



Fig. 1. Production-consumption model, adapted freely from John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, London: Pluto, 1989, p. 70.

Javier Gimeno-Martínez

**Artefacts:
the Artificial as Cultural Mediator**

Artefacts proposes to place the artefact at the core of design analyses. Javier Gimeno-Martínez explains why we failed to do so in the past and why it's important to do so in the future.

‘Things, therefore, are not neutral “intermediaries” between humans and world, but mediators: they actively mediate this relation.’

— Peter Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do. Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*¹

This *Kunstlicht* issue focuses on design products, with a special interest in ordinary objects. The ordinary and the insignificant can be pivotal to understanding culture. Artefacts are repositories of valuable cultural information. But how can this information be disclosed? Hammers, bridges, city maps and paintings require different analytical approaches. Accordingly, the right method of inquiry is the one that extracts the most information from each artefact. This article explores the origins of the centrality of artefacts in design history as influenced by material culture studies. I will argue that artefact-centred analyses define specific cultural inferences of designed artefacts as well as contribute towards defining the field of design more sharply.

In the words of art historian Jules David Prown, material culture studies departs from an underlying premise ‘[...] that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged’.² He extends the range of study from art to ordinary objects. Prown uses the term ‘artefact’ therefore not only to designate an object of study but as a source which can be used to study society from a different perspective; one which is equally valid as a written source may be. He states for example that artefacts offer different information to the researcher than written sources do. Written sources are indeed more univocal in the information offered. Nevertheless, they neither reflect all the dimensions of experiencing the object nor those meanings and beliefs that are hidden or submerged. The latter are better studied in their cultural representations, and artefacts can be considered as such.³

Material culture studies are not connected to a single discipline but underpinned by different fields such as anthropology, museum

studies, philosophy of science and archaeology. In 1990 archaeologist Christopher Tilley wrote that ‘[m]aterial-culture studies constitute a nascent developing field of enquiry which systematically refuses to remain enmeshed within established disciplinary boundaries’.⁴ For instance, material culture studies has been pivotal to the formulation and distribution of consumption studies in the 1980s — a particular interpretation of material culture studies that had a first impact in design history as will be elaborated on below.⁵ The influence of material culture studies has reached historical studies too. For example, historian Leora Auslander refers to the relevance of objects as non-linguistic sources in a similar manner to Prown’s when she argues that people’s relation to language is not the same as their relation to things, and that what they express through their creation and use cannot be reduced to words. Therefore, artefacts can also act as sources for history distinct from written records.⁶

One thing that all disciplinary approaches to material culture have in common is the denomination of their objects of study as ‘artefacts’, i.e. man-made objects. The term ‘artefacts’ defines the ‘material’ component of material culture studies and is generally preferred above other similar terms such as ‘objects’, ‘things’, ‘goods’, ‘products’, and ‘commodities’. There are a number of reasons why this term might have been given preference. ‘Objects’ recalls the Platonian and Kantian antithesis between subject and object and connotes the subsidiary character of the latter. Currently, the dichotomy between subjects and objects is increasingly challenged, especially since the popularization of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. ‘Things’, on the other hand, refers to objects independent from the subject and has been used in philosophy, most notably by Martin Heidegger.⁷ However, its extended use in everyday language makes this term less suitable for academia. ‘Goods’ and ‘products’ for their part are terms linked to capitalist market relations and refer to an exchange value. Similarly, ‘commodities’ is related to ‘goods’ since it connotes exchange value; but it is even more specific since it designates a particular moment in the life of an artefact, namely when it becomes involved in

an exchange.⁸ The term 'artefacts' appropriately recalls artificiality, an intrinsic cultural character and a source of knowledge in archaeology. Moreover, this term is less common in everyday language and its use is therefore less clouded. It denotes a greater independence from humans than 'objects', more specificity than 'things' and a broader range of social meanings than 'goods', 'products' or 'commodities'.

However, what does this term comprise? Artefacts have an inclusive character that involves material production superseding categorizations of high and low culture or art and design. This term refers to human material production in general and therefore presents, as could be expected, some flexibility depending on the user. What is common is the opposition of artefacts to nature.⁹ The core aspect of an artefact is therefore its artificial character. Other aspects such as scale can range from minuscule to gigantic, and the inclusion of movable and immovable objects is nuanced by some authors who give preference to the first above the second. For example, Woodward defines artefacts as something chiefly portable. Unlike Prown, he defines greater units such as cities as networks of artefacts rather than as artefacts themselves.¹⁰

Material Culture and Consumption Studies

There are different accounts of the evolution of design history as a discipline. This article does not intend to recapitulate this history, but a few basic notions will contribute to clarify the impact of material culture studies. Authors concur that the origins must be found in Britain during the late 1970s in connection to changes in higher education.¹¹ A first period has been identified when design history adopted methods of traditional art history and therefore focussed on the history of professional designers and design icons. This dominant discourse was enriched in the 1980s with methodologies stemming from cultural studies, which introduced semiotics to design history. Nevertheless, the focus on professional designers and design objects in their pre-commoditization phase remained unchanged.

The influence of material culture studies can be felt starting in the late 1980s. I argue that two phases can be distinguished in this paradigm shift. In a first phase, material culture

studies opened up the field of design history towards studies of consumption, and in a second, recent phase studied the interaction between artefacts and society. The first phase started with the work of Daniel Miller in the late 1980s.¹² His work introduced novelties relating to both subject and methodology. With regard to subject, the role of the consumer was acknowledged and researched in both recent and less recent periods. Moreover, it added ethnography to the methodologies typical to historical research already in use.

The importance of ethnography for historical studies is gaining recognition. Used primarily by anthropologists, ethnography seeks to study culture on the basis of direct observation. It can be argued that ethnography expands the techniques for studying recent history in general and design history in particular.¹³ Its use is more obvious for recent history, especially social and cultural history. Likewise, its benefits for studying previous periods have also been noted by some historians.¹⁴ And what is more important, ethnography can be implemented to study the whole life of an object from production through mediation to consumption. The reason for choosing an ethnographic approach is, as Jeffrey Meikle pointed out in 1998, that it remains difficult for researchers to analyze the extent of the perception of design by consumers. He argues that the only way to discover how the mainstream consumer deals with design is to go out into the streets and question them.¹⁵

Consumption studies, on the other hand, focussed on issues of consumption rather than on issues of use.¹⁶ In other words, consumption studies looked at the mechanisms and circumstances surrounding the moment of purchase but did not stretch beyond these bounds. Proof of this is for example Guy Julier's *The Culture of Design*, written after the influence of consumption studies and compiling a vast array of supplementary theories to interpret design, structured around the production and consumption of design. This book discussed aspects such as the branding of cities and computer interactivity.¹⁷ The interest shifted from design icons to processes, and expanded John Walker's production-consumption scheme (fig.1).¹⁸ However, there are still too few accounts following artefacts themselves in

a post-commodity stage.¹⁹ Reconsidering the centrality of artefacts does not imply returning to a previous phase in the discipline based on production issues, but rather expanding on the cultural importance of design.

Broadening the Field?

The influence of material culture studies in the broader sense — beyond consumption studies — can be felt in Judy Attfield's *Wild Things. The Material Culture of Everyday Life*.²⁰ In this book, the author proposes going beyond the framework that confines design studies' field of interest to the work of professional designers, and look at 'how people make sense of the world through physical objects'.²¹ The book places design against the backdrop of material culture, viewing design as a subgroup of distinguishable objects. According to Attfield, design is 'just one type of "thing" among the collectivity of material culture in general'.²² But how then can design be distinguished from other types of similar artefacts? In *Wild Things*, the field of design is defined as the artefacts that have traditionally been studied by design historians. A second differentiating characteristic for design according to Attfield is 'things with attitude'.²³ It is however difficult to discern which artefacts have more attitude than others. The subjectivity and arbitrariness of these defining characteristics show the difficult divide between design and portable, functional artefacts at large.

The broadness of the discipline has been acknowledged in the *Journal of Design History*, in its articles on the different disciplines from product design to fashion, from professional designers to the work of amateurs, and from recent accounts to historic issues. Similarly, the influence of material culture studies has contributed to broadening the contours of the discipline. If artefacts in general are the object of study, then there is little sense in reducing the scope of the field to one or another subfield. The challenge lies in embracing the totality of artefacts belonging to design, delimiting its extension towards other fields such as architecture or art, and at the same time acknowledging their overlap. Attempts to achieve this goal have stemmed from design historians close to the field of material culture studies, craft, and non-Western design. For example, *Global Design History* edited by Glenn Adamson, Gior-

gio Riello, and Sarah Teasley studies subjects ranging from fashion to websites, and from the Renaissance to the present day. The authors distance themselves from a design history centred on modernization and industrialization (which has produced a European and eurocentric historiography) in order to present evidence of design as a wider and more complex phenomenon.²⁴

That being said, and despite the attempts of the *Journal of Design History* to map the field of design and expand its scope to include diverse disciplines and chronologies prior to the mid-nineteenth century, there is still a need for a comprehensive account that includes a history of design at large. There is an imbalance between the theoretical conception of design and its historiographical practice. The awareness that design encompasses products, graphics, and dress is accepted. Now there is a need to create a historical overview that relates these three fields.²⁵ Authors such as Hazel Conway and John A. Walker have configured a proper, inclusive disciplinary framework for the three subdisciplines. Equally, museums such as the Victoria and Albert or the Cooper Hewitt reflect this scope, and educational programmes such as the MA History of Design at the Royal College of Art in London, or the MA Design Cultures at the VU University Amsterdam, acknowledge this diversity. Nevertheless, one must draw on partial accounts of industrial design, graphic design, decorative arts, and fashion to get a historical account of design at large. The influence of material culture studies hints in this direction by considering the common denominators of designed artefacts at large. The larger the framework, the more diversity it admits, and thereby the more comparative material it provides.

Understanding Artefacts

If the broadening of the field is one of the consequences of this turn towards material culture studies, the second consequence would be the centrality of the artefact. One can argue that artefacts have been the centre of design history since its beginnings. There is, however, a difference in the attention given to artefacts before and after the 1990s. If the pre-commodity phase was central prior to this decade, the

whole biography of the artefact has achieved interest following this decade.

Design historian Grace Lees-Maffei identified a secondary effect of material culture studies (which she refers to as 'consumption studies' in her article) in the late 1980s, namely that the mediatory character of design became an issue.²⁶ She mentions three constitutive phenomena within this movement. First, an interest towards mediating channels between producers and consumers; second, mediating channels themselves as the object of design historical analysis; third, and most important to this article, what she calls the mediation and the biography of 'designed goods'. Here Lees-Maffei mentions the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's article 'The Cultural Biography of Things' as exploring the interaction between objects and society.²⁷

Kopytoff stresses the different interpretations and meanings that an object can have in its 'biography' as a result of an interaction between the individual and society. Based on the ideas of anthropologist Margaret Mead, he explores the way in which culture can be understood by seeing what sort of biography it regards as embodying a successful social career.²⁸ He takes the example of a Renoir painting ending up in an incinerator.²⁹ Considering this fact as 'tragic' reveals the value of art in Western society today. It is actually the reactions to the fact and not the fact itself that provides the most information. The incineration of a painting may be experienced either as an act of religious iconoclasm, as an act of censorship, or as an unfortunate accident. Thus, valuations of 'failure' and 'success' reflect the cultural values of a given society. Therefore, limiting the study of artefacts to their pre-commodity phase excludes decisive information for understanding both society and design.³⁰

Likewise, Philosopher of Technology Peter-Paul Verbeek states the importance of artefact-centred analyses. He argues that phenomenologists such as Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger have always considered the influence of artefacts on subjects from an abstract point of view in what he calls, using Kantian nomenclature, 'conditions of possibility'.³¹ As a result, these authors considered technology to be alienating.³² Verbeek encourages looking at the actual meanings of specific artefacts

for human experience instead of talking about conditions of possibility.³³ He argues in favour of an empirical study of artefacts as mediators of reality in order to actually see how specific artefacts mediate the world in specific ways. He advocates a shift in 'the philosophical attention from the conditions of technology to technology itself (to the technological devices and objects that are virtually ubiquitous in our daily lives) thereby seeking to understand them via the role that they play in our society and culture.'³⁴ Considering technology from the point of view of its concrete artefacts would avoid overgeneralizations and provide information about the actual impact of objects as mediators.

The two previous accounts come from the field of anthropology and philosophy of technology respectively. Both advocate a closer analysis of artefacts in a post-commodity phase, but their goals are different. If the former aims to understand culture through objects, the latter is oriented towards a better understanding of the disciplinary field. Considering artefacts as mediators implies looking 'at' them while at the same time looking 'through' them. The challenge for design studies is to keep the balance between studying artefacts as a means to look at culture, as well as an object of study in itself. These two dimensions are indeed intimately connected. Artefacts shape culture and culture shapes artefacts. Defining causality in this relationship is an elusive endeavour and its very impossibility configures the core of material culture studies. Analysing designed artefacts can therefore define common characteristics in the way that they interact with culture. Moreover, this exercise can define the specificity of designed artefacts as opposed to natural objects or to other fields of material culture such as art or immovable artefacts.

The problem is that concrete examples of how to carry out such studies from the perspective of design studies are scarce. There are a number of studies on artefacts stemming from other disciplines worth mentioning. However, they do not contribute towards the understanding of design in the ways stated above. The benefit of studying artefacts from a design studies' perspective, in opposition to the study of artefacts in general, is twofold. It should firstly contribute to revealing the impact of designed artefacts in culture. Second, it

should serve as a means to further construct the disciplines of design history in particular and design studies in general. For example, Verbeek himself sketches a short analysis of the personal digital assistant (small, stripped-down versions of personal computers) in *What Things Do. Philosophical reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*.³⁵ Other accounts stemming from material culture studies can be found in Jules David Prown's and Kenneth Haltman's edited volume *American Artifacts. Essays in Material Culture*, a collection of work by Prown's students who applied his method to different objects ranging from 1970s lava lamps to Amish quilts.³⁶ More recently, *The Object Reader* edited by Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, published short reflections on artefacts written by scholars under the title 'Object Lessons'.³⁷ These range from historical reviews of design icons to analytic auto-ethnographies, with the result that some essays have a rigorous academic tone and others a rather personal, essayistic style. A last example is the book *Thinking Through Things*, which limits its methodology to ethnographic analysis to cover a wide range of artefact-centred analyses.³⁸

The idea behind publishing this issue of *Kunstlicht* originated from the awareness of a lack of useful examples that approach artefacts from multifarious angles. Essays on artefacts departing from a design studies perspective have therefore been selected. This issue differs from the abovementioned accounts in that the authors do not limit themselves to a single method. One of the main challenges faced by these authors was the difficult access to sources; not something one might expect when dealing with everyday artefacts. A second difficulty was linking an artefact analysis to a more general research question so that the resulting paper would not merely be the implementation of a method to an object. This task of connecting the right question to the right artefact has proved the most arduous. These authors have risen to the challenge of linking the particular to the general and the customary to the original.

- 1 Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do. Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p. 114.
- 2 Jules David Prown, 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method' in: *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (1982), pp. 1-2.
- 3 Jules David Prown, Kenneth Haltman (eds), *American Artifacts. Essays in Material Culture*, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2000, p. 13.
- 4 Christopher Tilley (ed.), *Reading Material Culture*, Oxford/ Cambridge (MA): Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. vii.
- 5 The seminal volume on consumption studies is Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. For cultural and social history's interest in material culture, see: Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History' in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35:4 (2005), pp. 591-603; Leora Auslander, 'Beyond Words' in: *American Historical Review*, (October 2005) pp. 1015-1045.
- 6 Auslander, op. cit. (note 5), p. 1017.
- 7 Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 163-186.
- 8 Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, London: Sage, 2007, p. 15.
- 9 Jules David Prown defined artefacts as 'objects made by man or modified by man. It excludes natural objects. Thus, the study of material culture might include a hammer, a plow, a microscope, a house, a painting, a city. It would exclude trees, rocks, fossils, skeletons.' He specifies that a pile of rocks could be considered as an artefact as long as it is nature modified by humans. Prown, op. cit. (note 2), p. 2.
- 10 Woodward, op. cit. (note 8), p. 14.
- 11 For a detailed institutional and contextual account see Jonathan M. Woodham, 'Recent Trends in Design Historical Research in Britain' in: Anna Calvera and Miquel Mallo (eds), *Design History Seen from Abroad: History and Histories of Design. Proceedings 1st International Conference of Design History and Design Studies. Barcelona 1999*, Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1999, pp. 85-97. Lees-Maffei elaborated on the influences of the discipline and paradigmatic changes in: Grace Lees-Maffei, 'The Production-Mediation-Consumption-Mediation Paradigm' in: *Journal of Design History* 22:4 (2009), pp. 351-376. For a broader theoretical contextualization but a limited scope in product range, see: Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method*, Oxford/New York: Berg, 2010.
- 12 Miller, op. cit. (note 5).
- 13 Fallan, op. cit. (note 11), p. 40.

Javier Gimeno-Martínez is Assistant Professor at the VU University Amsterdam. He holds an MA degree in Industrial Design and Art History. In 2006 he received his PhD from the KU Leuven with the dissertation 'The Role of the Creative Industries in the Construction of Regional/European Identities (1975-2002): Design and Fashion in Belgium and Spain'.

- 14 Isaac Rhys, 'Ethnographic Method for History: An Action Approach' in: *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 13:1 (1980), pp. 43-61.
- 15 Jeffrey Meikle, 'Material Virtues: On the Ideal and the Real in Design History' in: *Journal of Design History* 11:3 (1998), pp. 191-199; Fallan, op. cit. (note 11), p. 40.
- 16 This has been noted by Victor Margolin and Judy Attfield and mentioned in Fallan, op. cit. (note 11), p. 37.
- 17 Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design* (2000), London: Sage, 2008.
- 18 John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, London: Pluto, 1989, pp. 68-73.
- 19 Some examples are: Dick Hebdige, 'Object as Image: the Italian Scooter Cycle' in: *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London/New York: Routledge, 1988, pp. 77-116; Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, London: Sage, 1997; Alison J. Clark, *Tupperware: The Promise Of Plastic In 1950s America*, Washington/London: Smithsonian, 1999. Three articles specifically from the field of design history can be mentioned: Jane Graves, "'When Things Go Wrong ... Inside the Inside": A Psychoanalytical History of a Jug' in: *Journal of Design History* 12:4 (1999), pp. 357-67; Javier Gimeno-Martínez, 'Industrial Design in the Museum. The Case of the FN Milking Machine (ca. 1947)' in: *The Burlington Magazine* no. 1290 (September 2010), pp. 603-608; Kjetil Fallan, 'Kombi-Nation: Mini Bicycles as Moving Memories' in: *Journal of Design History* 26:1 (2013), pp. 65-85.
- 20 Attfield uses the term 'thing' as standing for 'the basic unit that makes up the totality of the material world'. Judy Attfield, *Wild Things. The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Oxford/New York: Berg, 2000, p. 9.
- 21 Ibid., p. 1.
- 22 Ibid., p. 29.
- 23 Ibid., p. 20.
- 24 Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley (eds.), *Global Design History*, London/New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 6.
- 25 Some books are based both on graphic design and industrial design but so far, there is no historical account that systematically includes design at large. See: David Raizman, *History of Modern Design. Graphics and Products since the Industrial Revolution*, London: Laurence King, 2010; Grace Lees-Maffei, Rebecca Houze, *The Design History Reader*, Oxford/New York: Berg, 2010.
- 26 Lees-Maffei, op. cit. (note 11), p. 365.
- 27 Ibid., p. 370.
- 28 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process' in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 66.
- 29 Ibid., p. 67.
- 30 Lees-Maffei concludes her article noting that '[t]he mediating function of objects has not, as yet, received sufficient scholarly attention and a great deal of potential for further work exists both here and in the narrative capacity of objects'. Lees-Maffei, op. cit. (note 11), p. 371.
- 31 Verbeek, op. cit. (note 1), p. 100.
- 32 Ibid., p. 99.
- 33 Ibid., p. 30.
- 34 Ibid., p. 100.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 197-199.
- 36 Prown and Haltman, op. cit. (note 3).
- 37 Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (eds.), *The Object Reader*, London/New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 443-534.
- 38 Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds.), *Thinking Through Things. Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, London/New York: Routledge, 2007.