

ARTHI 5101 Theories of Things - Spring 2017

Thursdays 9-12

Maclean 818

Professor Bess Williamson

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar explores core theories of the object in industrial and post-industrial societies. Readings in phenomenology, material culture, and design studies will inform a critical analysis of the roles of objects in various contexts, including intensive explorations of the public, private, commercial, and global lives of things. Classes will take a hands-on approach, with discussions of objects (and subjects) in the classroom, the museum, and various non-conventional sites.

Course Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will:

Gain new insight into the historical and theoretical study of objects

- Learn about and analyze major schools of thought on objects in culture
- Situate their own work/research in relation to art/design theories of objects

Master tools of art/design writing and research

- Make full use of relevant research resources – especially local collections and archives
- Master skills and conventions of scholarly writing and oral presentation

Contribute to the field of object study

- Build sustained arguments and relate them to existing literature
- Develop writing that critically interrogates existing formats of object writing

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation – 20% Attendance is mandatory in this class, which includes being on time, attentive, and participating in class discussions. I expect you to come to class with comments and questions prepared to discuss. All required readings will be posted on our Canvas site, and often include dense and challenging texts. You are also invited to bring in outside material that you find relevant to discussion (such as images, texts, news items, etc). Please set aside at least 3-4 hours a week to read carefully and prepare for discussion. More time will be required for weeks when papers/presentations are due. More than 3 unexcused absences may result in No Credit. Please contact me in advance if you anticipate missing classes or assignment deadlines.

Museum Object Paper: 20% Early in the semester, you will choose one object that is on display in a non-art museum in Chicago. You will describe the object and your initial thoughts on it in a short post on our class discussion board. Then, following the object curation strategies suggested in *Tangible Things*, you will pair the object with an item from the Art Institute's collection, and explore their related characteristics and thematic possibilities in an analytical paper.

Leading Discussion- 10% With another classmate, you will lead class discussion on one reading of the semester. You should introduce the readings to the class - identifying the author, date of publication, and contextual clues - and then *facilitate discussion* (NOT

summarize the reading) among classmates. I suggest raising key issues in the text and asking classmates for their feedback. Think ahead about how to engage classmates in discussion. I will assist but you will take the lead. Related objects/images for discussion recommended.

Object Presentation and Paper – 20% For one week's class (not the same week you are leading discussion), you will give a 10 minute presentation on a topic of your choice in the object world. This can focus on an artist/designer whose work you find interesting, or a set of objects in a collection of some kind (your own collection, a museum's collection, etc). After your presentation, you will write a short paper (3-4 pages) analyzing a key object from this discussion and discussing it using theories/readings from the class.

Object Catalog: 30% The final project takes two parts: first, an academic analysis focused on a series of objects of your choice. For the assignment, you will choose 3 objects to start with; over the course of the project you may drop some, add some according to the direction of your research. You will identify these three objects in an initial proposal. At least one of the initial objects must be something you can experience in person (for example, something you buy or own, or something in a nearby collection that you can view in person). After the proposal you will research these objects, their origins, and contexts, as well as consider secondary literature that can shed further light on them. Ultimately, you will produce a paper of 10-20 pages* with footnotes/citations of any research sources.

For the second part of the project, you will present these objects in class in a final exhibition and discussion. You must think about how you can present your catalog: will it be with the actual objects with labels or other presentation material? Will it be in digital or printed photos (your photos or someone else's)? A video or other kind of document? How will objects be labeled or identified? In class, prepare:

- a) some physical presentation of your objects so that other students can see and understand them
- b) a short (less than 5 minutes) description of your project and how you used the objects

* 10 pages is the requirement, but students may want to choose a longer paper format if it is a thesis chapter or potential writing sample for fellowship or grad school applications.

Your final catalog must be formatted and delivered on paper; if you wish to develop a digital format, you must gain approval in advance.

INCLUSION & ACCOMMODATIONS

Your success in this class is important to me. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for adapting assignments to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

I follow SAIC's policy that all students with exceptional needs or concerns (including 'invisible' difficulties such as chronic diseases, learning disabilities, or psychiatric

complications) are encouraged to make an appointment with the professor to discuss these issues by the end of the second week of the term so that appropriate accommodations can be arranged. Students with known or suspected disabilities, such as a Reading/Writing Disorder, ADD/ADHD, and/or a mental health or chronic physical condition who think they would benefit from assistance or accommodations should first contact the Disability and Learning Resource Center (DLRC) by phone at 312.499.4278 or contact on their website. DLRC staff will review your disability documentation and work with you to determine reasonable accommodations. They will then provide you with a letter outlining the approved accommodations for you to deliver to all of your instructors.

PLAGIARISM

I take plagiarism VERY SERIOUSLY and will not tolerate students who misrepresent their work. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago prohibits "dishonesty such as cheating, plagiarism, or knowingly furnishing false information to the School" (Students' Rights and Responsibilities, *Student Handbook*). Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. One plagiarizes when one presents another's work as one's own, even if one does not intend to. The penalty for plagiarizing may also result in some loss of some types of financial aid, and repeat offenses can lead to expulsion from the School. To find out more about plagiarism, (1) go to the [Current Students Dashboard](#) on the [saic.edu](#) site, under Campus Resources select the Academic Advising link, and click Guides and Forms. The Faculty Senate Student Life Subcommittee produced a handbook that can be found there. Or (2) read about it in the *Student Handbook* under the section Academic Misconduct.

CLASS SCHEDULE

***note: readings/assignments subject to (minor) change. The most up to date information is on Canvas.**

I Objects, Things, and How to Study Them

Jan 26 Material Culture

Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, "Design and Order in Everyday Life," *Design Issues* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), 26-34.

*bring to class: one object that you see as having a connection with one or more of the readings

Feb 2 Things in Philosophy

Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" (1971)

Bill Brown, "Thing Theory" (2001)

Art Institute of Chicago, Modern Velvet (in class)

Feb 9 Things in History / as History

Robert Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: And Was Jerusalem Buildd Here?," *All the World's a Fair*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Laurel Thacher Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things*, Introduction and Ch. 1

Feb 16 Museum Object paper

No class; post photos of your non-AIC objects with descriptive captions to discussion board.

Object paper due Sunday, Feb 19

II Objects in Culture

Feb 23 Commodities and (vs) Spectacles

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol I: "The fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," 163-178

Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Production*

March 2 Design and Collection

Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996).

Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

March 9 no class – Crit Week

March 16 Gendered Things

Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 251–64.

Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

March 23 no class – Spring Break

March 30 Racial Things

Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places: A Quarterly Journal of Environmental Design* 2, no. 2 (1984).

Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (December 21, 2009): 67–94.

Fo Wilson, *The Baartman Diaries*

III Objects as Art and Design

April 6 Crafted/Designed Things

David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge University Press, 1968)

Rafael Cardoso, "Craft Versus Design: Moving Beyond a Tired Dichotomy," in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (New York: Berg, 2010).

Final Project proposals due

*meetings on final collection projects

April 13 Minimalist Things

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" 1967

Barbara J. Bloemink and Joseph Cunningham, eds., *Design [Does Not Equal] Art: Functional Objects from Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread* / (London: Merrell, 2004).

*meetings on final collection projects

April 20 Technological Things

Bruno Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses?," in *The Object Reader* (originally 1992)

Kjetil Fallan, "Architecture in Action: Traveling with Actor-Network Theory in the Land of Architectural Research," *Architectural Theory Review* 13, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 80–96.

*meetings on final collection projects

April 27 Digital Things

George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson, "Production, Consumption, Prosumption," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, March 9, 2010.

Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

Final Project proposals updated

*meetings on final collection projects

May 4 Future Things

Tony Fry, "Redirective Practices," in *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* (Berg Publishers, 2008).

Jamer Hunt, "Prototyping the Social: Temporality and Speculative Futures at the Intersection of Design and Culture," in *Design Anthropology: Object Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Allison Clarke (Vienna: Springer, 2011).

May 11 Final Papers Due + exhibition/discussion