-economic actions under the umbrella of the state given their politics and the era when they were writing. However, I see them as organizational forms, power being inherent in organization of which the state is but one instantiation. The organizational forms implicated in this collection are present in the ways these sets mark instances where breaks or divisions in otherwise free-flowing phenomena are evident. For my plates and bowls, these breaks and divisions are represented through my act of purchasing them and dividing them from the much larger set of plates and bowls at

the store and ultimately at the factory where they were produced. That is, we are dividing them from the potters, teamsters, and clerks who produced them for my purchase and from the store itself at its specific location, and from its collection of merchandise and placing them in a cupboard in a kitchen in a house that I (and the bank jointly) own. The organizational form that permitted me to capture these objects is the sanctioned legitimacy of private property and full rights of ownership. That, too, is a part of the assemblage: the plates are mine.

Before I purchased my sets, the plates were in flux. They were produced for purchase, but they were not yet purchased. They traveled to various places where they could be compared to similar products. Such flows always exist prior to any particular assemblage coming into existence. The flows are suspended in time and space when the sets are placed in the assemblage. That is the moment when we can say that a durable object is being consumed. The objects are not terminated at this point because they could and probably will outlive their current owner. They could be sold in a flea market or at an antique shop. All of the economic processes detailed by Michael Thompson (1979) in his classic treatise on rubbish apply to these plates and will do so as soon as my ability to ensure their assembly is compromised. In this sense, they are still in flux.

The agency of the collection of plates lies in its power to create the contexts in which my food can be served. This power derives from the conditions under which the various sets were acquired, their specific history as sets after being placed in the cupboard, their coherences as sets, and the flexibility versus specificity that I impute to their features as plates. It is the collaborative potential of this collection that determines my choices for any given meal.

A PRELIMINARY SYNTHESIS OF A COLLECTING PROGRAM

Desire is an ability to perform certain acts. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) originally characterized assemblages as “desiring machines,” interconnected global and local processes that generate the favorable conditions for the production and consumption of specific things. They were not the first to focus on the conditions of production and consumption. There is a lineage of reflection on this stretching back to Denis

Diderot (1964) and his essay “Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown.” As retold by Grant McCracken (1988:118–119), Diderot is admiring the elegant, organized, and beautifully appointed, but grim, assemblage of his new office from what was once a crowded, chaotic, but happy room.² The transformation, Diderot tells us, began with his decision to give up his old tattered dressing gown for a new one. Within a week of working in the old space with his new gown, he resolved to replace his desk. Then the tapestry covering the wall had to go. Gradually, everything in the study was replaced: chairs, pictures on the wall, the bookshelf, and even the clock. All of this, Diderot concludes, is the work of an “impervious scarlet robe [which] forced everything else to conform with its own elegant tone” (1964:311). Looking back, he feels the loss of an accord, expressed in the consistency, harmony, and even beauty of the shabby room and tattered dressing gown. In McCracken’s (1988) well-known phrasing, this was the first observation of the “Diderot effects.” These effects describe more precisely the agency of the assemblage in channeling the actions of the owner of the objects.

Diderot’s (1964) great realization was that there are complementarities among objects. One can think of the set of objects that are “required” to take a ski trip to a resort or the set of what one must have on hand to bake a cake. Michael Solomon and Henry Assael (1987:195–196) build on this observation, offering the insight that the unified whole carries role information. What objects come to define the boss, the first responder, the hobbyist, the athlete, or the artist? To play the role successfully, the person cannot consume only one item but rather must eventually acquire the entire complement—their visibility in the role growing with every purchase. This way of understanding role activation as socially embedded in an assemblage lies at the core of the Diderot effects.

In McCracken’s (1988) analysis, there are at least five Diderot effects: continuity, transformation, experimentation, roll up, and ratcheting. Each of these refers to a particular pattern of consumption *as if* a pre-existing assemblage exercised agency over the production and consumption decisions.

The continuity effect emerges from the recognized boundaries of the assemblage. Objects are purchased to fill in perceived gaps in an established assemblage.

Continuity is a conserving force because it excludes the purchase of items that might radically alter the set, and hence, the performance of the role. The artist will not feel moved to acquire sports equipment as a way of being an artist. Nor will equipment manufacturers produce their goods for an artist as artist. Over time, the boundaries of a set become increasingly well defined. McCracken says,

The possessions that belong to the individual make up the objective correlative of his or her emotional world. They stand as the substantiation of this world, proof of its veracity, demonstration of its actuality. ... If the things of an individual's life help constantly to return this life to itself, to turn it back upon itself, then it is the Diderot effect that works to keep it capable of doing so, of ensuring that only the purist, cleanest signals come from our possessions. [1988:124]

The continuity effect ought to have guided Diderot by excluding the purchase of too fine a replacement gown and hence helping him to avoid the cascading purchases that followed. The continuity effect is often at play among collectors, both private and public. In a study of how "house" is transformed into "home" in a gentrifying Chicago neighborhood, Charles Suchar and I (1994) met several people whose front rooms were display rooms for collections of a single class of objects: ice cream parlor memorabilia, Hummel figurines, rare books, photographs of family and friends, or Japanese lacquerware. When asked to help Suchar set up the camera to photograph their vision of the quintessential home, they often picked a frame where they would be photographed with their collection on display behind them. Their identification with the effort and expense of assembling and completing the continuity of the set was irresistible to the study participants. It was a role unto itself: sophisticated collector.

Continuity effects are also a concern in the collection of contemporary urban materials. Must the objects we collect extend to the recognized boundaries of the set? Should we collect well-defined assemblages for roles that have recently emerged in the city, such as wellness purveyor/practitioner, home security purveyor/practitioner, or green energy purveyor/practitioner? Does the very coherence of these sets

suggest a level of institutionalization that projects these roles into the future, and hence, anchors a genealogy of role development that may be of interest to future museum visitors?

The transformation effect describes the expansive agentive force where the owner succumbs to a purchase that departs from an accustomed pattern, like Diderot's dressing gown. The temptation to possess something radically different for the established set is thrilling and self-validating but ultimately leads to instability in the assemblage. After an alien item is introduced to the assemblage, adjustments in the furthering of consistency engender the cascading purchases of new items. Although changes in lifestyle, advertising, or displacement (i.e., the gap between the real and the ideal experience of social life) can lead to such departure purchases, the most common form of transformation effect occurs through a gift. Here, the gift-giver is using the transformative agency inherent in the gift to force the receiver into a new role alignment. This is a wrinkle in gift giving that Mauss never imagined.

Transformative objects might be of special interest in a contemporary urban collection. For example, there are objects that represent global trends (the smart phone, the tablet computer, the hybrid automobile) and failed transformation (the fondue pot, the platform shoe), as well as objects that were initially transformative but whose effects were relatively short lived (the CD/DVD, the telephone answering machine, the electric frying pan). Here a possible collection principle would juxtapose the transformative object to the targeted assemblage, collecting examples of both. Ethnographic records of the impact of transformative consumption could be collected at the same time as broader commentary on assemblages in people's homes.

When the motivation for purchasing a potentially transformative item comes from a personal desire for change, McCracken (1988) suggests that we call such an effect experimental. This describes a prescriptive force, a license for engaging in trials with materials. Some people practice experimental consumption for its own sake. They are exploring new worlds, hoping that the item will produce happier or more fulfilling lives, shaking up the constellation of items in their assemblages, and ushering the dawn of "a whole new me." For the last decade, its practitioners have

sometimes described this behavior as “retail therapy.” For others, the experimentation is occasioned by an impulse. The object “moves” us, “speaks” or “calls” to us, or, even more coyly, “waits” for us to pick it up. Such objects self-consciously violate continuity. Only occasionally does the object have the desired effect. At that point, it becomes the anchor of a new assemblage populated by a round of acquisitions aimed at equipping the new role arrangements that herald a change of life.

The analytical distinction between a transformative object and an experimental one might well lie in the intentional nature of the latter and the contingent nature of the former. A transformative object is gifted or otherwise imposed on a disinterested participant, while an experimental object is intentionally discovered or pursued. The experimental object, therefore, cannot be identified ahead of time. The consumer creates its identity and its agency. It emerges as a separate effect as people narrate their experience with objects in their lives. What may qualify the experimental object as a focus of interest in a collection program is the ethnographic discovery of the prevalence of a certain kind of object as experimental in the lives of urbanites, such as clothing, technology, or the materiality of voluntary associations.

The fourth effect is a roll-up purchase where an object that is already part of a set is replaced by a similar object of greater value, one at the very top of its category in price and quality. In roll-ups, we are observing an agentive force in which the least desirable object in the assemblage sets in motion the actions leading to its replacement. When that object is replaced, the next least desirable one asserts itself and so on. As with the transformation effect, the purchases cascade until the quality of the set as a whole is brought back into balance. The effect on the existing assemblage is to bring about a steady upgrading in quality and tone until the ensemble more closely matches the highest quality piece. This usually occurs in steps, but there is conceivably a spiraling mode for this effect as well. Here each new purchase is set higher than the last. When this happens, the entire set never catches up. This, too, was Diderot’s problem. His mistake was to make that first roll-up purchase, the richly appointed dressing gown.

The roll-up is implicated in the most urban of all role performances, namely that of class. Most urban households will have essentially the same basic material kit for the ordinary functions of food preparation, hygiene, transportation, clothing, and physical comfort. They will vary in two regards: the ways in which the domestic space is a repository for the sets of material of all the roles played by the household members and the level of quality of the materials contained in those sets. The roll-up effect is specifically concerned with that second variation. We should be collecting different levels of material quality and distinction for the objects that we discover are widely distributed. This is not merely an exercise in how object features represent class. Roll-up effects may have implications for both transformation and experimentation. Furthermore, the pattern of decisions to produce or purchase an object, for which variations in quality and distinction are available, reflects class anxiety, class mobility, and class pretension, all of which are important indices of economic and social stability.

The final effect is ratcheting purchases. This effect is like the continuity effect, in that it attempts to fill in the gaps in an existing set. Unlike the continuity effect, the boundaries of a ratcheted set are ambiguous. Consumers begin the process of acquiring an assemblage without a complete awareness of its scope. They have only a vague idea of what the set will look like when it is completed. Instead, they work from what is already in the set, extending it in what seems to be an appropriate direction. The set itself is a perfect desiring machine. Like the increasing possibilities for forming words on a Scrabble™ board, each new purchase opens up multiple possibilities of combination, recombination, and extension. This acts to move consumption forward and prevent it from backsliding. The problem is that the set will never be closed. It fulfills no recognizable role except its own logic. This effect prevents us from attaining true satisfaction by needling us about the insufficiencies that remain within our assemblages. Like Diderot, we are condemned to live our lives surrounded by goods that bring us no joy because they bear no necessary relationship to our understandings of our selves or our world.

The lesson we should draw from a focus on assemblage instead of object in a contemporary collecting program is that we cannot separate urban material culture from the conditions of its production and consumption, as these are understood and implemented by their owners. It is not material agency per se that nominates an object for inclusion in the Chicago 2110 exhibit. Rather, it is the way we recognize the various forms of agency, of complementarity, and of assemblage that our consociates encounter as they negotiate material possibilities of Chicago. That recognition cannot be inferred either from the objects themselves or from the context of their use. The diorama is no help in this regard. Instead, interview data must be integrated with the material objects during the acquisition process. As our project goes forward, we hope to produce specific study materials to illustrate the differences and strengths of this approach.

NOTES

1. Speech is material not only because vibrations in the air transmit it but also because through speech humans create immediate changes in their social environment. It is not merely a metaphor to say that speech is a tool. Speech engenders action: a question demands a response, an assessment imposes an expectation of agreement, a request constrains another person to comply. In these ways, speech is as material an artifact of human devising as clothing, housing, and cooking utensils.
2. This final section relies heavily on McCracken's (1988) analysis of Diderot for a reason. McCracken was supposed to have been a conference participant but in the end could not attend. My article was an effort to ensure that what I hoped would be the focus of his remarks would still have a presence in our discussions. I hope that he will forgive the impertinence of my discussion and the liberty I have taken with his ideas to help them fit with this discussion of agency. I do so with the utmost respect.

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