tramlines of enquiry. Our exercise has probably not generated any really new philosophical challenges, yet our more practical and also more playful approach suggests that there is scope for undertaking experiments and exercises that revisit such territory from different points of view. By using objects, rather than concepts or terminologies as our initial point of departure, we have found new ways of enjoying and appreciating features of method and orientation, catching glimpses of the everyday significance of difference that are paradoxically but typically obscured by heavy-duty theory. This is not meant as a criticism of the philosophy of enquiry: abstraction and reflection of this kind are surely important. But in everyday research, and especially in relation to interdisciplinary enquiry, it is important to develop ways of making these positions tangible, accessible and therefore amenable to review and innovation. It is in this spirit that we end with a practical suggestion: next time you embark on an interdisciplinary project, start by swapping some small object and spend a moment discussing and describing it as we have done above. If our experience is anything to go by, this method, derived more from the school playground than from the lecture room, promises to be intriguing, surprising and intellectually rewarding.

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Notes

[1] In what follows, I believe this story but I have no basis on which to do so other than trust.

[2] The fact that Duncan's toothbrush was pink, and Elizabeth's rock blueish grey, was entirely coincidental. We were not intending to introduce, or indeed subvert, any gender stereotypes.

[3] This interpretation was subsequently confirmed by Elizabeth.

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Objects as such and objects in contexts. Things and equipment

Hans Peter Hahn

In the last two or three decades, material culture as a topic of scientific study has experienced a real boom. Focusing on everyday objects, their contexts and meanings, material culture studies offers important approaches for several disciplines within the humanities. The aim of this new wave of research

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is to improve the understanding of social practices in a wider sense and thereby contribute to the understanding of societies themselves. Given this ambitious goal, and the wide range of disciplines engaged in studying material culture, the new approach will only have a future if interdisciplinary debates are initiated and succeed in making reciprocal benefits. In particular, the complementarities of different disciplinary methodologies should result in useful synergies. If material culture studies is seen only as a domain within anthropology (or any other discipline) then we risk it coming to a dead end (Bertrand and Jewsiewicki 1999, 181; Hahn 2005, 12). This is the larger context in which I see the relevance of the present essay and, before going into details, I would like to express my support to the ideas expressed by Garrow and Shove.

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to imagine greater differences in the methodology of studying material culture than those between sociology and archaeology. On the one hand, archaeology is concerned with distributions of artefacts, their chronologies and technologies. On the other hand, the domains of material-culture research in sociology deal with lifestyles, social status and meanings of things. In the context of this disciplinary gap, the courageous undertaking by the authors of the present article has particular merits. If we accept, just for the purpose of making the disciplinary gap clearer, an equation of sociology with anthropology, the dispute between the anthropologist Polly Wiessner (1985) and the archaeologist James Sackett (1985) makes obvious how differently objects may be perceived from different disciplinary perspectives. Wiessner and Sackett debated the relevance of specific material forms to ethnic identity. They both did field research among the !Kung bush people in Southern Africa, but their perspectives on the arrowheads they observed in the field and the role of these objects in ethnic identity are quite different. The focus of Wiessner's interpretation is discourse about the weapons (this is 'speaking about things'), and she describes different styles as 'isochrestic variations'. In contrast, Sackett restricts his view to the objects themselves. He holds that objects are part of a 'style' and that there is no need to investigate discourse. Wiessner's approach uses contexts; in contrast, the archaeologist Sackett rejects the assumption that contexts are necessary to identify 'ethnic styles', as evidence comes from the objects themselves. But, Wiessner (1989) replies, how could people themselves consider an object as being part of a particular style without having an idea about what she calls 'an ideal form'?

Obviously there are great differences between how things are perceived by archaeologists and by anthropologists. As Kobylinski (1989) states, archaeologists tend to adopt the image of the 'passive object' – the continuous presence of the object (in a given society and at a given time) is taken as a primary evidence of its relevance and meaning. The paradigm of the 'active object', in contrast, corresponds with the anthropologists' point of view. Ethnographic objects do not explain themselves but, in order to be explained, they need the documentation of activities: contexts and meanings. This very brief characterization of the disciplinary approaches makes somewhat clearer what happened to the toothbrush (a scientific description was produced) and to the stone axe (people were asked what they thought about it). So far,

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both scientists intuitively followed the lines of their disciplinary traditions and both showed how limited these approaches are when it comes to totally unfamiliar objects. It is obvious that a widening of the disciplinary approach may enhance the methodology in anthropology and in archaeology. So my first comment on the interdisciplinary experiment is this: it is not so much a question of 'slipping into another discipline' as of understanding other disciplines' methods as an option to enlarge one's own methodology.

But, beyond the effects of what I call the disciplinary gap, the overall setting of the authors' experiment merits a closer look. The authors claim to have a spontaneous and unbiased perspective. My impression is that they proceed in a very particular way: they practise a radical isolation of the single object, thereby assuming that material culture's most elementary units of research are isolated objects. This is not always the case – not in archaeology and not in sociology. Isolating an object might have been a popular method in earlier times of the disciplines' development, but today it must be considered as a specific approach, which needs to be justified. This is how I understand the authors' argument that their approach might help to preserve the 'unfamiliar position' of the things.

This particular aspect of Garrow and Shove's approach reminds me of the methods of 'objective hermeneutics', long practised by Ulrich Oevermann (1987). He and members of his research group showed by various examples (of archaeological artefacts as well as of contemporary objects; cf. Jung 2003; 2005) the possibilities and limits of an approach centred on an isolated object. Oevermann holds that the interpretative act, based on an object's physical properties alone, may pass through different stages, each time integrating different horizons of technology, everyday experience and free-floating associations, and finally reaching a valid and specific interpretation.

Oevermann and his disciples voluntarily strip an object of any accompanying text or oral explanation. Thus they achieve an objectivity, which, they claim, is of universal relevance, which applies for people in any society. Oevermann's approach has been much debated and his claim to limit the scope of information to 'what is in the object per se' may not convince everyone. But the parallels with the interdisciplinary experiment of the present authors are obvious. The merits of 'objective hermeneutics' are close to what the authors call 'making the present unfamiliar'. So my second comment on the experiment is that a particular approach has been chosen. This approach focuses on the object per se, a strategy which is not congruent with the range of methods used in material-culture studies in either of the disciplines. But this strategy is legitimate if it is in the interest of understanding the particularities of a given object.

I have already mentioned the two dominant methods exercised in the experiment: documenting discourses about things; and establishing a scientific description of things by observing and measuring. Oevermann's idea about objective hermeneutics provides an approach reaching beyond this, and I will add a second perspective, which merits a mention because it takes isolated objects as a starting point: the phenomenological approach of Martin Heidegger (Heidegger 2002; Harman 2007), who distinguished between 'things', 'works' and 'equipment'. In Heidegger's thought, the differentiation

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is based upon the relationship established between people and the particular element of their material environment in question. Thus 'things' and 'works' seem to have an autonomous existence, like rocks being shaped by nature and masterpieces of art, being works which remain unchanged, receiving attention over time. But, not astonishingly, both objects in the interdisciplinary experiment would have been classified by Heidegger not as things but as 'equipment'; that is, things which are best explained not by their intrinsic properties but by the uses people make of them. Heidegger argues that whatever is 'equipment' should be approached by looking at the moments of their practical usage.[1] This is close to the idea of contexts, but not the same. Contexts may be understood as something meaningful ascribed to a thing; Heidegger's 'moments of practical usage' are more implicit – they do not always comprise what we call 'meaning'. Objects like the toothbrush and the stone axe are usable equipment, i.e. devices or tools, which probably never had much meaning beyond their uses. This is why things are of relevance beyond their design or semiotics (Attfield 2000, 50).

Thus the potential usages, rather than the measurable aspects of the object's form and the discourses, should be placed in the middle of the examination. Some potential uses are discussed by the authors, but their analysis somehow misses the most obvious. Taking the example of the toothbrush, what does it mean to use an object twice a day, to use it in a bathroom, being the most private area of the home? What is the intimacy of a toothbrush, which is probably never touched by another person after being used for the first time? Garrow seems to be disappointed that everybody took familiarity with the toothbrush for granted. But is this kind of regular use of an everyday tool not something that always 'goes without saying'? Does the bodily experience count less because it is not a topic of explicit reflection? I do not think so and a close description should consider even the emotional relationship between the user and the object (Slater and Miller 2007).

Returning once again to the disciplines and their standard methods of describing objects, more similarities come into view. As a matter of fact, in both disciplines observing practical usage is at the heart of the methodological approaches. Thus archaeologists treat excavation sites as informants, and anthropologists or sociologists will interview and observe users and owners of objects as sources of information. In both cases it is not the object itself but its contexts and usages which are in the focus of investigation. Garrow and Shove did not explore this dimension here: they did not use the toothbrush to clean the teeth and they did not try to cut a branch of wood with the help of the stone axe. This kind of experiment would have led them to a closer description of how this equipment influences the interaction between people and their environments. But probably this was not the intention of the dialogue between disciplines as the authors had designed it.

My remarks should be understood as an encouragement to intensify and to enhance the authors' approach, not as a criticism. The authors' undertaking has all the merits of initiating a debate about the limits of different disciplinary methodologies. I therefore understand this contribution as a beginning of a growing exchange about what is needed to understand material culture. In conclusion I wish to express once again my full support of the authors' dialogue, which should be continued.

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Note

[1] 'It must be in this process of usage that the equipmentality of the equipment actually confronts us. But on the contrary, as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or merely look at the shoes as they stand there in the picture, empty and unused, we will never learn what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is' (Heidegger 2002, 13).

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Artefacts in quarantine? *Carl Knappett*

Encountering affordances

As the authors situate the discussion in their offices, let me also begin in mine. On my way home from the office there will be many things around me. They will mostly be familiar and go largely unnoticed. I will take my keys off the desk and lock the door behind me. I will walk along the corridor, through the swing doors, down the stairs, unlock my bike, and so on. Desk, keys, door, carpet, windows, stairs, lock, bike – these are all objects with which I interact. But do I necessarily notice them? As long as there is 'smooth coping', as long as these objects are ready to hand (Wheeler 2005, 129), then they remain in the background. These are not objects that hold me in their gaze; I do not 'encounter' them, in the sense of encountering, meeting or bumping into a person.

But in some, perhaps relatively rare, circumstances we do 'encounter' artefacts. This might occur in a museum, an art gallery, a shop or even in an archaeological excavation. We might look, touch, smell, listen or even taste – attempting to make an object of a thing (on transformations of 'things' into 'objects', and on 'thing theory', see Brown 2001; 2003; and Sev Fowles's website http://www.columbia.edu/~sf2220/TT2007/web-content/index.html). We might be faced with something unfamiliar, and struggle to make sense of it in isolation, or the thing might be familiar but in an unlikely setting. These are encounters. In Heidegger's terms they would be classed as 'present at hand'.

What Duncan Garrow and Elizabeth Shove have set up is a series of encounters. On the one hand they have selected an unfamiliar artefact category (unfinished Neolithic axe) and set it up for viewing; on the other a familiar artefact category (toothbrush) is chosen, albeit placed in an unlikely location on an office desk. Their experiments are thus not designed in such a way that they might explore the phenomena of smooth coping or readiness to hand. This is not to say that their endeavour is irrelevant or invalid, simply that it can only speak to a limited register, that of the encounter. I say limited, because I imagine that most human interaction with material culture takes the form of smooth coping, such that artefacts are experienced not 'as aggregates of natural physical mass, but rather as a range of *functions* or *effects* that we rely upon' (Harman 2002, 18; original emphasis).

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