

Reading Objects: Collections as Sites and Systems of Cultural Order

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Abstract

The political nature of making personal and cultural meaning of objects (both ordinary and aesthetic) is the site where transactions between our innate need for order and environmental influences, such as consumerism, are made. Valuing objects leads to the phenomena of collection, a subject that has been of interest in education and psychology since the nineteenth century. I ask how the private collections of children, and later adults, lead to systems of labeling, grouping, and display of art and artifacts in the art and natural history museum. In the age of the meta museum, how do educators question the museum's colonial and patriarchal practices that remain current? I use postmodern feminism to challenge these practices because of its search for alternative ways of knowing and new representations of self.

Vision is always a question of the power to see — and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted? (Haraway, 1991, p. 7)

In this article I examine how aesthetic meaning of objects develops as a result of individual, cultural, social, and political causes. Analysis of aesthetic meaning-making has its history in the century-old debate

between nature and nurture, a debate still alive in the new century (Ridley, 2003). In the first part of the twentieth century, the behaviorism of psychology and education that located learning in nature, gave way at the end of the century to the environment as the constructor of human development. However, recent research tells us that it is more likely that there is a transaction between nature (behaviorism) and nurture (environment) a relationship so subtle and unknowable that renders a less interesting debate (Haraway, 2004, 2003; Ridley, 2003). My interest is in a specific segment of this debate – the political nature of making personal and cultural meaning of objects (both ordinary and aesthetic) by which we are attracted, perplexed, or repelled. In a culture that favors “sight” over the other senses (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) I argue that it is with our sight that we Westerners ultimately make distinctions of quality and meaning. The “site,” or environment, and our bodily interaction between sight and site, is where transactions between nature (innate preferences) and nurture (environmental, cultural influences) are made. The result of valuing objects naturally leads to desire and the phenomena of collection. For many, this is a satisfying activity that begins in childhood and ends sometime, if ever, in adulthood. Private collecting often leads to many forms of public collecting, and ultimately, the housing of collections. In this paper I ask how this private, innately human disposition leads to cultural connoisseurship. Later I will examine how the child’s inheritance of culture which is manifest in the accumulation of artifacts, categories, and ideas, is the means of understanding the different kind of culture of the arts. I ask how some objects become publicly valued over others, and how the emergence of self as owner has created, among other things, the modernist sanctuary, the museum. What are the political, social, and cultural causes that compel a few to make decisions about value, resulting in the inevitable consequences that affect the many? Ultimately, I question the museum’s colonial and patriarchal practices that remain current.

Postmodern feminism is in a unique position to challenge these practices because of its theorists own marginality. Postmodern feminism's search for alternative ways of knowing and new representations of self reaches beyond essentialism, relativism, and rationality.

The museum has had an important place in education and, indeed, very early on museum personnel recognized education as central to their mission (Haraway 2004; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Given the complexity of its history, how do art educators include and use the museum in an effort to transform our field in ways that are expansive and inclusive of all human experiences and their products? I argue that children and adolescents take the leap from their private collections to the public if personal experience is kept intact, and only if young people are encouraged to thoroughly analyze the social and political causes and effects of the museum's collecting practices. In this paper I put special emphasis on the natural history museum because here colonial notions of non-Western objects and gender relationships are made explicitly evident.

Collecting Objects

The phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter. I do know that time is running out for the type that I am discussing here and have been representing before you a bit ex officio. But, as Hegel put it, only when it is dark does the Owl of Minerva begin its flight. Only in extinction is the collector comprehended. (Benjamin, as cited in Crimp, 1997 p. 203)

One third of Americans describe themselves as collectors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Who are these Americans? Although Eilean Hooper-Greenhill doesn't specify, it is likely that many are children in the middle

years of childhood. Children between seven and eleven-years-old in the concrete operational stage, are known for their prodigious collections (Lord, 1996; Smith, 1998, 1993; Stone, 2004). Real collectors, Walter Benjamin writes in his *Passagen-Werk* (1982), are old men, animals and children (Benjamin, as cited in Crimp, 1997). Benjamin gives these collectors the distinction of “real” because old men, animals and children aren’t seduced by the aura of the museum relic. They are, in Douglas Crimp’s words, the “countertype” of collectors, because the objects they collect have personal value and meaning, and for very young children in the first three years of life, collected out of necessity as a genetic or primal activity: to group, classify, categorize, and make meaning (Smith, 1998, 1993). The collection as a new system of things, wholly created by one individual, is often useless to another. Personal meaning gives the collection its value; the objects make tangible connections with the life of the collector.

Collecting in the middle childhood years is likely an extension of earlier cognitive development; the classification and categorization years (Lord, 1996; Smith, 1998, 1993). The locus of meaning lies in the groupings of things in the world that are different and similar. The beginning of distinction and meaning making requires an understanding of “kinds” of things, or headings, under which things go. We humans take this cognitive landmark for granted, but it is a highly complex cognitive feat, and possible only if all the “normal” connections in the young brain are made (Smith, 2001). We now know that our brains are highly individualized, that even within the so-called “normal” brain, many variations exist (Bruner 1990; Gardner, 1976). Some semblance of uniformity, however, is necessary for communication and shared understanding even though each of us fashion idiosyncratic connections to things in the world. Add to this the ingredient of cultural influence, for it will play a large role in the constructing of our knowledge of the world.

Abstractions and ideas grow from the concrete material thing (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000) and they remain as reminders and provokers of earlier feelings and sensations. Without them “the idea would remain at an abstract individual level and it would be much more difficult to share it:” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 108). According to Donald Winnicott (1999), objects given aesthetic value have their genesis in infancy as ordinary objects are endowed with primitive symbolic meaning. These transitional objects come in the form of the infant’s first stuffed animals, blankets, or toys. In the process of human individuation, the concreteness of the object makes longing and desire visible, and therefore, tenable. The thing – the object – can stand in for those feelings that can’t be seen. This separation-individuation theory first developed by Mahler, might also give more credibility to the mid-childhood compulsion to collect. What’s better than one object that embodies feelings than many of them?

Children rein in the world by possessing a part of it. How does this private selection and possession lead to the cultural compulsion to own and display? “Whether a child collects model dinosaurs or dolls, sooner or later she or he will be encouraged to keep the possessions on a shelf, in a special box, or to set up a doll house. Personal treasures will be made public.” (Clifford, 1985, p. 238). James Clifford suggests that the need to gather the material world around oneself later leads to complex systems of value and meaning, and the inevitable display and viewing of objects. Innocence is lost as museums function “to confirm the knowledge and taste of a possessive Western subjectivity” (p. 244).

When Objects Become Aesthetic

Perhaps it is in the seeing of the object that the transaction between self and culture is made. The memory of the first visual contact with things in the world is embedded within objects, making them carriers of symbolic experience. But first it might be useful to investigate

what is meant by “object” and what is meant by “seeing” the object. Hooper-Greenfield’s (2000) dictionary definition includes three intersecting elements: the object as material, an aim or purpose, and as a target for feelings and actions. When and how does the material object become intended as a target for feelings and actions and interpreted as such by others? When and how do the intentions of the maker become purely aesthetic for the purpose of communicating specific meanings to be apprehended by the viewer?

Dissanayake (1998) writes about the Western notion of art as removed from the world and challenges distinctions made “between Capital-A art and the acknowledged manifestations of a need and liking for decoration, rhythmic form, sensuous pleasure” (Dissanayake, pp. 34, 35). At the moment painting and sculpture became worthy as objects in and of themselves, the space between the viewer and object became sacred, signaling a need for a site that will make this space more significant. While all objects are now becoming worthy of aesthetic study, and the concept of high and low culture is losing ground (Desai, 2004; Gude, 2004; Tavin, 2003), the purposes and practices of the museum have not changed substantively. The “site” made for the viewing of special objects remains emblematic of modernist binary thought: high and low, viewer and object.

Art and Anthropology

The word “culture” means at least two different things. It means high art, discernment, and taste: opera, for instance. It also means ritual, tradition, and ethnicity: such as dancing around a campfire with a bone through your nose. But these two meanings converge: sitting in a black tie listening to La Traviata is merely a western version of dancing around a campfire with a bone through your nose. (Ridley, 2003, p. 201)

In order to examine the meaning of collecting objects, both ordinary and special (aesthetic), I discuss the art museum and the

natural history museum, and employ two meanings of culture as the making of high art and also as the accumulation of ideas, artifacts, and heritable traditions. Both meanings of culture, however, are not mutually exclusive, and it is helpful to briefly look at the origins of the two and how they intersect. Matt Ridley (2003) suggests that they might in fact be different versions of the same human impulse. "Equipped with just snow, dogs, and dead seals, human beings will gradually invent a lifestyle complete with songs and gods as well as sleds and igloos" (p. 208). How and when these human talents appear give deeper meaning to the ultimate product of "civilization," the fine arts.

The ability to inherit, transmit, and accumulate ideas that lead to songs, gods, sleds and igloos set us apart from the highest primate, even though the difference between an ape's brain and a human's are so slight that only minor changes are needed (Ridley, 2003).

Yet these minor changes had far-reaching consequences: people have nuclear weapons and money, gods and poetry, philosophy and fire. They got these things through culture, through their ability to accumulate ideas and inventions generation by generation, transmit them to others, and thereby pool the cognitive resources of many individuals alive and dead. (p. 209)

But culture might also be viewed as a consequence of biology: a development during evolution that made sense; a Darwinian need and desire to bond with other humans, to have language in order to communicate and create societies that held similar beliefs. According to Dissanayake (1998) and Ridley (2003), however, the meaning of culture began as an Evangelical reaction to Darwinism in France and England. Culture came to mean all the human products and behavior that set us apart from apes. The Enlightenment ideals of individuality and progress were incompatible with the Darwinian view of humans as "genetically endowed (inherent) behavioral potentials and tendencies...threatening to liberal democratic notions" (Dissanayake,

1998, p. 17). The road was laid for nineteenth-century Western ethnocentrism in which the white European man ascends over all of nature.

In America Franz Boas also rejected natural and evolutionary universal laws, but transformed the notion of culture to even greater heights with the birth of cultural anthropology. Ridley suggests that Boas's theories posed unanswerable questions: if human abilities are alike everywhere, then why is there not a single human culture? Or, if it is culture, and not nature, that causes differentiation in societies, then how might they be looked upon as equal? If culture influences the mind rather than the other way around, then the results will be lesser in some and greater in others. The conclusion to this paradox, settled on by such anthropologists as Clifford Geertz, was the notion that no common core exists in the human psyche outside of the senses. For Joseph Conrad, progress was an illusion, imposed on a universal human nature, technology and tradition merely refracting this nature into the local culture; "bow ties and violins in one place, nasal ornaments and tribal dancing in another. But the bow ties and the dances do not shape the mind – they express it" (Ridley, 2003, p. 207).

Art, anthropology, science, and philosophy have swung from nature to nurture and back to nature again right up to the present, while at the same time the formalism of modernism has given way to its own disruption. Dualities persist. The following pages describe how the postmodern disruption of modernism began with the Surrealist artists and ethnographers after World War I, and how the last phase of feminist theory, postmodern feminism, and attempts to bridge the two movements by retaining the best of both.

Surrealism to Postmodern Feminism

Relativism and totalization are both "god-tricks" promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully, common myths in rhetoric surrounding science. But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of

partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective enquiry rests. (Haraway, 1991, p.7)

The Gods Must Be Crazy, a movie directed by James Uys in 1980, is an example of an interesting reversal of appropriation, a disruption of a cultural system of valuing objects, and its political implications. A Coca Cola bottle is carelessly thrown over board a plane and lands in the Kalahari Desert. The finder of the object, a Juni Wasi tribesman, had never seen anything like it; nothing this hard existed in his soft world, says the narrator. It quickly becomes a useful object however, such as for the pounding and rolling out of food. Soon this object that never existed before becomes essential. Out of ownership comes the first glimmer of anger, jealousy, betrayal, which just moments before were unknown and incomprehensible emotions. The Western identity as a wealth of objects and knowledge has collided with a culture that has no word for ownership.

Clifford suggests that such an example might help us to understand the cultural process in which “the African-looking masks that in 1907 suddenly appeared attached to the pink bodies of the Demoiselles d’Avignon” (p. 148). With the fragmentation of modern culture into dissociated fragments of knowledge and semiotic, artificial codes, the new ethnographic attitude became a kind of cultural leveling, “the redistribution of value-charged categories such as ‘music,’ ‘art,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘sophistication,’ ‘cleanliness,’ and so forth” (Clifford, 1988, p. 131). Borrowing from the surrealist artists, ethnographers provoked a defamilization by “breaking down the conventional ‘bodies’ – objects, identities” (p. 133). The emergence of a surreal ethnography in the 1920s followed the polemical surrealist artists’ example of disrupting the modernist notion of art as a universal essence. By dislocating the orders of its own culture, these surrealist ethnographers went against the grain of “both modern art and science to deploy a fully ethnographic cultural criticism” (p. 144).

The surrealist ethnographers subverted the system of universal essence in both ethnography and modern art – the enlightened man’s love for humanity which to others was “merely the custom and institution of a group of men” (Ponty as cited in Clifford, p. 145). Artistic and ethnographic surrealism are both products of a global modernism in their efforts to make cultural meaning of the unknowable space between self and other, similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange (Clifford, 1988). Clifford compares ethnographic surrealism to collage, a favorite medium of the surrealist artists. It might contain conflicting voices and semiotic messages, found and sometimes incomprehensible data, in an attempt to “avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse” (p. 146).

Postmodern feminism, like postmodernism, has continued the work of the surrealist artists and ethnographers who blurred the boundaries between art, life and culture. They disrupt the modernist unified “self” based on the universalization of reason, and Western culture as synonymous with civilization (Giroux, 1993). The feminist theorists, however, have struggled with the issue of domination, first in terms of gender, and later in race and class. Their concern with all forms of domination and lack of agency leads them to reject postmodern erasure of human agency. “Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well” (Haraway, 1991, p. 7). The trajectory from postmodernism to postmodern feminism implies a political, social, and pedagogical transformation that deepens and radicalizes the scope of postmodernism. The feminist concern for the construction of identity is located not only in the personal, but also in the community and society, such as in bell hook’s politics of possibility which offers alternative narratives and visions (Giroux, 1993). Postmodern

feminism's greatest contribution, perhaps is its rejection of cynicism and its embrace of optimism. Reason and objectivity were abandoned not only as partial, but as a construction of masculine discourse.

In these terms, reason is not merely about a politics of representation structured in domination or a relativist discourse that abstracts itself from the dynamics of power and struggle, it also offers the possibility for self-representation and social reconstruction....At issue here is not the rejection of reason but a modernist version of reason that is totalizing, essentialist, and politically repressive. (Giroux, 1993, p. 167)

An additional critical broadening of the postmodern project is the postmodern feminist use of metanarrative as a strategy useful in contextualizing current theory in historical terms. An optimistic vision of the future, the metanarrative, human agency, and a reconstructed use of reason, are all necessary in creating a radical social theory that champions justice, equity, and freedom in education. It provides a language with which educators can engage in democratic and ethical discourse. In short, as Henry Giroux (1993) states above, postmodern feminism retains "modernism's commitment to critical reason, agency, and the power of human beings to overcome human suffering" while at the same time retaining postmodernism's challenge to its totalizing discourses (p. 93). Donna Haraway (1991) describes the postmodern feminist movement as a reaction to disembodied objectivity – the "world-as-code," as "abstract masculinity" – disconnected from body and sense perception, intentionally unreal... "to get to our versions of standpoint theories, insistent embodiment, a rich tradition of critiques of hegemony without disempowering positivisms and relativisms, and nuanced theories of mediation" (p. 6). I argue that it is in the complexity of postmodern feminism that the most radical forms of art education might emerge, particularly in the area of human-object power relationships, which this paper is about.

The Pedagogical and Political

The world is a knot in motion. Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness — i.e., the mistake of, first taking provisional and local category abstractions like “nature” and “culture” for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations. There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends (Haraway, 2003, p. 6)

The complexity of ideas about art objects, their importance, meaning, and place in the world are important political subjects for art educators. While several art museums are making efforts to establish a connection between art and life, an uncritical acceptance of the traditional museum practices still remains, and denies students the possibility of engaging in issues about nature, culture, meaning, and privilege. How do art educators negotiate between the individual collection, imbued with personal and sensory meaning, and the curator’s collection imbued with cultural meaning, particularly if the collection is comprised of non-Western artifacts “conserved” in natural history museums? So much more complex, then, are the American and European practices of documenting and cataloguing collections of non-Western artifacts. The objectification of display, with its cataloguing and labelling, obscures the object’s relationship to personal and cultural experience. The site which once gave meaning to the object is now so removed as to change its intent, reason or purpose. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) suggests that Western museum practices don’t take into account non-Western ways of experiencing, knowing, and making-meaning of the material world. Because ours is a sight-dominated culture, our thinking is rendered to linear, objective, and analytical systems.

Sight became a dominating and conquering sense; mapping and counting, those symptoms of modernity, were used to describe and

control the targets of vision. Sight, overseeing, became co-opted as an essential attribute of masculinity, the seeing man, while the other senses, especially touching and listening, became associated with more feminine characteristics such as caring and interpreting. (Hooper-Greenhill, p. 112)

In search of a feminist objectivity, Haraway (1991) sees the need for a richer account of the world that reflects the inevitable uneven dominance and privilege of all positions, ours and others. Haraway reclaims the much maligned term of *vision* in feminist theory from its disembodied objectivity and reductionism. Rather than the “gaze from nowhere,” that seems to transcend all limits, Haraway restores vision to its embodied nature, situating it in mental and physical space. “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision...there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds.” (p. 6).

The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power. The instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodernist culture have compounded these meanings of dis-embodiment. (p. 5)

Representing the world as if it is seen from nowhere is embedded in the natural history museum’s practices of conserving non-Western artifacts. Haraway (2004) links its purpose to patriarchal, white supremacy and eugenics given free reign during the “Nature Movement” of the 1890s-1930s. “Man” looks at nature, while nature, often referred to as feminine, cannot see, because “she” is being seen. Haraway uses the seeing “eye” as a trope for the masculine “I.” “Man is not in nature partly because he is not seen, is not the spectacle. A constitutive meaning of masculine gender for us is to be the unseen, the eye, the author, to be Linnaeus who fathers the primitive order” (p.

186). Domination, Haraway argues, is built into the American Museum of Natural History as “naked eye science” (p. 186) producing a vision of social peace “through research, education, and reform” (p. 187), a prophylactic for social decadence and racial suicide, “the dread disease of imperialist, capitalist, white culture” (p. 188). The purpose of the Museum’s education program, reaching a million children each year by the 1920s, was to teach the law of nature: the undeniable objective facts that the dioramas and “nature cabinets” revealed. The newly constructed Hall of the Age of Man made “the moral lesson of racial hierarchy and progress explicit, lest they be missed gazing at elephants” (p. 189). The Hall put “man” in his rightful place, superior and separate from animals. It was not until the 1940s that the racial intent of conservation was criticized, leaving the Museum’s stakeholders to reinvent its spiritual and political rationale.

The language of Critique and Possibility

We also don’t want to theorize the world, much less act within it, in terms of Global Systems, but we do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledge among very different — and power-differentiated — communities. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future. (Haraway, 1991, p. 4)

Returning to the collection of art and artifacts in both private and public spheres, I suggest that how we engage students with public museums in art education could use more scrutiny. The practice of housing human and natural artifacts are riddled with gender and racial bias which needs to be considered as educators lead their groups past the glass cases that inhabit exotic plants, insects, animals, and finally, humans. Rather than a passive acceptance, educators need to allow museums to be viewed in their historical context, enabling students to

develop a critical capacity to examine the gender, racial, and economic inequities on which many museums are built. Students do not often come with the skills needed to locate themselves within the museum's history. It requires the courage of educators to take the risks that challenge and ultimately transform existing political and social inequities in museums and elsewhere. While identities are constructed in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, the large public museum often has an aura of exclusionary inevitability, inhospitable to the role that gender, race, and class play when apprehending museum objects. Educators might provide students with the opportunities to construct their own stories by reflecting on the diverse ways that objects, art and artifacts may be understood: learning to see from another's point of view, something not known in advance. The museum therefore, becomes the site on which "webs of domination, subordination, hierarchy, and exploitation" (Giroux, 1993, p. 75) can be explored. A language of possibility "offers students the opportunity to read the world differently, resist the abuse of power and privilege, and construct alternative democratic communities" (p. 75). The monolithic institutional power of the museum can be disabled by introducing the interpretations from new and diverse voices as relevant and important to our collective understanding of the long history of human and object relationships, both ordinary and special.

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