Introduction

Victor Buchli

This reader is a compilation of some of the representative works of the Material Culture Group at University College London. It is by no means exhaustive and representative, but it does provide an idea of the range of subjects, contexts and problems material culture studies at University College have addressed over the years and at present. The works here are a sampling of some of the dominant concerns of the contributors. In turn, each contribution is preceded with an introduction by the author placing the work within broader themes relevant to the study of the material world. As a result the compass of these works is quite diverse, giving the reader a sense of the broad and at times conflicting issues in which material cultures studies as a whole participates. What might appear an unruly collection of works is united by an abiding concern for the materiality of cultural life and its diverse and at times conflicting vitality.

Up to now there has never been a 'snapshot' of the work of this group, so the introduction to such a compilation offers a place to look back and try to place this 'snapshot' within the larger scheme of things. As such, this provides the opportunity to examine in general the trajectory of development of material culture studies through a particular cohort of scholars. It also affords the opportunity to attempt and delineate some of the overall issues affecting material cultures studies from this writer's perspective and from there, hopefully, offer some suggestions as to where we are now and where we might be going next.

The particular cohort of which we are speaking are the contributors: Barbara Bender, Victor Buchli, Susanne Küchler, Daniel Miller, Christopher Pinney, Michael Rowlands, Nicholas J. Saunders and Christopher Tilley. It is very obvious that this cohort represents a viewpoint that is distinctly British despite Buchli and Küchler being from the United States and Germany respectively (though they both received their doctorates from British universities). In terms of the British academic traditions of which this group is a part, the cohort is quite firmly situated within the Universities of London and Cambridge and their schools, departments and institutes of archaeology and anthropology. This immediately distinguishes this cohort from scholars of material culture in the United States who, in addition to coming out of the traditions of archaeology and anthropology, are strongly

influenced by the tradition of American folklore studies. Bender and Rowlands received their doctorates in archaeology from the Institute of Archaeology, and Saunders from Southampton. All are closely associated with the Institute's current director, Peter Ucko and the legacy of its former director, the Marxist archaeologist Gordon Childe. Similarly, Buchli and Tilley received their doctorates in archaeology from Cambridge having both been supervised by Ian Hodder, who was originally a student of David Clarke's. Miller received his doctorate in oriental studies from Cambridge, but he is closely associated with the group of post-processualist archaeologists who gathered around Ian Hodder. This archaeological leaning within the group is complemented by Küchler and Pinney who both received their doctorates in anthropology from the London School of Economics under the supervision of the anthropologist of art Alfred Gell, a student of Anthony Forge of the London School of Economics.

Material Culture and the Work of Culture

We first encounter the use of the term 'material culture' in English in the nineteenth century. The origins are murky, the first reference to such a concept according to the Oxford English Dictionary was made in 1843 by Prescott on in reference to the 'material civilization' of Mexico in his travelogue. The intellectual history of this concept regrettably is beyond the scope of this introduction, except to say that the study of material culture itself became one of the cornerstones of the nascent independent discipline of anthropology (for a history of the role of material culture in the growth of anthropology see Steadman 1979 and Lowie 1937). In fact, in the late 1800s the concept and its study was almost entirely inseparable from anthropology itself: the so-called 'object-lessons' described by Edward Tylor in his foreword to Ratzel's monumental treatise on the ethnographic study of artifacts, *The History of Mankind* (Ratzel 1896).

However, nineteenth century Victorians who coined the term 'material culture' were by no means the only people preoccupied with artefacts per se. People have always been under their thrall, from palaeolithic assemblages, which seem to suggest an early propensity for collecting, to Babylonian temple collections, ancient Chinese and Roman antiquarians and the cabinets of curios established by Europeans during the Renaissance (Schnapp 1996). In the European context it was these cabinets of curios which were the ancestors of our museums and our preoccupation with objects in themselves. The history of such collections have been dealt with elsewhere (Belk 2001, Pearce 1994, Thomas 1997). For our purposes here, it is necessary to note that the great Euro-American museums were the institutions in which material culture studies as we know it originally found their home and thrived.

So what has happened in terms of the changing fortunes of material culture studies since the mid nineteenth century? Why was this super-category of objects needed in the first place and why has it fallen in and out of use within anthropology? From its beginnings, material culture as a category and as a field of study was intimately related to larger cultural projects. In the nineteenth century it was used as a way of gauging the degree of technical and social sophistication of a given group. Within these schemes of unilineal evolution European Victorian society was on the top of the scale as the most modern and progressive while other non-European societies descended downwards with various hunter-gatherer groups at the bottom of the scale of human social and technical evolution. This naturally justified European dominance in expansionist imperial affairs, but also served liberal notions of Enlightenment thought which advocated the universality of human experience and justice. The various 'uncivilized' peoples of the world were all subject to the same technical and social processes albeit at different levels, thereby ensuring European imperial dominance. All of humanity's inventions and institutions could be used as an indicator of this inexorable dynamic of inclusive progress.

The emergence of material culture studies was an innovation arising from earlier Enlightenment era preoccupation with the materiality of social life. As Michel Foucault argued in *Space, Knowledge and Power*, the interest in the various material components of social life (i.e. architecture as an aspect of governance) is an eighteenth century preoccupation where 'One begins to see a form of political literature, that addresses, what the order of a society should be, what a city should be, given the requirements of the maintenance of order . . .' (Rabinow 1984:239). The ethnographic urge to order, manage and constitute new political subjects (typically colonial and subject to the principles of universality to which all could aspire to), maintained unilinealism as just such a demonstration of this universal progression. Statecraft, the formation of nationhood and empire were inextricably bound to these quasi-archaeological and ethnographical impulses (Schnapp 1996). These 'objects' of knowledge were vital for establishing the building blocks of statecraft. In short the super-category of objects: material culture, has had from the beginning a utility with specific cultural work to do. As Edward Tylor observed in thinking about the future of material culture studies on the eve of the twentieth century: 'In the next century, to judge from its advance in the present, it will have largely attained to the realm of positive law, and its full use will then be acknowledged not only as interpreting the past history of mankind, but as even laying down the first stages of curves of movements which will describe and affect the courses of future opinions and institutions' (Tylor in Ratzel 1896: xi) .

This emerging understanding of human progress was best expressed in the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's monumental work *Ancient Society* which laid out the stages of human social and technical evolution from

savagery to civilization. Each stage was characterized by a particular level of social and technical achievement which incorporated all peoples and races in the trajectory of human progress. All peoples were alike and uniform and would respond in similar ways given the same technical limitations. Morgan was acutely aware that old life ways were passing through his close work with Native Americans. He could directly witness how older indigenous technical and social achievements were succumbing to the relentless march of Euro-American expansion and progress. Existing peoples in isolation, resembling the earlier stages of humans social evolution existed in Morgan's schema as 'monuments of the past' that is as a living archaeology of early forms of human life. As Karl Marx (a keen reader of Morgan) stated: 'Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic forms of society, as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals' (Marx 1986: 78). The level of a society was intimately linked to its level of material culture. Thus social organization, social progress could be 'read' from the material culture of a particular people or nation as a fossil could be read to determine stages of the evolution of life on earth. Non-European peoples encountered could be understood within this schema and the differences between nations (especially European nations) could be understood in terms of the differences in their material culture. Thus objects were intimately connected with notions of progress – historically, technically and socially – in short, material culture as it was conceived in the nineteenth century was the modernist super-artefact and the supreme signifier of universal progress and modernity.

Earlier European collections of objects sought to gather the curiosities of the world, both natural and manmade, in cabinets of curiosities. These were not systematized in any particular way, except that they represented everything that was out of the ordinary, exceptional, that is not conventional, be it a tool from a distant society, an unusual rock formation, or natural deformity. The early ethnographic collections that formed the basis of material culture studies in the nineteenth century often contained souvenirs accumulated by sailors on expeditions that one way or another made their way back to the European capitals, forming parts of cabinets of curios or collections dedicated to artefacts of far-flung peoples (Thomas 1991). Beyond mere curiosity, these artefacts and their collections served as proof of an event and contact and knowledge of the peoples encountered. Artefact collections essentially were objectifications of authoritative knowledge (Thomas 1991: 141–3) – and more rarely along with the importation of actually indigenous peoples – no other could possibly do in light of the intellectual and technical circumstances of the time. Thus, as these forms of objectified authoritative knowledge became increasingly unsatisfactory, the random collections of curiosities were superseded by the more systematic collections of later scholars, Haddon, Pitt-Rivers, Boas, etc., These collections were to be rejected

again during the careers of pivotal figures such as Boas for not being sufficient objectifications of authoritative knowledge. These objectifications were then supplanted by the ethnographic monograph as it began to emerge through the development of British social anthropology as a source of authoritative knowledge about other societies (Thomas 1991: 141–3). Earlier objectifications of authoritative knowledge were simply superseded by more satisfying techniques – more satisfying in terms of its being able, as Pomian suggests, to render the invisible visible, which he describes as the primary impulse of collecting (Pomian 1990). If initial collections were an attempt to bring such exotic, invisible and otherwise unknowable realms into being for Europeans, then these attempts at knowledge of other realms of experience found more satisfactory expression in the ethnographic monograph which was based on direct field work and participant observation – the souvenir club would no longer suit as an indicator of authoritative knowledge of another realm of experience. As such this requirement has never really been exhausted within anthropology as every Ph.D. student who undergoes the *rite de passage* of fieldwork knows so well.

I do not wish to go over the critical ground covered by others who have emphasized the indisputable ills that have been a consequence of unilinealism and the role of material culture studies within it, except to say that the constitution of mere objects into systems of 'material culture' represented a particular intellectual and political project that required a new kind of conceptual tool: the super-category of objects 'material culture' itself. This project proceeded to materialize precisely such a super-category of objects that never existed before and which was meaningless to the individuals who actually produced these objects. Cook Islanders were hardly producing 'material culture' for the consumption of sailors, travelers, administrators and scholars (as we know from Thomas, Pacific Islanders had very different purposes in mind; see Thomas 1991: 131). Similarly, archaeological excavations constituted a category of objects as 'material culture' entirely foreign to the past producers of these objects. To insist otherwise and claim its ahistorical universality, as many still do, is the act of 'retrofitting' (using Bruno Latour's language) that naturalizes a particular 'concresence' of institutionalized and historically contingent knowledge, which results in his felicitous neologism a 'factish': 'a sustained mode of existence for facts' within a specific 'spatiotemporal envelope' (Latour 1999). This super-category materializes something entirely new and uniquely Victorian and Western, as modern as the artefacts of industrialism on display at the Great Exposition of 1851 from which our more systematic nineteenth century collections of ethnographic material culture took their inspiration. At the Great Exposition all of humanity's technical achievements were to be assembled under one roof – one universal and fully encompassing schema which excluded no one and not one thing from its purview. More significantly it was intended to edify and instruct the visiting public – provide them with a view

of universal order, prosperity and progress which no theology up to this point had ever been able to do to such a telling degree. Thus the Great Exhibition served – to follow Pomian – as a window onto a universal realm of progress and prosperity just within everyone's reach, especially the inhabitants of the capital of the British Empire. The items on display became, using Pomian's term, semiophores – objects which do not have, or no longer have, a general practical use '. . . but which, being endowed with meaning, represented the invisible' (Pomian 1990) – the promise of a world of universal progress. Pitt-Rivers's famous and foundational collection for anthropology was first inspired by his visit to the Great Exhibition (Chapman 1985: 16). Even though something as ostensibly exotic as a neolithic axe found in Britain or an Aboriginal spear seemed to be as far removed as possible from the latest technical triumphs of nineteenth century industrialization, they all served together to emphasize a political, intellectual and cultural project based on empiricism, progress and perfectible unlineal evolution. As much as this justified European superiority, it also insisted on the perfectibility of all peoples (under European guidance) within the tradition of Enlightenment era liberalism and the universality of Man. The legacy of this impulse is still very much with us as rising nation states and creative ethnic self-determination assert claims towards inclusion and modernity, as Rowlands so cogently discusses in his contribution here.

There is a social reformist agenda here, which is often overlooked. These exhibitions not only brought in 'primitive' peoples within the unversalizing schema of European thought, but also brought in and edified the less enlightened in their own societies, serving as a vehicle for social reform. Both 'savage' and 'proletariat' were meant to be enlightened, edified and stimulated towards social progress and reform through these displays. Pitt-Rivers exhibited his collection in the severely deprived London working-class district of Bethnal Green in the 1870s with the purpose of edifying the masses so that they might more effectively participate in governance (Chapman 1985: 39). Eventually he realized the edifying purpose of his collection on the British working classes by setting up his collection on his Farnham estate. Thus, within this scheme of things, 'material culture' a peculiar super-category of objects was constituted and materialized as such. The highly contrived means by which some objects were separated out, and materialized as 'artefacts' within a 'material culture' in the aid of scholarship, colonial administration, museology and popular exoticism all served in their different ways to constitute and thereby materialize a very new, original and 'modern' category of objects.

These collections had a direct affinity with the rise in the nineteenth century of shopping and consumerism (Belk 2001). The exposition and the department store emerged at the same time and like the exposition, the newly invented institution of the department store with its vitrines and window displays provided views onto a desirable and more readily achievable (that is consumable) world that was just

within reach – more universal and more open to a wider range of people than anything which preceded it. Such displays of material culture also served well within university settings as primary authoritative vehicles with which to peer into and understand non-western, past cultures and rapidly disappearing local 'folk' cultures. Anthropology appointments were often within museums and these museum collections formed the basis of instruction serving as the primary 'text', if you like, of early ethnographic and archaeological training (Hodder 1983:13). Similarly, In the United States, before the First World War, jobs in anthropology were in museums or research bureaux. Early teaching posts were split between museums and the first academic departments in anthropology at Harvard, California, and Pennsylvania. Franz Boas, himself worked jointly at the Anthropology Department of Columbia and the American Museum of Natural History (Fenton 1974: 19).

However, this super-artefact/intellectual tool was soon to lose its usefulness amongst Anglophone anthropologists and was virtually abandoned with the rise of British social anthropology, which sought to question the utility of these 'primary texts'. Rather than learning from these 'semiophores', this new turn, signalled most notably by Malinowski, amongst others, sought to understand societies directly through the innovative technique of participant observation over long extended periods of time: interview, discourse, observation and the reconstruction of social structure prevailed as a more perfect means of understanding. How societies functioned as social systems was more significant than how they could be placed within a schema of unlineal evolution based on material traits; the kinship diagram prevailed over the material culture 'fossil'. Transitional figures such as Boas became disillusioned with museum based work, becoming more interested instead in the social process which structured material culture (Boas 1907). The end result was an emphasis on kinship and social structure, the cornerstones of twentieth century social anthropology. Material culture as an intellectual and political tool became irrelevant, and faded by the wayside.

However, material culture retained its usefulness in other ways; most notably for its ability to materialize national identity in the creation of nationhood, as Rowlands and Bender illustrate here. Thus a number of traditions of material culture within folkloric studies remained and continued its nineteenth century mandate for delineating, materializing and stimulating social reform. The establishment of the Soviet Union witnessed the extraordinary institutionalization of the subject. The nineteenth century reformist and progressivist impulse was very much in evidence here on a scale Pitt-Rivers could never have dreamt of when Lenin 'abolished' archaeology as a 'bourgeois' science and re-created it as the study of the history of material culture in 1919. The evolution of the understanding of material culture in Soviet Russia probably followed more completely the logic of the world's fairs, serving as a new revolutionary form of social reform. This was

an intellectual and political transformation that reworked archaeology not as an antiquarian discipline but as that branch of the human sciences which studies the 'history of material culture'. As such it was firmly part of history faculties, and a very long way from its earlier geological origins. Thus there was an understanding of a distinct field of material culture studies. Archaeology had the mandate to discern the processes of social change and progress through the study of material culture in the past, while more recent periods and the present were covered by the ethnologist, as part of a complementary analysis of the material basis of social evolution and progress. Archaeology and ethnology along with other arts and sciences were united in the common goal of the reconstruction of society according to Marxian principles towards the realization of communism and the social promise of modernity and progress – going some considerable way from Tylor's observation that the study of material culture ought to 'affect the courses of future opinions and institutions' (Ratzel 1896: xi). The Enlightenment era heritage found new impetus with the Russian Revolution. Marxian concepts of technical progress and unilineal evolution privileged the material world to an unprecedented extent and material culture studies served as revolutionary semiophores opening up on a new realm of social being. Within this context, the super-category had an extraordinary task to perform – to identify, chart and restructure social life towards a new future.

Melancholy and the Material

Within a climate stressing progress and social change, another element stood out that characterized the emerging preoccupation with artefacts and its study as material culture. This is a melancholic turn in the face of rapid social change both within the European imperial and national heartlands and colonial peripheries (see Rowland's introduction here). Traditional European life was changing quickly and much of traditional society, especially rural agrarian society was vanishing with the onslaught of industrialism. This nostalgia was a key element in the creation of foundational myths of industrialized nations. Similarly colonized societies that rarely had any contact with Europeans were rapidly changing with the expansion of colonial administration, trade and contact. This melancholy so well documented by writers such as Proust and Zola in France, was keenly felt by the early pioneers of anthropological research such as Haddon, Boas and others who were desperately aware of the precipitous rate of change in non-European societies whose ways of life were radically changing and whose traditional cultures were rapidly disappearing with the onslaught of imperial expansion in trade and administration.

This underlying concern with loss rather than consumption is probably the deeper motivation within material culture studies – rather than a view onto a world that is barely imaginable or about to come, this is a melancholic receding view. Material culture has been often, and rather uncritically, referred to as a mirror: 'As material culture, tools are the final objectification of intrinsic hopes. As imprinted thought and as engraved behavior, material culture becomes a mirror in which man can see himself' (Richardson, 1974: 12). However, this passive understanding reveals an unintended but important quality of material culture, that this view, either forwards or backwards, is constitutive and interpellative. Through its material constitution and the reiterative effects of its culturally produced durability, it becomes constitutive of desired and imagined subjectivies either nostalgic, futuristic or transformative which at times can have devastating consequences as Rowlands here describes in the context of India and the Former Yugoslavia. 'Cultural property' as constituted within material culture studies becomes the currency whereby nationhood or ethnic self-determination is ascribed according to how much of it one can show as 'proof' of one's coherence, integrity and worth. Rowlands points out little has changed since the Victorians – the emphasis on property and attendant notions of copyright is something both Rowlands and Küchler discuss here in greater detail, particularly Küchler in relation to the 'promiscuous' qualities of artefacts in the face of textual metaphors used to understand indigenous 'art' and its inhibition of material culture's promiscuity. Both Küchler and Pinney assert a renewed engagement with the nondiscursive, that is the phenomenological and somatic effects of material culture beyond textuality as does Tilley – a reassertion of the problematic relations between bodies and things (see Merleau-Ponty 1962 and Latour 1999), returning to a Maussian understanding of this fluid and hybrid relationship as revealed through Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998).

The Disillusionment of Objects and their Revival

Obviously the demise of unilinealism with the beginning of British social anthropology in the early twentieth century saw the demise of these objects as 'fossils' (which had served their purpose as appropriate semiophores). Material culture as cultural work was rendered increasingly useless in light of the developments of British social anthropology. In Britain few figures retained an interest. Wissler, a key figure in the field in the United States, already lamented the drop-off of interest before the First World War (Fenton 1974:20). Whereas Sayce in Britain was one of the few anthropological figures who pursued research in the inter-war period (Sayce 1933). Similarly the foundation of the department of anthropology at University College, London by Darryl Forde retained a link with this tradition through

Forde's interests in 'primitive technology' (Forde 1934) and a synthetic approach to the study of human society/evolution. Forde himself completed his Ph.D. at University College London but he was closely associated with Boas's students Kroeber and Lowie at Berkeley. He established and maintained the tradition of a teaching collection of material culture at UCL. However, by 1930 according to William Sturtevant, museum anthropology and traditional material culture studies reached their peak in most Euro-American traditions (Stocking 1985: 9). Between the wars and afterwards, material culture studies become increasingly irrelevant and stagnant.

The Anglophone tradition of material culture studies receded but did not disappear. The renewed force it was to achieve in the second half of the twentieth century drew much of its force in Britain from the pioneering work of the archaeologist Gordon Childe which reasserted the social within archaeological studies along with later Marxist-inspired critiques of consumerism in sociology. Childe was a keen observer of Soviet archaeology with its emphasis on the socially diagnostic aspect of material culture studies. Childe's subtle Marxism, his rejection of antiquarianism and assertion of the significance of social processes in the study of archaeology paved the way along with others for the eventual formation of the 'New Archaeology' in Britain and America, which broke the slumbering theoretical innocence of antiquarian Anglo-American archaeology with a renewed emphasis on the study of social processes as materialized in the material culture of the past.

Material culture studies as we come to know it now, emerged within the British tradition and gained renewed impetus amongst a group of variously Marxist-inspired archaeologists based at The Archaeology Institute of University College London and the archaeology department of the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University. Many of the figures associated with this period are represented in this volume: Bender, Miller, Rowlands who worked closely with Jonathan Friedman, and Tilley. At the same time at the UCL department of anthropology in the 1970s, Mary Douglas was working on some of the key texts that brought this field of interest back into prominence: *Purity and Danger* and, with Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods*. Her work was paralleled by that of other anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai and Pierre Bourdieu. French trends particularly within the work of the Annales School of History took significant turns in reconsidering the significance of material cultures studies (Braudel 1992, Baudrillard 1996, Barthes 1973). As Miller here notes, the emerging significance of semiology from within linguistics (Barthes 1973, Baudrillard 1996) and especially structuralism (Lévi-Strauss) saw the re-evaluation of the material within symbolic systems. This is especially so in Lévi-Strauss's work on Pacific Northwest Coast masks (Lévi-Strauss 1988) and his reappraisal of the work of Franz Boas. Structural Marxism provided a powerful critique of the role of objects in symbolic systems and social structures at the time of the social tumult and student riots of the 1960s and early 1970s. These were powerful conceptual tools with which to confront post-war capitalist countries with critical and diagnostic Marxist studies of material culture.

The rise of interest in semiotics and structuralism had an important effect on the revival of interest in material culture studies in the United States as well (Glassie 1975, Deetz 1977), as did offshoots of the 'New Archaeology' through the development of ethno-archaeology and the resulting interest in modern material culture studies on their own as in the works of Rathje, Schiffer and later Marxist archaeologists such as Layton, Paynter and Leone. With the 1980s of course, this direction had by no means disappeared, but a new reappraisal emerged which began to see consumption as an active process, whereby individuals actively appropriated material goods towards the creation of inalienable culture (Miller 1987, Belk 2001). Finally, the *Journal of Material Culture* was established in 1996 at University College London (Editorial 1996) being the first Anglophone academic journal explicitly dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of the field and which has been edited at various times by the individuals represented in this volume.

Within the British Tradition, the post-war revival of interest in material culture studies is often associated with the Curl Lecture by Peter Ucko on the cross-cultural study of penis sheaths (Ucko 1969). Ucko following in the footsteps of Darryl Forde played a key role in formalizing the Material Culture group at UCL. That the re-emphasis on the material should have been heralded by the arch material signifier, the sheathed phallus, whether intentional or not, is a point best explored by Lacanian analysts. Regardless it is a fundamentally apt beginning for a reappraisal of the presence of material signifiers in anthropological analyses. The foundational Curl lecture, however, raises some interesting questions regarding a masculinist bias in material culture studies that has been rarely discussed. Feminist analyses have shown that material presence (which is what material culture studies deal with: the socially constituted and materialized physical artefact) is a consequence of a deeply placed masculinist bias – as feminine subjectivities are understood in terms of their inherent 'lack' vis-à-vis the elemental presenced material signifier, the phallus (Butler 1993). Ruth Olendziel's discussion of technology, culture and gender (Oldenziel 1996) explores another masculinist bias in material culture studies: the link to industrial modernization, progress and imperial governance, and its overt emphasis on the material and production (male) at the expense of use and consumption (female): a focus which does not emerge openly until the anthropological studies of consumption in the 1980s (Miller 1987, Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Appadurai 1986). As Judith Butler has suggested, much of the materialized world is forged within this masculinist bias, that sees the realm of the 'feminine' as one of lack, and constitutive of the 'masculine signifier',

thus forming what she refers to as the 'constitutive outside' that defines and materializes the dominant 'masculine'. Thus the 'feminine', an abject category, is unmaterialized in two senses, as not 'mattered physically' and also as not 'mattering' as social worth – its absence thereby secures and delineates the contours of the 'masculine'. So if this emphasis on materiality that presences the masculinist signifier renders our understanding of the feminine and women problematic, what does it do for other subjectivities and other states of being? Olendziel is one of the few voices to call into question the universality of the concept of material culture itself despite the prevalent celebration of its universality which to this day is still triumphantly announced. As a universal, this may be just an empty sign, but it is a sign nonetheless that constitutes a bracketing and certain original exclusions that the history of this topic of study demonstrates (see Löfgren 1997) as have the masculinist universals revealed by various traditions of feminist scholarship. Olendziel argues quite rightly that this signifier, though empty, has an ideological basis that might not permit us to understand those processes that are entailed in materialization and the exclusions that inevitably result.

The Present

Material culture as we understand it is a direct consequence of the collecting traditions of the nineteenth century, liberal Enlightenment era notions of universality, colonial expansion, industrialization and the birth of consumerism. As stated before, these collections were the primary means by which we studied other societies in distant time and space. We abandoned these studies to the promises made by social anthropology, which sought to go direct to the source rather than try and understand and translate it through ethnographic collections. If we consider Krystoff Pomian's thesis here, these earlier ethnographic collections were clearly attempts to mediate between two worlds, one known (Western) and one not known and invisible (non-Western), that could be comprehended through these mediating objects we call material culture. There is an element of sacrifice and wastage here in terms of utility not unlike the negation of the feminine as 'lack' – as that which is precluded or 'pre-disposed', to borrow Strathern's useful term (Strathern 2001), to ensure a desired category. However, Bataille might be instructive here in his similar investigations of the Potlatch and other practices within what he describes as sacrificial economies. These are sacrifices of objects, attempts to render ultimate inalienability be they through the creative destruction of archaeological sites, or the deathlike still-life artefact assemblages of museum collections. Through this inalienability, ideal worlds and states of being are delineated, whether it be the small sacrifices a housewife makes in her shopping excursions to realize a familial ideal (Miller 1998b) or the grandiloquent sacrifices of previously useful objects,

as in Potlach rituals or those in museums – objects are withdrawn from one sphere of social use, wasted in relation to that sphere to constitute and materialize alternate ideal realms. As suggested earlier, material culture studies as part of a sacrificial economy has historically occurred within a framework of social purpose, which required the constitution of such super-material objects – material culture – to facilitate these goals whether industrial progress, social revolution or critical consciousness.

Daniel Miller has noted that the study of material culture is an integrative endeavour (Miller 1983). Thus one might hazard to describe here three attempts where material culture has emerged as an integrative intellectual project: evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century; Marxian social analysis and revolution in the early twentieth century and progressivist New Archaeology and Marxian social theory in the second half of the twentieth century. The problem with current approaches is the lack of an overtly integrative intellectual project, a consequence of the postmodern condition and the demise of Enlightenment era ideologies such as liberal notions of universalism, progress and Marxism. The fragmentation of such narratives that otherwise describe our so-called 'postmodern' condition may in part explain material culture studies' persistent and increasing heterogeneity as it surfaces within so many disciplines. Its instability is a consequence of its virtue – being a socially motivated and contingent materialization of objects into systems of material culture. It has never really been a discipline – it is effectively an intervention within and between disciplines; translations from one realm into another. But it is precisely this persistent heterogeneity and the proven ability of material culture studies to translate (by virtue of its disruptive abilities) not just simply between different and incommensurable social and physical realms, but between disciplinary realms as both Rowlands and Bender argue here. This might partially explain the increasing turn towards the material across the various disciplines of the humanities in addition to the consequences of the rapidity of culture change which typically evinces a melancholic preoccupation with the material as a means of coping with change. The moment we are in right now is just one in a history of many other attempts to focus and mediate between a realm rapidly becoming invisible and unrecognizable from our own. The nineteenth century idea that culture change could be evinced from our relationship to objects and thereby coped with more effectively has not really shifted much.

The reconstitutive (and destructive) operation of material culture involves a certain degree of waste and sacrifice; with war as the most spectacular expression of 'the transformation of matter through the agency of destruction' (Saunders, this volume). It also transforms a mostly inarticulate realm of sensual experience into the two dimensions of a scholarly text or the '*nature-morte*' of the museum display (as in all translations something is always 'lost'). This suggests a decrease in physicality across dimensions – moving sensual reality increasingly towards the

dimensionless and ephemeral. Vast realms of sensual reality and utility are removed, transformed and made into the sensually 'dead' objectifications of 'material culture' we call an ethnographic monograph which preclude as required by a modernist science the more promiscuous and multiple meanings generated by the materialized 'artefact'. So much, and quite necessarily so, is wasted in terms of twentieth century cultural work – the troublesome fetish of a conservative Marxist discourse is suppressed, rendered harmless and erased by edifying analyses that attempt to keep the transfixing , enchanting and promiscuous affects of the artefact at bay (Belk 2001; Editorial 1996). This process is bemoaned by Löfgren as we neglect and unproblematize the materiality of material culture. We no longer dare to stroke those 'consenting molecules' (Löfgren 1997) which constitute material culture as our antiquarian ancestors did. The erotics and attendant politics of this materiality are inadequately discussed. There is a promiscuity here as both Pinney and Küchler describe that is rarely explored (but see Shanks 1992) and hindered by our preoccupation with textuality. Most of our publications deny us any visual representation of the very physical objects we explore. This was never the case in the beautifully illustrated discussions of material culture in the past and their exquisite display when the affects of these objects were at their most problematic from the standpoint of mid-twentieth century anti-consumerist and post-colonial anxieties. Their visuality and form was the primary vehicle of authority and information, the text was merely supplementary and discursive (Lucas 2001, see also Thomas 1997: 93–132). This is the reverse of how we recently have valued the authority of such visual materialization of material culture. That we have sanitized them to such a degree, evacuating them into inaccessible collections, constituting them as edifying discursive texts, and at times even rendering them dangerous – as some frustrated Native American groups have found their repatriated objects conserved with highly poisonous substances. Conservation is anything but that: it is a very active and deliberate process of materialization; it 'conserves' nothing but 'produces' everything, as we can learn from Bruno Latour's work (Latour 1999). So what are the social effects and costs of such productive materializations such as 'conservation'? Are these poisoned artefacts the result of some misplaced fear of the seduction of the commodity fetish – a legacy of a conservative critique that sought to deny earthly seductions in an effort to achieve an idealized order – or something else entirely?

Waste, Change and Ephemerality

Material culture studies has been described by Rowlands as an intellectual refuge '. . . during periods of antipathy when anthropology's rupture with its nineteenth century origins threatened to abolish all questions that recalled a tainted past. It may always need to be preserved as such, since to rupture such a category is always to place its contents in danger' (Rowlands 1983: 16). This emphasis on translation and rupture suggest a different perspective from the imperial, universalistic, panoptic one of the nineteenth century. The issue of translatability from one realm to the another, the invisible into the visible, described by Pomian recalls a recent point made by Judith Butler regarding left politics as being one centred on translation, from an interstitial position 'to shatter the confidence of dominance, to show how equivocal its claims to universality are, and, from that equivocation, track the break-up of its regime, an opening towards alternative versions of universality that are wrought from the work of translation itself' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 179).

The interstitial positions occupied by material culture studies provide a platform for a critical engagement with materiality for understanding issues facing us such as the fluidity of gender and body/object interfaces, recyclia, biotech, genetic engineering and the Internet – in short, those key materializing and transformative processes that shape new inclusions and exclusions as the critical focus of material culture studies such as new kinds of bodies, forms of 'nature' and political subjects.

One might consider here the nature of alienability as a tendency towards fluidity that denies a certain 'cultural' mass. As this fluidity quickens it moves, losing the 'weight of tradition' towards an increasingly 'lighter' and immaterial state (Oldenziel 1996: 63). This process is like that described by Thompson whereby objects are literally transformed in terms of their physicality and durability as a consequence of the cultural work that transforms rubbish on its way to becoming immaterial dust into durable artefacts – materiality is by no means a non-negotiable and unquestionable empirical reality it is a produced social one. As Thompson states 'Those people near the top have the power to make things durable and to make things transient . . .' (Thompson 1994: 271). This socially produced durability is the effect of extensive cultural interventions – the exchange value of the market or the science and politics of museum curation being prominent amongst others. In short this is the production of what one might call an artefactual effect (see Fletcher 1997a, b); the result of a profound social alchemy. This massiveness, or this so-called 'weight of tradition' is shown by Gilles Lipovetsky (Lipovetsky 1994) to be entirely undermined by the ephemerality of the fashion system of consumerism dating back to the nineteenth century, that since this time has actively worn away at the 'gravity' and 'mass' of custom. The crushing ephemerality of late capitalism (its constant material flux), its 'tragic lightness' (as Lipovetksy calls it) combined with the increasingly immaterial nature by which individuals assert agency and intervene in the social world (information technology over production, the Internet, the extreme mobility and liquidity of capital, and the intense rate of consumption and waste production) all create a situation where the insistence on the peculiar, limited and highly contingent fixity of the material artefact seems all

the more inadequate to cope with the social effects of these increasingly ephemeral, highly fluid and immaterial interventions within the material world that sustains us.

This issue is becoming more the focus of recent work in material culture studies that focuses on cultures of waste, destruction (Saunders, this volume), recycling, divestment, moving, capital flows, etc., which suggests that the processes of materialization are more significant than materiality itself and in fact variably constitutive of it – material culture itself is just a peculiar moment in these processes – an alchemical cultural effect which serves as a diagnostic formed by processes of waste and sacrifice required of our various cultural projects. This more recent work on materiality and material culture has focused on a certain critical empiricism (Miller personal communication, Buchli and Lucas 2000, Oldenziel 1996: 66) which examines closely the terms by which discursive empirical reality is materialized and produced. This is a continuation of the suggestions of Bataille which moved the focus of consumption and the understanding of material culture from consumption and use value, to an exploration of the processes of waste, and the logics of sacrificial economies rather than normative notions of utility. This we can understand as a preoccupation with the means by which alienability occurs, how things are released, given away, wasted, taken away, sacrificed or disposed of towards the creation of the social terms of existence. These are key concerns within recent studies of recycling and moving and similarly the repatriation of artefacts and reburial of remains. These are all actions of one sort or another that facilitate a transformation of the materiality of material culture in terms of durability and visibility. New subjectivities are facilitated through this process which tends to diminish the materiality of material culture and even to move out of the realm of durable 'conserved' material culture itself. In the case of recent repatriation and reburial controversies – what for a museum curator represents an almost iconoclastic wastage of precious artefacts (a fact that is undeniable from the point of view of orthodox Western science) is on the other hand the highly creative act of cultural construction and consolidation from the point of view of some indigenous groups – and additionally, a radical reconstitution of identity facilitated by the very same objects of material culture that facilitated the original exclusions and subaltern status of such groups in the first place (Jacknis 1996: 209). Conservation and creative destruction become problematic in the face of differing and conflicting material strategies vying for social control (see Rowlands and Saunders this volume).

The more recent emphasis in material culture studies, one might say, in many respects has been its most traditional – that is in terms of its focus on translation and the material processes at work to facilitate a view from one realm on to another. Such translations are more significant and more frequent in terms of the increasing rapid change and superfluity of knowledge and goods. This is a point

explored by Lipovetsky in terms of the significance of the ephemerality of fashion as non-durable, changing, frequently wasted and fleeting to facilitate a view from one realm on to another. Rather than suggesting a lack of distinction, authenticity and inalienability – the inherent alienability of fashion, as fleeting, frequently cast off – are the very terms by which social viability and enfranchised subjectivity are possible. Through the democratizing and enfranchising effects of the fluid and mobile immateriality of fashion all stabilizing authority and tradition is challenged. A constantly fluid and immaterial means is established by which to assert new subjectivies. Neo-pragmatist thinkers such as Rorty and Radical Democratic theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe and Butler argue for the importance of this instability and openendedness that never lets any one particular way of getting things done ever get the upper hand. This is the ethical 'scrappiness' of Smith (1988) or the disorderly virtuous cities of Sennett, which are believed to best secure democratic freedoms (Sennett 1971). The production and waste of objects and their constitution and dissipation are the two sides of the larger processes of materialization that facilitate the terms of social life, perpetuating its inclusions and exclusions as well as reworking and challenging them.

Material culture's ability to constitute through the cultural articulation of its durability as increasing inalienablity shows that it has not disappeared in the present day and is still very much in force. Material culture functions as a means of resistance against globalization or as a way of countering colonial legacies (Rowlands this volume), or through consumption facilitates inalienable authenticity (Miller 1987), and the generation of various 'strategic essentialisms' – the 'cultural property' of Rowlands's contribution here. However, as various neo-pragmatist and Radical Democratic thinkers have suggested, these critical interventions are momentary, contingent and strategic – creating what one might call a critical empiricism. These concerns echo Lipovetsky's understanding of the fashion system as conspiring against the solidity of objects, and that personal liberty is in fact guaranteed by the increasing ephemerality of the material world. Its rapid flux does not allow one to make firm attachments either to an object or an ideology, or tradition. An ideology of superficiality within a rapidly changing and wasteful material world ensures that no one form of materiality will ever prevail or get the upper hand, which can be rejected and left behind like the poetic metaphors of Richard Rorty: 'The proper honor to pay new, vibrantly alive metaphors, is to help them become dead metaphors as quickly as possible , to rapidly reduce them to the tools of social progress' (Rorty 1991: 17). What is more important probably is not to study the materializations themselves but rather what was wasted towards these rapid and increasingly ephemeral materializations (what Strathern refers to as the universe of meanings predisposed by social conventions (Strathern 2001)) The realm of the abject, the realm of the wasted beyond the constitutive outsides of social reality is where critical work needs to be done

(rubbish studies, divestment studies, the disenfranchised of globalization, the 'non-places' of Augé (Augé 1999) and the general effects of late capitalist ephemerality). This is the territory of 'tragic lightness' described by Lipovetsky. The ephemerality of human interaction, the inability of any one regime to take hold subject to the ever-increasing individualized needs of consumerist novelty means that ontological security is tentative and supremely contingent at best. This ethos of ethical disorder which ensures that no one regime gets the upper hand and the boundaries of social legitimacy can always be challenged means that even though 'The consummate reign of fashion pacifies social conflict; it allows more individual freedom, but it generates greater malaise of living [. . .] which renders us increasingly problematic to ourselves and others' (Lipovetsky 1994: 241). How people negotiate the increasing immateriality and alienability of our material world is one of the challenges facing material cultures studies.

The fragmented nature of the discipline is hardly a sign of crisis, but rather a testimony to its vigour in an expanded and diffuse realm of social inquiry. Within this of course lies the issue of materiality, the various ways we materialize social being and the ways in which this process is challenged in light of rapid social change and the increasingly ephemeral nature of our social interactions. Under such circumstances numerous voices disappear as quickly as they appear, or are never able to appear at all, buried within the rapid superfluity of information and materiality. How things come to matter both physically and socially, how the terms of materiality are reconfigured to facilitate various forms of social inclusion and exclusion are questions which become increasingly relevant. This is another way of understanding materiality not so much as physics but as cultural process – the immateriality of cyberspace can cause as much pain (Haraway 1991) because of the social effects by which these materialities or immaterialities are constituted. The material realm has not been supplanted, the virtual realm works alongside in a hybrid fashion to facilitate such connections, views and realms as most innovations in the past have done (see Haraway 1991 and Latour 1999). Its 'artefactuality' (Fletcher 1997a) is just as effective as it was early on: the Internet as much as the constituted and 'conserved' artefact, or nineteenth century engraving are different constitutive representations. They have specific social effects as relevant along the continuum of various materialized and de-materialized states from the actual object to its manifestation in cyberspace. They all produce a certain artefactuality (Fletcher 1997b) – that is an artefact effect with contingent social purpose: the 'factishes' of Latour (1999). In this respect anthropology since its beginnings has always traditionally dealt with and produced the virtual – whose respective social worths are assessed in terms of how they are able to mediate between one state and another with their respective social effects. What is very different is how we consider and configure the material conditions of our interactions, that is how does materiality function, what does it do, what are its new

social costs and who is included or excluded, given a voice or silenced. A number of the contributions of this volume provide excellent examples such as the conflicts over cultural properties in India mentioned by Rowlands, or those over Stonehenge described by Bender and the kinds of subjectivities that could be accommodated within the changing Soviet home described here by Buchli. In a sense, looking at what happens before and after the artefact is more significant than the artefact itself; that is, the terms of materiality rather than material culture itself and the differential ability of individuals to participate in these processes is more important. As Butler has suggested in relation to the materiality of gender, this means '. . . a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*' (Butler 1993: 9, see also Strathern 1988). The materializing function of archaeological and anthropological projects in material culture studies serves to render discursively legible, groups, worlds, individuals, subjectivities and experiences that were otherwise outside of the discursive realm (Buchli and Lucas 2001), thus they help refigure the boundaries of inclusion – suggesting possible worlds and views that are increasingly silenced, overlooked and forgotten in the increasingly ephemeralised world of human interaction – and thereby address and challenge the social and ontological costs of this 'tragic lightness' (Lipovetsky) which surrounds us.

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Metaphor, Materiality and Interpretation

Christopher Tilley

Introduction

During the past thirty years some of the most exciting and innovatory ethnographic and archaeological studies of material culture have exploited analogies with language to provide a fresh way of understanding of what things mean, and why they are important. Structuralist approaches have led us to think about things as communicating meaning like a language, silent 'grammars' of artefact forms such as sequences of designs on calabashes, pots or bark cloth. Similarly 'grammars' of household and village space, gravegoods and burials, etc. have been produced and then linked back to a structure of social and political relations in various ways (see Tilley 2000 for a recent review). Things have thus become regarded as texts, structured sign systems whose relationship with each other and the social world is to be decoded. In various post-structural approaches to material forms the metaphors of language, or discourse, and text have remained dominant in an understanding of things. The new emphasis here has been on polysemy, biographical, historical and cultural shifts in meaning, the active role or 'agency' of things in constituting rather than reflecting social realities, power/knowledge relations and the poetics and politics of the process of interpretation itself, that we write things rather than somehow passively read off their meanings independently of our social and political location, values and interests.

But a design is not a word and a house is not a text: words and things, discourses and material practices are fundamentally different. Clearly linguistic analogies may serve to obscure as much as they may illuminate the nature and meanings of things as material forms. Yet (at least as academics) we primarily have to write and speak of things, transform them into utterances and thus risk domesticating their difference from the language used to re-present them. Much as perhaps we might like it, the problem of language will not go away in the study of the things. It is only through the use of words that we can claim, assert, investigate and understand why things matter and why a study of them is important, why it makes a difference to an understanding of persons and their social worlds. It is this general problem of how we cope with language in the study of things that I attempted to explore in some detail in my book *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Tilley 1999) of which the study of canoes in Vanuatu, reproduced in this volume, forms a part.