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Evocative Objects: A Sexual Violence Primer

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Photo Essay: Object Lessons

Figure 1. Tip box, Afolabi forced labor hair-braiding case, Newark, New Jersey, 2013. All photographs appear courtesy of Nina Berman.

Figure 2. Tip ledger, Afolabi forced labor hair-braiding case, Newark, New Jersey, 2013.

Figure 3. Hatchet used to terrorize kidnapping victim, Charles Kizer sex trafficking case, Memphis, Tennessee, 2013.

Figure 4. Parkway Inn, Memphis, where Kizer's victim, left alone with a cell phone, managed to call the police, Charles Kizer sex trafficking case, Memphis, Tennessee, 2013.

W: Um, I see a hotel

911: What is the name of the hotel?

W: Hold on, I am trying to get to a street so I can tell you. He went to his house to get his gun.

911: Ok, who is holding you hostage?

W: Charles Kizer

911: Is he a boyfriend or something?

W: No, I met him Knoxville and he brought me to Memphis and making me prostitute for him. Can you all please hurry up?

911: Yeah, I need you to tell me where about on Elvis Presley?

W: Ok, I see, I see Parkway Inn

911: Parkway Inn?

W: Yeah

911: What are you going to have on so we will know who you are?

W: I got on a white wife beater with a black wife beater under it with a black belt wrapped around my shirt with short shorts on some four course different color shoes and an afro

911: An afro, ok, what is he going to have on ma'am?

W: I don't know, he is in his truck (unintelligible)

911: What kind of truck is he in?

W: He in a Chevy, a green Chevy with twenties on it

911: A pick-up truck?

W: No, it's a Chevy

911: A car?

W: Yeah, a big old truck. Can you all please hurry up he is on his way back.

911: Ok, we are coming ok, do you see an ambulance where you are?

W: I am at the Parkway Inn

911: The who?

Figure 5. Kizer victim 911 call transcript, Memphis, Tennessee, 2013.

Figure 6. "Family" rules, Alex Campbell sex trafficking case, Chicago, Illinois 2013.

Figure 7. Billy club, Alex Campbell sex trafficking case, Chicago, Illinois, 2013.

Figure 8. Horseshoe key chain, Alex Campbell sex trafficking case, Chicago, Illinois, 2013.

Figure 9. Horseshoe jewelry, Alex Campbell sex trafficking case, Chicago, Illinois, 2013.

Figure 10. Culp's rules 1, Marvell Culp sex trafficking case, Memphis, Tennessee, 2013.

Evocative Objects: A Sexual Violence Primer

In her 2007 collection of essays *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle asked her contributors to explore their emotional and intellectual connections with everyday objects. According to the introduction, her book seeks to clarify “the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things.”¹ The various chapters dwell on each of the authors’ felt relationship with the given object—a discarded pair of shoes, a beloved toy, a favorite car. The overall emphasis lies less on the instrumental power of each object than on the ways material things become carriers of our life experiences—and in turn, how these object relations can provide food for thought.

In a certain light, Nina Berman’s series *Object Lessons* reads like a critical rejoinder to Turkle’s project. The photographs explore a rather different, more rapacious spectrum of object relations. Imagine if Alex Campbell—the violent and seasoned Chicago pimp also known as “Daddy”—were to write a chapter for Turkle on his cufflinks (see figs. 8 and 9). Campbell called himself “the Cowboy” and had a collection of custom-made jewelry featuring a horseshoe logo. The branding extended to the women who worked for him: he tattooed his logo onto their necks, and in one case had a thirteen-line, sixty-word homage to himself tattooed onto a woman’s back.²

Campbell got his start by recruiting local Chicago women into sex work, but by 2008 he set his sights on immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus. These women were easy targets; they had few friends, poor language skills, and visa complications. He lured them with promises of legitimate employment and then seized their documents, indoctrinated them into his “family,” as he called it, and put them to work as prostitutes in his massage parlors. He ruled through terror, forcing one woman to eat a twenty-dollar bill when she did not make him enough money, and tying another woman to a bed and beating her with a belt. He videotaped the women having sex and threatened to send the tapes to their families. In 2012, in a trial that included extensive testimony from his victims, Campbell was found guilty of “recruiting, exploiting, raping, punching, beating, whipping, extorting, slapping, defrauding, burning, degrading, starving, humiliating, and branding” women for profit.³ He received a rare life sentence from U.S. District Judge Robert Gettleman.

It would be difficult to claim that Campbell used his horseshoe-themed jewelry as a “source of inner vitality,” to cite one of the more saccharine phrases from Turkle’s book.⁴ But Berman is more interested in our more savage forms of “object-play.” Consider “Culp’s rules” (fig. 10). In 2012, Marvell Culp pled guilty to the sexual trafficking of children by force, fraud, and coercion. Reading his list of rules—not to mention the childish script itself—is an encounter with a rudimentary form of relationality that D. W. Winnicott once named “object-relating.” Winnicott, who studied

the relationship between emotional development and object use, found that primitive emotional states were often expressed in cruder relationships with objects. “Object-relating” was his term for a particularly aggressive kind of relationality. In this state of mind, the individual fails to recognize the independent existence of the object. Things (and people) are manipulated as projections and extensions of the self—controlled as a means to shore up a fragile sense of omnipotence.⁵

Although Winnicott didn’t use the term this way, his concept of “object-relating” provides a good description for the psychology of slavery—sexual or otherwise. In this state of mind, there is no sense of a genuinely shared reality; objects have no independent status apart from the individual’s manipulation of them. Consider the case of Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, the ringleader in a multimillion-dollar human trafficking operation that illegally transported young girls from Togo and Ghana, forcing them to work without pay in hair-braiding salons in New Jersey (figs. 1 and 2). From 2002 to 2007, Afolabi, along with her husband and various co-conspirators, made close to four million dollars from the girls’ labor. They worked them fourteen hours a day, six or seven days a week. Afolabi took every penny of earnings, including their tips, which the women were instructed to deposit in a wooden box and record in a ledger adorned with the image of the Statue of Liberty. In 2009, Afolabi was tried and sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison.

Berman’s series explores the psychology behind this mode of relating to others. The photographer possesses a kind of “chemical curiosity,” to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin.⁶ She brings the most disturbing aspects of human relationality to the surface and then invites spectators to imaginatively enter into these perverse environments where people are treated like things. Her stated aim is to reveal “the mindset of the perpetrator,” although spectators could just as easily find themselves identifying with the victim (identification, as Sigmund Freud frequently insisted, is always partial and ambivalent).⁷ Either way, by casting us as agents in these scenes, Berman has put spectators into proximity with madness. Encountering these images is a bit like being suddenly thrust into an improvised play—like being handed a stage prop with minimal instruction. The visual strategy is a close cousin, in this respect, to the work of feminist performance artists like Ana Mendieta and Rebecca Belmore, who have mobilized their own bodies as a medium for registering the emotional impact of violence against women that has gone otherwise unrecognized.⁸ Berman’s attention to material objects similarly underscores the embodied dimension of human dignity. Her series shows us that dignity is not just an abstract concept but primarily a *lived experience* and that what we describe as the “human condition” might be best understood as an embodied sense of well-being. In her calm, patient meditation on these objects, Berman exposes the utter fragility of human dignity, and more specifically, the way that a woman’s capacity to protect and maintain the integrity of her own body is particularly vulnerable to the social bond.

By focusing on the psychological dimensions of our object relations, Berman provides a new way of seeing sexual violence and misogyny. The “lesson” here rests on cultivating the spectator’s willingness to intimately engage these violent and chaotic

states of mind. Berman asks us to cast a clear, dry, unblinking eye on the all-too-ordinary madness that drives individuals to violate the other's dignity. She puts spectators into contact with experiences that, for many of us, are difficult to comprehend. Her inventory of objects constitutes a kind of perverse catalogue: ways to destroy (through words and actions) the human being's fragile links to individuality, singularity, and freedom. This is a kind of learning that hovers at a boiling point, threatening to break experience open. But rather than dispatch these perversities to the margins of humanity and the knowable world, Berman forces us to become intimate with these states of mind for a time. We are asked to enter a world where violence is not so much exceptional as unending. The photographer's refusal, if I can put it that way, to resolve or redeem this encounter is part of what lends the series its strength. Berman puts us into contact with the material traces of this violence not simply to arouse feelings of outrage but so that we are faced with the task of working through this frightening mode of "object-relating" for ourselves. Only this intimacy, she teaches us, will be equal to the complexities of politics and the mind. We must get very close to what is darkest and most unsettling about human relations in our struggles to build a better political future.

NOTES

1. Sherry Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 5.

2. A photograph of the tattoo was entered as evidence and reproduced in the newspaper story: Annie Sweeney, "Convicted Pimp Sentenced to Life in Prison," *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 2012.

3. Sentencing memo submitted by prosecutors to Judge Robert Gettleman.

4. Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 309.

5. D. W. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications," in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991).

6. Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 203–4.

7. Nina Berman, "Object Lessons," *Columbia Magazine*, Spring 2014, accessed June 19, 2016, <http://magazine.columbia.edu/features/spring-2014/object-lessons>.

8. Appalled by the brutal murder in 1973 of Sarah Ann Ottens, a nursing student at the University of Iowa, the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta smeared herself with blood and had herself tied to a table in a re-creation of the crime scene as reported in the press. She invited her fellow students to her apartment where, through a door left purposefully ajar, they found her in this position. She produced three "crime scene" photographs as part of the performance. See Elizabeth Manchester, "Ana Mendieta: Untitled (Rape Scene) 1973," *Tate*, October 2009, accessed June 19, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mendieta-untitled-rape-scene-t13355/text-summary>. In a slightly different vein, in 2002, the Anishanaabe artist Rebecca Belmore performed *Vigil* on a street corner in the Downtown East Side of Vancouver. The performance aimed to commemorate the lives of missing and murdered aboriginal women who have disappeared from the area. The performance involves several elements: Belmore scrubs the street on hands and knees,

lights votive candles, and nails the long red dress she is wearing to a telephone pole. As she struggles to free herself, the dress is torn from her body and “hangs in tatters from the nails, reminiscent of the tattered lives of women forced onto the streets for their survival in an alien urban environment.” See Rebecca Belmore, “Vigil,” *Rebecca Belmore*, 2002, accessed June 19, 2016, <http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html>.