

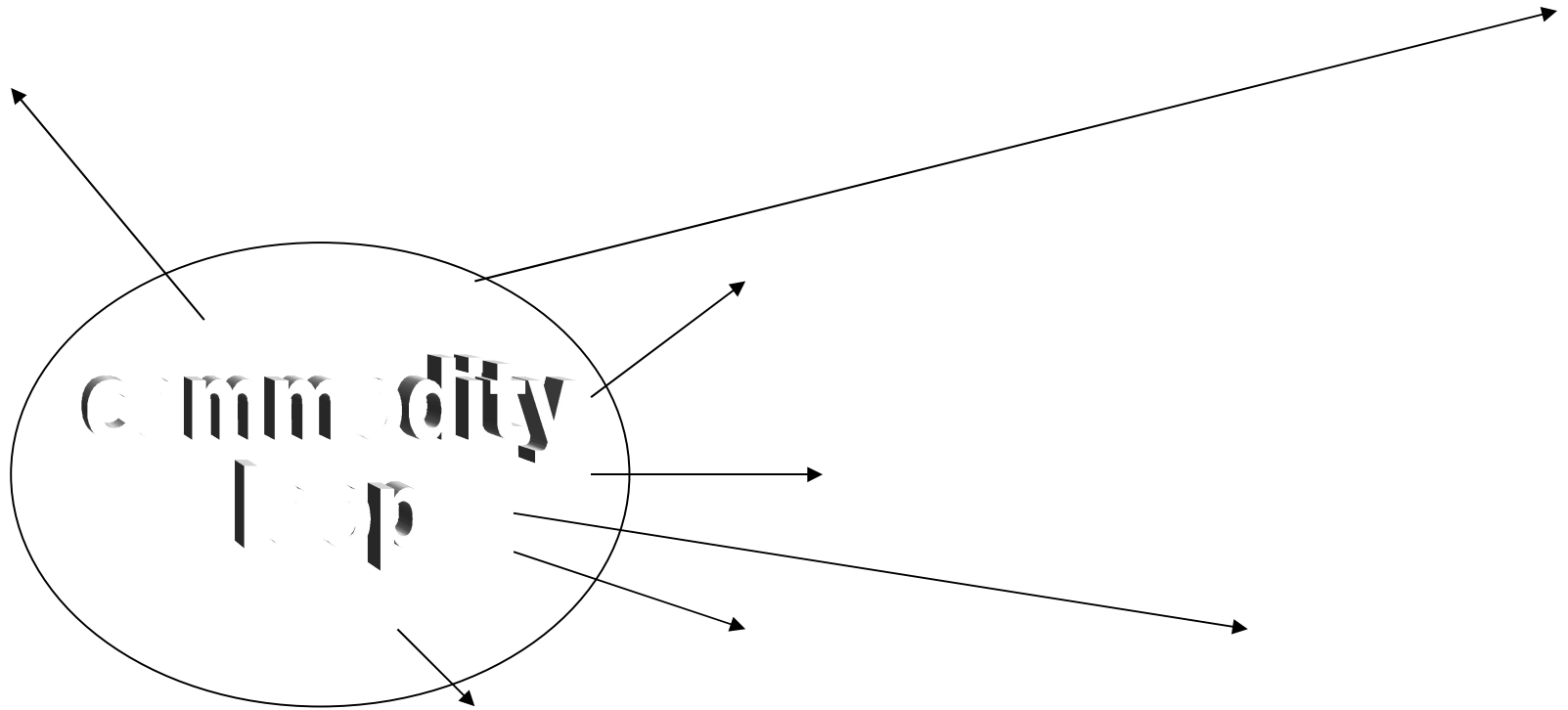
Reading Things
Neil Cummings

Linda Lai / April 16, 2008

The many names of “things”

- Material culture
- Commodities
 - Concern on ideology
- A field of personal & cultural representation: desires, aspirations & fears of individuals
 - Concern on psychology of the individuals
- A field of production
 - Taking the form of marketing research, advertising and statistics, stock-taking of things in circulation
- Alternatives????

A New Emphasis: beyond commodity culture & consumption
a divergent + lateral approach



A New Vocabulary

The **rich** and **varied** *lives* of things



How objects are **patterned with meanings & values** in actual everyday life...

[new task of ethnography]

*To track down *uses & usage*

*To track down how objects trap (capture) “**historically transient experiences**”

Michel de Certeau

Beyond *poaching*...

“Consider the use of things as analogous to the speech act within the linguistic system.”

More on “use”

“It will be foolish to propose a formal grammar of things. ...
The best I can hope for is a momentary snap shot...

...by attending to the rich collisions of objects, the
playful frictions, the linguistic diversity of culture”
via use.

(Neil Cummings)

“Reading” *things*: new concern

- How to read an object:
 - Tip of the ice berg principle (synchronic trope)
 - Past in present principle (the temporal trope)

*“Things flow past and rest silently as a **sediment** shaping **our consciousness.**”*

- Emphasis on subjectivity, role of the ordinary individual in the creation of culture – **without centering on the individual alone**

Things: **personalized** objects

“How people actually utilize things is extremely resistant to representation.”

...more than functional usage

Many current discussions of use ignore the creative aspects of how people relate to objects, i.e. such discussions work against the tactics for art, and therefore close down the room for creative intervention.

Further critique

In discussions on art, too, art objects' representational function has dominated and killed our understanding of many other aspects of art.

(++over-emphasis on “text” and mining the interpretable meanings of the artifact)

(--insufficient attention to the materiality of objects)

Utility unites critique and art (creative activities).

“No Object is an Island.”

Connectivity...

The presence of an artifact immediately calls attention to the following:

- Functions
- Relations
- Context
- Associations

An artifact *exists* concretely and *participates* simultaneously in a discursive and textual space.

“An artifact inevitably grows a textual appendage.”

“No Object is an Island.”

Connectivity...

The **multiple presences** and **mapped relations** of an object/artifact resist pure writing – i.e., its *rich lives* cannot be fully transcribed in writing.

→ a material syntax requires multiple strategies needed

Step 1

To move from production to use.

To slip through prescribed material typologies.

Step 2

To move beyond the commodity loop...

Step 3

No pure resistance...

Subversion begins with engaging...

Seek for the many possibilities (things we can do) to write ourselves into the dominant material text, then alter its fabric.

A simple “clinical” operation on things

Each person has an object s/he brings to class:

*Describe

*Analyze

*Narrate

*Categorize/Classify

*Make connections

*Create/Invent a map/network that holds these objects together

A sample project

- Fluxus member Spoerri's *Annotated Topography of Chance*

[PQ2679.P6 T6313 1995]

(a chance game exfoliating the hidden rich lives of an object)

(see also Deleuze and Guattari's discussion on the project in their book
A Thousand Plateau.)