

CSTU 2300 – INTRODUCTION TO MATERIAL CULTURE – WINTER 2012

Wednesdays, 12:30-3:30pm, Bell Auditorium

Instructor: Dr. Max Haiven, mhaiven@nscad.ca

Office hours: Wednesdays, 10am-12pm

Office: S410 (across from the writing lab)

Prerequisites: FNDN 1800 (Writing for the Arts)

Preamble

Material Culture is less a subject of study and more a way of encountering the world. We are social beings, but our social relations are *mediated* and *activated* by and through *things*. We use objects to build our identities, our relationships and our means of survival and pleasure. Objects are everywhere and we ourselves are objects (bodies). Our “reproduction” as social beings depends on things (food, heating fuel, clothing, etc.). Conversely, we, as a society, are organized around how we reproduce things (how we cooperate to build things, how we have or are denied access to things). Things are everywhere and every thing.

This course is about the social life of things and the “thing”-ness of social life. We will examine the work of a wide diversity of authors and artists as they try to understand how things work, why things don’t work, how we work through things, and how things work on us. We will focus on how things are part of power relations in our society and how things are used to both express, contest, reinforce and undermine power relations based on sex, gender, class, race, nationality and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

We approach things and objects as part of our “material culture.” Like all cultures, material culture is always under negotiation, reconfiguration, recalibration, and renovation. As such, we talk about people’s “material cultural practices” and study what people *do* with things, how people make meaning with things and how they ascribe value to things. The relationship between people and things is “dialectical”: we use things to get about our lives, and the things we use influence and shape how we live, work, play, love, think and be.

As such, this is an interdisciplinary course. We draw on texts from art history, anthropology, archeology, literary criticism, politics, philosophy, geography, cultural studies, women’s studies, critical race studies and critical theory

Our work in this course will build towards “material culture interventions”: student-directed projects that explore and contest material power relations.

Grading Breakdown and due dates

Weekly Reading Responses	30% (10 x 3%)	Due: Weekly
Material Intervention Project	30%	Due: April 11
Intervention Project Proposal	20%	Due: February 8
Intervention Project Research Portfolio	20%	Due: March 7

Policies

Attendance: Attendance at all classes is mandatory

Late Assignments: It is important to get your assignments in on time so that I have time to give them the attention they deserve. Weekly response papers are due at the beginning of each class, no exceptions. Other assignments will be deducted one full point per day late. A doctor's note is required in extenuating circumstances.

Writing and ESL (English as a Second Language) Tutors are available, free of charge. Please email or call Ken Rice in Historical and Critical Studies at krice@nscad.ca or 494-8187 for an appointment. Writing is a key part of this course, so it is extremely important you seek assistance early.

Learning disabilities or special needs: If you think you need help for any reason, please contact the Disability Resource Facilitator in Student Services, 494-8313. And please let me know, as soon as possible, what I can do to help.

Academic Integrity/Plagiarism

Students are reminded that plagiarism is a serious academic offence and carries severe penalties. Students may obtain a copy of the complete *Policy on Plagiarism* from the Office of Student and Academic Services (2nd floor Duke block) or on the NSCAD website.

(<http://nscad.ca/site-nscad/media/nscad/plagiarismpolicy.pdf>)

Other policies can be found on the NSCAD web site – please take the time to review them.

(<http://nscad.ca/en/home/abouttheuniversity/policiesdocumentation.aspx>)

Weekly reading and thematic schedule:

The majority of texts for this course are either electronic (available through the Campus Guide) or on reserve. However **many required readings** are **only** available in the **Coursepack**, which is available for purchase at Kinkos on Spring Garden Road. I have made every effort to keep the cost to a minimum. All readings listed here are required. Please contact me or check the Campus Guide for additional supplementary readings. Don't be daunted by the number of readings: most are short.

[cp] course pack

[lr] library reserve

[ol] online

January 4 - Course Introduction

This week I'll introduce key course thematics and we will discuss several videos which assess the state of the material world today.

January 11 – Consumerism in a Material World

In a capitalist economy, our interactions with the material world and our material realtions with one another are mediated by money. Under capitalism, things become “commodified,” subject to being bought and sold, and we all become consumers. Consumerism names the latent ideology and material practices of our lifes under capitalism.

[cp] **The Consuming Life.** Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman.
In *Popular Culture: A User's Guide*, 135-168. Toronto: Pearson, 2004.

January 18 – Material Culture in Mi'Kma'Ki

We live our lives on stolen land. Through a brutal process of colonialization, which included attempted genocide by Europeans against the indigenous people, Mi'Kma'Ki or The Land of the Mi'Kmaq became what we today know as Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. Colonialism is still with us, leading to the continued devaluation of indigenous people, communities and worldviews, and to the ongoing destruction of the planet. This week, we'll look at indigenous material practices past and present, as well as the ways colonialism works through and on material culture.

[cp] **Colonizing Knowledges.** Linda Tuhiwai Smith.
In *Indigenous Archeologies: A Reader on Decolonization*, ed. Margaret M. Bruchac, Siobhan M. Hart, and H. Martin Wobst, 57-62. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2010.

[cp] **The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture.** Daniel Francis.
In *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*, ed. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Roger C. A. Maaka, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Chris Andersen, 234-239. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2007.

[lr] **Elitekey: Micmac Material Culture from 1600AD to the Present.** Ruth Holmes Whitehead.
Halifax, NS: The Nova Scotia Museum, 1980. (Please browse this book)

[ol] Film: **Is the Crown at War with Us?** Alanis Obosawim.
National Film Board of Canada, 2002. (please screen outside of class).
<http://www.nfb.ca/film/is_the_Crown_at_war_with_us>

January 25 – Material Empires and the Other’s Object

We live in a world built on over five centuries of European domination, imperialism and colonialism, and they have left their mark. Unlike other empires that were based on military domination, European capitalist empires depended on economic power. The transit of commodities around the world defined everyone’s life, and still does. Objects we take for granted, from rubber tires to computer components, from tea to cotton, all pass through global systems of unequal power. This week, we look at how material cultures flowed and were valued under colonial administration, and their present-day ramifications.

[cp] **Racializing the “Other.”** Stuart Hall.

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, 239-249. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1997.

[cp] **Soap and Commodity Spectacle.** Anne McClintock.

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, 280-283. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1997.

[lr] **Some General Observations on the Problem of Cultural Colonialism.**

Kenneth Coutts-Smith.

In *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller, 14-31. London and New York: Routledge. 1991.

February 1 – Materializing Race and Objectification

Race is an “immaterial” thing: it has no scientific or genetic meaning. Yet few other fictions have had so much material power. Following on the previous weeks’ discussions of colonialism and empire, this week we examine how physical objects (and the labour that produces them) becomes “racialized” and how race and racism is reproduced (and contested) through material culture.

[cp] **Latent and Manifest Orientalism.** Edward Said.

In *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*, ed. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Roger C. A. Maaka, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Chris Andersen, 45-55. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press. 2007.

[cp] **Races, Racism and Popular Culture.** John Solomos and Les Back.

In *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*, ed. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Roger C. A. Maaka, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Chris Andersen, 247-256. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press. 2007.

[cp] **Contemptible Collectables.** Patricia A. Turner.

In *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Uncles: Black Images and their Influence on Culture*, 9-30. New York: Anchor. 1994.

February 8 - En-Gendering Things (Material Interventions Proposals Due)

One of the most durable forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation is sexism and its broader sociological manifestation: patriarchy. This week, we examine how material culture and material cultural practices are en-gendered: how certain objects and activities are “coded” as masculine or feminine, and how this influences how people act and cooperate in the material world, past and present.

- [cp] **Making Things Mean.** Catherine King.
In *An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 273-275. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill. 2006.
- [cp] **Gender and Creative Production: A Social History Lesson in Art Evaluation.** Gayle R. Davis.
In *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture*, ed. Katherine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames, 53-73. Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England. 1997.
- [ol] **Young Women and Consumer Culture.** Angela McRobbie.
Cultural Studies 22 (September): 531-550. 2008.
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380802245803>>

February 15 – Materialism

Materialism refers to a philosophical orientation that bases its understanding on the study of how people cooperate on reproducing their material world. It is opposed to orientations like “idealism” that understand human life to be about the achievement of principles and ideas. For materialists, most notably Marxists, we can best understand society, and how people act and think, by looking at material reality: how objects are made (who makes them, under what conditions, who gets exploited, who gets to decide what gets made?), how they are distributed (who gets more, who gets less, who has more than enough, who has not enough?), how they are used (how do people relate to objects, how are powers ascribed to things, how do people measure their own worth through possession?), and how they are disposed of. This week we look in depth at Marxist thought about the material world and about art’s place within it.

- [ol] **Private Property and Communism.** Karl Marx.
Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.
<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>>
- [ol] **Chapter 2: The Commodity Form.** Harry Cleaver.
In *Reading Capital Politically*. Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press. 2000.
<<http://libcom.org/library/reading-capital-politically-cleaver-commodity-form>>
- [ol] **Art and Socialism.** William Morris.
<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/as/as.htm>>

Mid-term Break

February 29 – Globalization

The last 40 years has seen a massive global revolution. New communications and transportation technologies have unleashed a new wave of imperial and colonial relations, leading to a “global assembly line,” the globalization of consumer culture, and a whole new array of global relationships.

[lr] **The No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization. 3rd ed.** Wayne Ellwood.

Toronto: Between the Lines. 2010.

(please see the Campus Guide for reading priorities)

[cp] **Tracking the Militarized Global Sneaker.** Cynthia Enloe.

In *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 2007.

March 7 - The Public Life of Things (Material Interventions Research Portfolios Due)

We do not just encounter and use material things as individuals. Material culture is shared and often public. But commodification encourages us to see our material world as so many personal possessions. This week we look at how material things become items of public concern and political possibility.

[lr] **Cultural Interventions in the Public Sphere.** Bruce Baber.

In *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, 165-182. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2010.

[ol] **Making the ‘Res Public’.** Bruno Latour and Tomás Sánchez-Criado.

Ephemera 7 (2): 364-371. 2007.

<<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/7-2/7-2latour-sanchez-criado.pdf>>

[optional ol] **Halifax’s Nocturne (versus?) the Spectacle of Neoliberal Civics.** Max Haiven.

Public 45. Forthcoming 2012.

March 14 - Queer(y)ing Material Passions

We define our identity through things: clothing, furniture, taste, consumption. But the way we define ourselves and our lived through commodities and objects reveals the fragility of our identities and just how much we take for granted. Queer theorists have been at the forefront of pointing out how certain ideas of self and certain social relations are reproduced through our engagements with the material world. “Queering” material culture means looking again at what assumptions and desires underlie our passion for material things.

[cp] **Conclusion: Disorientation and Queer Objects.** Sarah Ahmed.

In *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*, 157-179. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press. 2008.

[ol] **Cashing in on Queers: from Liberation to Commodification.**

Nadia Guidotto.

Canadian Online Journal of Queer Studies in Education 2 (1). 2006.

<<http://jqstudies.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/jqstudies/article/view/3286/1414>>

March 21 – Museums and Collections

The modern museum and the idea of a “collection” are manifestations of European capitalist imperialism and colonialism. Today, museums and collections are huge parts of our lives, our society and, increasingly our economy. By examining the social role of museums and collections in Canada, we can better understand material culture, public and private.

- [lr] **Museum Pieces.** Ruth B. Phillips.
Selections TBA – watch the Campus Guide – book on order.

March 28 – Art as Material Practice

What makes an art object different from any other object? How can we account for art’s strange value(s)? This week, we examine art as material culture and material cultural practice with a special focus on folk art.

- [cp] **Women’s Folk and Popular Arts: The Need for a Grounded Theory.**
Elaine Lawless.
In *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture*, ed. Katherine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames, 197-216. Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England. 1997.
- [lr] **Organizing Art.** Jonathan Vickery
In *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon J. Knell, 214-229. London and New York: Routledge. 2007.

April 4 – The Gift

Theorists and artists have been eager to redefine our material culture based on values of love, compassion, equality and collaboration. This week, we look at ideas of the gift as an alternative to a society of “exchange.” Gift giving was and is a key part of many non-Western civilizations, and is also a major part of even our own highly consumerist civilization. Reawakening the gift as a counter-logic to capitalist imperialist patriarchy is a promising activist project.

- [cp] **Introduction and Conclusion.** Lewis Hyde.
In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Vintage. 1983.
- [ol] **Introduction: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible.** Genevieve Vaughan.
In *Women and the gift economy: a radically different worldview is possible*, ed. Genevieve Vaughan, 1-38. Toronto: Inanna. 2007.
<http://www.gift-economy.com/womenand/women_gift_part_one.pdf>

April 11 - Material Interventions Day

On this day, students will share their material interventions project and we will revisit key themes from throughout the course. You should prepare a 3-4 minute presentation of your intervention. Please let me know if you need more time.

ASSIGNMENTS

Grading Breakdown and due dates

Weekly Reading Responses	30% (10 x 3%)	Due: Weekly
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Reading responses (30% - 10 x 3%)

- Each week, you are expected to complete a reading response of no more than **one (two-sided) page, typed**. **The content of the report is up** to you, but remember that the objective of this assignment is to **demonstrate to me that you have read the week's texts**. Your writing should **not be a summary**. Some suggestions include:
 - A **reflection** on something that ties the texts together,
 - The **relation** of these texts to your own experience,
 - Relating the texts to **your Material Interventions theme or topic**.
- Your grade for this part of the course will be comprised of your **10 highest marks on reading responses**. Hence, technically you need produce only 10, although it is recommended you plan to do one or two extra, just in case.
- These responses are due at the beginning of class each week. There will be absolutely **no exceptions**. That is why only the best 10 will be counted!

Material Intervention Project (30% - due April 11)

- Your work throughout the term is based on an “**intervention**” project. The idea of an “intervention” is based on the understanding that all our actions and interactions are part of the “flows” of material culture: we are always “intervening” in our world. The idea of an intervention asks us to understand our actions as attempts to shape those flows. It also brings to mind the idea that things aren’t flowing as they ought to flow, that things are not right in the world. Considering our actions as interventions forces us to reflect on *how* we are intervening, and why, and to what ends.
- An intervention in the context of this course is quite an **open** thing. For instance, you may choose to write a more **formal essay** to “intervene” in your own thinking on a topic. You might choose to write on a particular artist, process or material. You might choose to pursue your intervention through **art or design practice**, through a deep interrogation of materials, or through a reflection of material culture. You might choose to make a more **public, performative or site-specific intervention**. Or you may chose something different entirely. Please feel free to consult me.
- Your intervention should focus on **a particular aspect of material culture, a thing, a process or a set of relations**. For instance, you might want to investigate the material history of cellophane, or look at how people interact with traffic, or consider knitting culture. Try and narrow down your topic as much as possible. In this course, we will be learning how to “**unpack**” objects and material relations for multiple levels of

meaning. Focusing on a very particular element of our material culture will help you stay grounded and give your intervention clarity.

- **Ideas and examples** will be discussed in class, but start thinking early.
- This assignment will be composed of several parts.
 - You will need to **present your project** to the class in some way for 3-4 minutes on April 11.
 - You will need to give me **something on paper** to grade.
 - In cases where the intervention is ephemeral (eg. won't last, or is site or time specific) ensure that you **record/archive your intervention fully**.
 - In all cases (except formal essays), your intervention should be accompanied by a **1000-1500 word write-up** that:
 - **Describes** your intervention
 - **Explains** its objectives
 - Explains how you mobilized your **research** portfolio in the execution of your intervention (with specific references)
 - Reflects on the **success** of the project: what worked, what didn't, why?
 - You may chose to write this assignment in the form of a longer artists' statement or catalogue essay, but recall that **part of your mark does depend on clarity and style**, so don't be too "out there" in your style.
 - This assignment should be **written clearly and concisely**, be free of errors and be formatted in a recognized manner (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.)
 - If you chose to compose a more **formal essay**, it should be roughly 3,000 words.

Intervention Project Proposal (20% - Due February 8)

- The objective of this assignment is to **demonstrate your ability to clearly communicate your ideas**, your ability **to relate them to class concepts**, and your ability **to plan and propose a feasible project**.
- Imagine you are writing this proposal to a funding agency, a gallery or another gatekeeper: be concise, convincing and impassioned. The proposal should be **clear** enough that another person would be able to execute the project.
- The proposal should be **between 750-1000 words**.
- Making reference to **at least three course readings**, propose a material culture intervention. See the assignment above.
- **Clearly state what** it is you propose to do, **why** you want to do it, and **how** and **when** you are going to do it.
- These are the sorts of questions that should animate your proposal (not necessarily in this order)
 - Why is your intervention important?
 - What is the objective of your intervention?
 - What would you say are the criteria for your intervention's success and why?
 - What are the audiences your intervention hopes to reach? How will you reach them?
 - What will you need to learn before attempting your intervention?

- How do course readings inform the how, what, when and why of your intervention?
- What sorts of materials will you need to complete your intervention? (eg. Research resources, materials for construction, permissions and/or skills)
- Remember: you need not take the intervention you propose as your final project: you can switch ideas, processes, themes, etc. later.

Intervention Research Portfolio (20% - due March 7)

- The objective of this assignment is to **demonstrate your ability to cultivate useful and high-quality research resources** for your final project
- You are to collect 12 “points” worth of information. Points are as follows:
 - Print or online “journalistic” article/book – 1 point
 - Scholarly source – 2 points (eg. an academic article, book (chapter), or catalogue essay)
 - Artists’ profile or exhibition catalogue – 2 points
 - Personal research project/observation – 2 points (eg. if you were studying coffee culture, notes from your observations)

You *must* collect **at least one** of each of these resources. The remaining 5 points are up to you.

- For each resource, you are to prepare a 1-2pp. information sheet which should include:
 - A summary of the text or process you are discussing.
 - A consideration of its relevance to your topic.
 - A few questions, concerns or thoughts in response.
 - Remember to *fully* site your sources in a recognized format.
- It is, of course, highly recommended you be proactive in cultivating this portfolio, rather than trying to do it all at the last minute.