

SEIZED OBJECTS

TOOLS TO STRUCTURE THE MATERIAL AND SOCIAL SELVES

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ABSTRACT

During the existence of some objects occurred representations that mark not only a transit between different individuals and contexts, but the creation of interpersonal bonds linked to memories, feelings and wishes, among others, that extend their service life beyond economic dynamics, this phenomenon has been called reuse.

Three types of object's dynamics are identified in this study: mutable objects dynamic, which represent a scenario of objects creation and use by societies in transition; located objects dynamic, which falls into the principles of family social reproduction; and seized objects dynamic, which serve in the construction of the material and social Selves of individuals. This last type of dynamic will be the main subject of the study.

Under the dynamics of reuse, some forms of social and environmental sustainability are visualized, due to the construction of objects exchange networks.

Key words: objects, reuse, exchange network, power, significance.

INTRODUCTION

Usually, parents talk with their kids about how to interact with the world of objects; the spaces where they are used; the times when they are used; the images and values they represent, and the principles that help them estimate what is useful, what is beautiful and what is good, as well as their opposites. These appreciations generate in each person or group

dynamics of usage of the objects that differ depending on the context.

In part of Colombia, objects are so highly valued that they are hardly ever discarded. They continue to be used by other family members, friends or others who find them useful, replicating several times the dynamics of use and reuse.

In the present study, the **dynamic of reuse** is defined as the extension of the object's service life in its original condition¹ through various users. From the moment an object is reused, it is possible to identify the expression of different forms of relationship and re-significance that confer meaning to the objects. This dynamic is not integrated into commercial circuits, because the motivation for reuse is generated mainly by memories, feelings and desires, among others, and not by aspects related to their economic exchange value.

The dynamics of reuse start through a gift, donation, loan, transfer or inheritance. These create intangible exchanges² that certainly do not move from the meanings given to the objects from the point of view of "transactions, the powers and the human motivations [but from] the concrete, historical movement of things" (Appadurai, c1991, p. 19). From this perspective, we have identified three trajectories in the dynamics of reuse: the first and central theme of

¹ The object does not undergo any transformation as in the recycling.

² In this case, the object of use or social usage is not seen as a commodity. The term "goods" has been transforming since it first appeared in Marx' *Capital*. In any case, it is necessary to understand that "goods" are products intended mainly for exchange and that those products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, economic and psychological conditions of Capitalism (...). Goods become intrinsically linked to money, to an impersonal market and to their exchange value (Appadurai c1991).

this study is related to users that extend the service life of the object through other users —similar or different to the one established in the first entry of use³. Two forms of relationships are evident in this trajectory: the first is a linear structure that we have called ‘a chain of users’. In this case, the object leaves the hands of the first owner and moves gradually into the hands of another user; here, the object does not return to the first user. The second is a radial structure (circuit of the loan), with nodes that concentrate the dynamics of reuse in a non-linear manner, because the object returns to its first owner whenever other users have no more use for it.

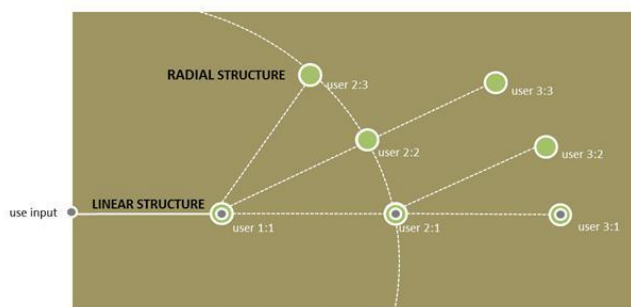


Figure 1. Linear and radial structure of the dynamics of reuse.

The second and third trajectories involve restorers or repairers in the chain of users⁴.

For the purpose of this study, we identified the need to analyze in depth not only the paths followed by the users and reused objects, but also the meaning people give to objects in their daily life.

Without a theoretical discussion that specifically asserted the definition given to reuse, whether from the anthropological field or the design field, it was necessary to create a conceptual framework that contributed to its construction and led the research in these two front lines of the discussed topic.

In that way, usability studies approached to transcendence and power notions that design does not know in its practice and that are found at material culture studies. The notion of transcendence was seen in the light of Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Haltn

³ In this field we find the objects given away, donated, transferred, lent and inherited.

⁴ In the case of restorers, a specialist must restore the object before it is reused. The restorer charges for the service. The user wishes to maintain the object in its original form (It is not intended to enter into the dynamics of the antique shops, where it would acquire the value of goods). In the case of repairers, the user wants the object to continue operating but is not interested in preserving its authenticity.

work (1981), whose postulates locate us close to the concept of senses cultivation given to the verb *tend to*, i.e. take care of, and *be keen on*, i.e. to have the tendency towards somebody or something, the case be aesthetics —canalization of psychical and physical energy transaction- and purpose create meanings. Another consideration to be taken into account was the relationships people have based on time remembrance. Halbwachs (2004) sets us closer to the remembrance as learning model and example amongst family members, while Attfield (2000) references different ways of seeing time —existential, present ethnographic, historical and personal⁵- which are also identified with the reuse dynamic.

The notion of power was seen from two perspectives: *power for* and *power over*, that Miller and Tilley (quoted by McGuire & Paynter, 1991) offer us on the domination and transformation phenomena that arise from the socialization and expansion of human relationships; thus, it was needed to understand how do belongings are used to be kept —maintained, used and stored- within a group of people, something that leads towards the construction of value (Weiner, 1992) not of use but of social exchange due to what they represent —potential power-.

Finally, the social networks frame was defined. We returned to the postulates of Attfield (2000) on the way people negotiate their identity and dynamic or social change with the world, from two perspectives: the authenticity that legitimates relationships among individuals, an issue where objects are present; and, retaining, a space where the daily life experiences located through organization, categorization, definition, redefinition, elaboration, re-elaboration and de-elaboration of their material world. Hence, individuals make agreements on shared interests of precise matters in the short or long term where the emotional support (emotions and feelings) and the instrumental aid (objects) are present in the established links and exchanges. As a consequence, the reciprocity between individuals structures the confidence and will to exercise the exchange towards a subjective and personal assessment (Madariaga, Abello y Sierra, 2003)

⁵ Attfield (2000) presents existential time from Heidegger's perspective, the ethnographic present from Mary Douglas and personal time from Williamson.

For the analysis of seized objects we included aspects used by the individual in the construction of the Self; in this sense, it deals with aspects related to human consciousness as "active existence" (James 1989, p. 274). These aspects promote actions that influence or determine human behavior; one of them is the way we interact with the objects we use.

Qualitative research methodologies are currently seen as excellent tools in the construction of social knowledge and design on daily realities. This ethnographic research emerged from this perspective, seeking to identify the social relationships built by users from the practices of objects reuse in urban domestic spaces of the city of Bogotá.

A first matrix was developed from the conceptual framework. Based on it, the observation and in-depth interview questionnaire⁶ done were determined. (See Table No.1 Questions Matrix). On the one hand, actors, objects, space and time of the reuse event are described; on the other hand, the constructed feelings, bonds, relationships, meanings and senses are presented.

ELEMENTS TO OBSERVE	DINAMIC OF REUSE	
	Actions in use	Activities in reuse
Stakeholders/ users	Who was the first user?	Who were following users?
Object / product	How is the object?	What changes was the object in reuse?
Space	Where the object is used?	Where the object is reused?
Time	When was the object used for the first times?	How many times have been used the object?
Meaning	Why was buying the object? Why was the object used?	Why was the object reused? What meanings that continue or become the object reuse between people?
Ties	What feelings or emotions are taken into use in order?	What feelings or emotions are taken into reuse in order?
Relations	What kind of relations between the object and the user?	What is the relationship between users?
Notion / Sense	What dimension is constructed with the use of the object: transcendence, network or power?	What dimension is constructed with the reuse of the object: transcendence, network or power?

Table 1. Matrix questions

Then, a second matrix was developed relating the three abovementioned categories, analyzing in

⁶ Informal interviews of conversational type, semi-structured interviews accompanied by a participant observer. Record oral, visual and written.

parallel tangible and intangible dimensions of reuse (see Table No. 2 Conceptual Relationships Matrix). The person, as agent generator of the use and reuse actions, belongs to the intangible dimension, as well as the notion of transcendence, regarding tradition issues, the social network towards emotional support and power –*for*- notion to exchange transforming and mobilizing. On the opposite side, it appears the tangible dimension in terms of the item or element that mediates and depicts the reuse dynamics; therefore, the transcendence notion was referred to cultivation, social network aided by instrumental contribution and power –*over*- notion to domination as model that paralyzes exchange processes.

Both points of view, tangible and intangible, were complemented with intermediate categories that were taken and ordered according to the conceptual framework and the factual data, relating ties, feelings and material representations with the values and exchanges that are present in the dynamic of reuse. Starting from these categories, a level of minor categories was developed, consistently to the data drawn from the interviews. According to Dey (1993)⁷, this process of disaggregation allows the emergence of meaningful data.

Each category and its associated data were analyzed⁸ under Wolcott's perspective (1994)⁹, which states that relating research findings (minor categories) is what enables to elaborate significance. Here, comprehension was not the only one sought, but the explanation of the reuse event that resulted in three reused objects dynamics: mutable, located and seized objects.

⁷ (Quoted by Strauss Anselm & Corbin Juliet, 2002).

⁸ The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used for the analysis of relationships and their interpretation. It facilitated systematizing categories, relating "factual" data with concepts and with one or more of the analytical categories, and, finally, the reports cross-information.

⁹ (Quoted by Strauss Anselm & Corbin Juliet, 2002).

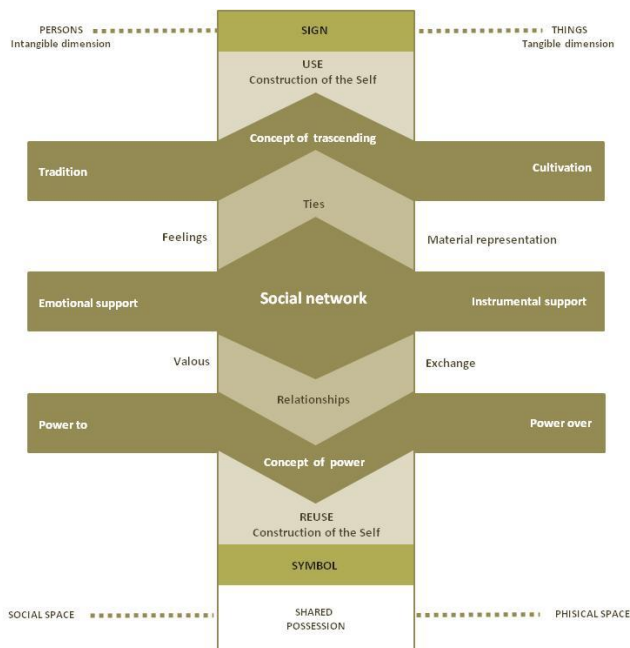


Table 2. Conceptual Relationships Matrix.

SEIZED OBJECT

One of the characteristics of the seized object is that it is kept or saved by the person as long as it serves as a tool to structure the material and social Selves —as constitutive of the empirical Self¹⁰. According to James, the material Self refers both to the internal and external parts of our body or parts close to it such as clothing, objects and all those possessions which are a product of our physical growth. In this field we also find the family, which is a part of ourselves, it "is bones of our bones and flesh of our flesh. When one of its members dies, a part of our Self disappears" (1989 p. 274). Instead, the social Self is located in the "recognition that [one] receives from its fellows"(1989, p. 275).

It can be said that seized objects have characteristics of configuration that create in people a relationship with their private or subjective being [material Self];

¹⁰ Term used by the Germans to refer to everything intended to be called Self. According to James (1989, p. 274) there are four components of the Ego: 1) The material Self (2) the social Self (3) the spiritual Self, and 4) the pure Self. It must be noted that the last two will not be developed in this paper because they were not evident in the case study.

that is why we identify with them, appropriate them, take care of them, and mourn their absence when they are no longer with us. On the other hand, the social Self relies on seized objects to be recognized by other people. The seized object becomes a reflection of the Self constructed by people or, as James says (1989, p. 275), "a man has as many social egos as there are individuals that recognize him and carry in their spirit an image of him". In this regard, such objects are signs-symbols whose function is to represent, through their formal-aesthetic signifier, meanings which are related to practices in the service of social intentions of the person who possesses them, uses them and allows them to be reused. In fact, their function is to contribute to the socialization of those seeking certain life styles, where social status is present in forms of domination or transformation and (non-commercial) exchange.

On the other hand, the seized objects play with the notions of power of dominance and transformation. Dominance occurs when those who reuse the object must comply with the orders of the person who initially had it or of the person (or persons) who administers or controls it (holder), although there might be other people with a right over them. In fact, no other individual could make use of these objects without permission because he would be transgressing the imaginaries of the group to which they belong. The administrator or holder keeps an eye on the presence of the objects in its immediate surroundings and keeps track of them as a way of preventing possible losses. This special care expresses, among other aspects, the importance of such objects in the construction of the material and social Selves of the group they belong to. In case the object is lost, the construction can be seriously affected and could lead to a partial collapse of the material and social Selves constructed from the appropriation of that object.

When the seized objects are reused with permission of their holder or manager, the dynamics of the power of transformation is activated as a form of exchange of meanings, of values, between those previously granted by the ones recalled and the values assigned at the time by those who use the object. The latter are related to the stories or memories of the time when the object was acquired, to the different uses so far

given to it, to the meanings acquired in representative moments for the group, to the fact that they represent services that have benefited some members of the group, or to the aesthetic values of those who have and manage them, among others.

Similarly, those values may be associated with feelings of affection or pleasant, painful or threatening feelings regarding the Self. The mere fact of associating affection with the object leads the individual to be on the defensive, as a result of the struggle between Self and instinct. As Freud's daughter said (1961), the individual "will accept with joy pleasant affection and will defend himself against pain", i.e., the individual will repress instinctively any feeling that puts at risk his welfare or pleasure. Owing to that, in some cases, seized objects replace or mitigate a negative affection of displeasure (such as the absence or loss of a loved one) as a way of prolonging his/her presence in the object. In these cases, the loss of the object can generate reactions similar to a postponed mourning.

In addition, seized objects are a "shared possession" among several holders-managers. In the case of the present study, they are shared among the members of a family who received an inheritance. The holder or keeper is committed to keeping, storing or reusing the objects and is responsible for their care; in certain circumstances, he may decide to throw, give away or hand over some of the objects¹¹, in which case it would be those that have not been seized and, therefore, do not represent a relationship or a special value to him or to the group that has entrusted him with their care. The objects people decide to preserve can be considered as seized. In this case, they are treated with special care, preserved and repaired or restored when necessary to extend their life cycle. In seized objects, people seek and find dimensions of meaning that allow them to cultivate or build both their individuality (identity of the Self) and their differences in relation to others. This effort —psychic energy— turns the seized objects into signs-symbols of prestige¹² that serve also as integrators in the

dynamics of reuse, both for those who use them (reuse) and for those participating in the event convened for that purpose. Such connotation of prestige leads the holder of the seized objects to lend them to others in order to display them. In this case, the loan is due both to the desire of the person who requests the loan —who must follow a protocol of respect and order— as to the expectations of the holder. That is how these objects conform to imaginaries or interests projected by the holder.

Such interests include function-functionality, which is related both to use and to the utilitarian condition and practice. For this purpose, it is necessary to take into account that seized objects are frequently treated with special care for being representative pieces of a style¹³ or as products of a recognized and prestigious manufacturer on a local or global level. On the other hand, there are objects classified as 'seized' because they were produced by a member of the group and that circumstance, attached to the service they provide, guarantees that they do not enter the dynamics of disuse.

EXCHANGE NETWORKS

We have said that seized objects are a shared possession in which owners-holders or managers consider them as their own. We have also referred to the forms of appropriation by use and memories, which contribute to the construction of the material and the social Selves. In both types of appropriation we find forms of exchange¹⁴ or agreements between the owners-holders that give continuity to the dynamics of use-reuse of the seized object.

The first form of exchange happens within the holder himself, at the time of choosing one object among other seized objects which have the same functional and productive nature but a different formal-aesthetic configuration. For this exchange to take place, the

to be a trait of human nature, just as the desire to appear to be more than what we are the desire to receive the highest possible esteem from others (Leopold, 1916, quoted by Lobach, 1981).

¹³ In 1937, Focillon defined 'style' as a *coherent set of forms united by a reciprocal convenience*, and concludes that these forms are *submissive to an inner logic that organizes them*, without becoming static, but with the capacity to evolve over time, Souriau (1998, pp. 540-541).

¹⁴ Forms of exchange which can be mistaken for barter.

¹¹ Damaged objects, objects that can be replaced with another one, or simply useless objects that take valuable space.

¹² "It is that disturbing feeling of having someone in front and not being able to approach him thinking or qualifying". Prestige seems

person has had previous experiences of use or appropriation by memories that do not necessarily mean full satisfaction with the current use. The choice of object entails a difficult decision because the reasons to choose imply a high emotional charge with itself and with the group in general, whether it is to be reused, saved or stored.

Heiress (1) speaking:

Ok, I will tell you.. I have one thing that I wanted and liked very much: a dinner service she received as a marriage present. It was very simple, yet elegant; my mom only used it for special occasions, not every day. (...). Well, so it was, the dinner service was still used only on special occasions, a dinnerware for about 36 people. The pieces started decreasing, it went down to serve about 18 people and I had it here. But, when this aunt died, she had 6 dinner services and I inherited the most beautiful. Then I thought: "What am I going to do with two elegant sets?" This is my mom's and is the one I like most, but I have to be consistent with my sisters who have their dishes but no special dinnerware. My sister, the oldest, wanted that dinner service and she told me so. I did my grieving process¹⁵.

I only asked her to "leave me a tray", because I wanted to keep a tray to remind me of that dinnerware. Then I chose the tray that best suited me and I have it there. That dinnerware is gone and I kept my aunt's, the one she gave me¹⁶.

In addition to memories, this emotional burden is also based on the values the family has assigned to the object. Regarding this, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Haltn¹⁷ state: "Household objects facilitate flowing experiences in two different directions. On the one hand, by providing a familiar symbolic context that reaffirms the identity of the owner. On the other hand, household objects can provide opportunities to stimulate the flow from one state to another, attracting the attention of people". Therefore, the way the objects were first acquired, the motivations to continue using them, their uses-reuses, and the representations reached with them (considering them as seized objects during the three last stages), are part of the affective and cognitive¹⁸ systems of the family —and not only of the individual, as one could think. Likewise, with objects one can evoke memories that have become family models, examples or teachings as well as representing the nature, qualities and weaknesses of the family. The latter is so

important that nowadays you can reproduce the history of a family, starting from the study of its objects (Halbwachs, 2004).



Figure 2. Cookware

Just as the appropriation process of the object occurs through the memories, the expropriation process is necessary for the exchange agreement of the seized object to happen. The expropriation implies an act of mourning by the holder, since he must part with the possession in order to deliver it to someone else — even though it might be replaced by another seized object. The parting means that the holder expropriates the object; he hands over, together with the object, the permanent presence of the memory that makes sense for him and —with it— the memory of those who possessed or used it; that is, he lets go of the history evoked by the object. The act of letting go of some of the aspects of the object does not mean that the object completely loses its seized status; in this case, it can extend its seized status through the sense of functionality or as a social prestige object.

The person that receives the seized object can ascribe to it the same meanings that the previous owner, or transform them and add new ones; this is possible because there is a new material Self. In fact, the common memories of the family can evoke different meanings in each of its members.

There is a *second type that happens between two individuals and two seized objects*. In this exchange, the affective intangible values assigned to the objects take precedence over their formal-esthetic or functional qualities. One could think that it is the

¹⁵ Interview with ElsaP. (3: 49).

¹⁶ Interview with ElsaP. (3: 52).

¹⁷ Quoted by Norman, 2005, p. 65

¹⁸ Norman (2005, p. 26) says: "Cognition and affection influence each other: certain emotions and affective states derive from cognition, while affection often leaves its mark on cognition."

economic value what brings about the decision to keep them¹⁹, but it is not the case when there is a prior awareness of the loss of any commercial value; such is the case of the holder of a few pieces of furniture received by inheritance and, today, obsolete.

In this case, the idea is to exchange objects with the same functional nature –a chair for a chair and a mirror for a mirror—; this dynamic is brought about by the space functionality requirements of one of the users, because the size of the piece does not allow him to locate it in a suitable space. The furniture was developed to meet the architectural considerations of another time, when rooms were more spacious than nowadays; this fact affects the chance of using, caring and storage of such objects. For the family, it is important to find an alternative that generates a dynamic of reuse which prolongs the life of objects, so they decide to make an exchange in order to adapt them to the available space while keeping the affective value they represent.

In such a case, the assessment of the quality of functionality is reversed with regard to the formal-aesthetic and productive configuration seen in the previous exchange. Both interested parts want to preserve the family heirloom, but each assumes a different position: one wants to keep the object and cannot use it, while the other can solve the problem providing an object in keeping with the required characteristics.

The heiress (1) refers to the exchange:

(...) I exchanged the mirror for this one I have here, a large, French style mirror which I think is too big but fits better and is easier to care for²⁰.

The feeling of solidarity which can be seen in this behavior refers to a form of emotional support that keeps alive the bonds left by the ancestors and serves as a model for those that must extend them. Regarding this, we can quote Durkheim's^{21 22} study of the agnatic family: "the ties that unite things to the domestic unit are stronger than those that unite the individual". This statement is more closely related to reciprocal exchanges than to exchanges supported on equivalence principles. Reciprocal exchanges are established because the objects have certain characteristics in common that make them transferable, and they may be replaceable not necessarily for their formal-esthetic and functional similarity but because they embody the same values. In this case, such an exchange is possible on the basis that both people have assigned similar values to the seized objects and their primary interest is to keep the connection with the "total social fact" as Mauss (c1968) calls it. The "total social fact" refers to the individual history that allows the study of the general behavior of the family group immersed in an interpretation system of the different behavioral aspects of giving and receiving.

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Figure 3. Wall mirror

¹⁹ We are aware that some objects are kept for their economic value and not just for their formal-esthetic and functional qualities.

²⁰ Interview with ElsaP. (3:30).

²¹ Quoted by Halbwachs (2004, p. 190).

²² Therein lies the principle that heritage cannot leave the family.

Finally, *loans can be understood as a third form of exchange*, in which the seized object moves between the owner-holder and a person who asks for it in order to display it—in an event where the social Self of the lender should be recognized. This situation occurs because of the condition of "shared possession" which contributes to structuring the material and the social Self of those involved in the loan, including the family that owns it. The exchange dynamic is possible only if the lender recognizes in the other person the appropriate ethical qualities to grant him the right to use the object.

In this case, the loan is the exchange of an extension of the prestige it represents for the group that owns it; that is, it is about sharing an image, status or other representation of prestige, with the approval of the holder group. The interests of the social Self of the holder and the borrower come into play in the exchange. James (1989, p. 288) defines these interests as "the need to please, draw attention, arouse admiration, emulation, generate envy, express the love for glory, influence and power of transformation"; the latter manifests itself in the need to have distinguished friends and enjoy admiration as recognition²³.

The heiress (2) speaks about the loan:

Yes, we all like that Saint Anthony, all of us, everyone. Aunt Agnes—the one that died— had it for the past few years, because she once asked Elsa to lend it to her. I do not know if it was for some celebration, for something, and she returned the Saint Anthony. It is very nice²⁴.

To sum up, we can say that every object contributes to building the material and social Selves of an individual but, in this case, the seized object contributes as well to the creation of exchange networks in order to extend its use among several users in time. In this sense, matter, energy and information move in the family scenario building up the group's identity. Besides, it sets behaviors subject to assessments of the object in its functional, practical, and esthetic dimensions as visual and tactile elements with formal and material qualities (memory of a style), as well as its quality related to the

recognition or prestige of its producer or creator (name, brand, tradition) in terms of image.

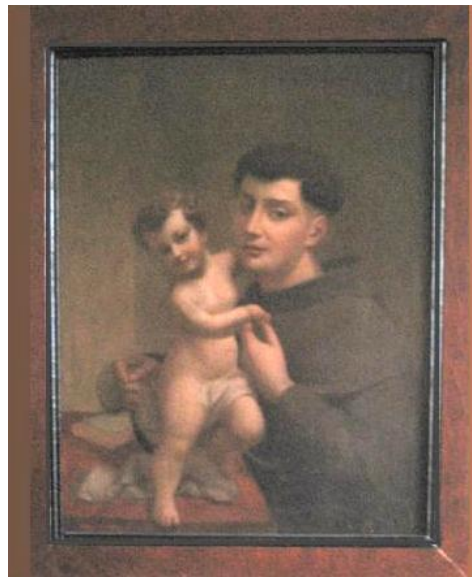


Figure 4. San Antonio painting

The material, symbolic and reciprocal exchanges that start from seized objects are linked to the dominance and transformation powers, as far as the meanings and significant connected with the object are attached to feelings that support the existence of the values and memories of an individual or group.

What has been previously discussed proves that the notion of reuse is broader than it's usually thought, since it includes a social perspective not limited to material reuse. Revealing the current dynamics of reuse in societies such as ours, allows us to offer anthropologists and designers a new alternative for their professional practice, oriented towards an instrumental materialism that involves a culture of objects with re-signification instead of continuing to favor the terminal materialism²⁵ that has left us with an unsustainable world.

Therefore, what is essential is the design of experiences that foster the dynamics of reuse as meaningful practices. These dynamics of reuse are favored by the parents, who focus their efforts not only on the service of those they love but on the

²⁵ In instrumental materialism, the possession serves practical ends, devoid of greed, and creates a limited range within a context of purposes, in such a way that the objects become a means to achieve the goals. In this sort of materialism there is a sense of direction, the individual's goals are cultivated or can be cultivated through transactions with the object. In this context we find a more relaxed materialism as opposed to terminal materialism, in which there is no reciprocal interaction in the relation between object and goals. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Haltn, 1981).

²³ James (1989).

²⁴ Interview with MclaraP. (4:61).

construction of behaviors that are usually repeated by their children, who become multipliers of the information transmitted at home. This means that, to the extent that design works in the construction of reuse dynamics (with their social and environmental benefits), one will possibly be contributing, brewing or potentiating a positive change. This refers to what individuals can do for the planet, autonomously and regardless of the processes and policies lead by others.

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