Thinking about Things
AHIS 477 Fall 2009

Instructor: Anne Porter (office: ACB 230; e-mail: amporter@usc.edu)

This course considers things in three different cultural contexts: the ancient Near East, a rural village in the modern Middle East, and Los Angeles in 2009. You will use these contexts to arrive at your own answers to some big questions. These questions guide the weekly discussions and constitute the assessment for the course.

1) What is the difference between visual and material culture? Or, put another way, what is the difference between art and artifact?
   Position piece, 3-4 pages, due Week Three. Here you will focus on building an argument to support your case. 10%

2) What do you consider the most important, or most interesting, question about things to be?
   Position piece, 3-4 pages, due Week Six. Here you will think about the big picture. 10%

3) Can we see through things to the people who inhabit the worlds things create?
   Research paper, 12-15 pages. In consultation with the instructor, you will be expected to choose and assemble a body of material culture from one of the three cultural contexts listed above, choose and apply the theory and method (or theories and methods) that you think are useful in answering that question. You will be expected to use both data and literature beyond that given in class. You will begin this project no later than Week Four, due last day of class. 40%

4) What is the relationship between things, ourselves and our experience of the world?
   Position piece, 3-4 pages, based on an analysis of one of the three cultural contexts listed above, but excluding the subject of the research paper, due Week Twelve. 10%

Class Participation 10%

Field Reports (presented in class) 15% each
**Week One (25/27 Aug): Take the figurine...What is it that Art Historians, Anthropologists and Archaeologists actually do?**

What can we learn from these three figurines, and what is the difference between them?

**Readings:**


**Week Two (1/3 Sept): Now consider the cell phone....What is it that objects actually do? The agency of things**

How do the physical dimensions of objects influence us in what we do and how we act – if the cell phone were designed completely differently would we be different?

**Readings**


**Week Three (8/10 Sept): Telling the story of things**

- or is it things that tell the story?

**Readings:**


Tilley: Reading material culture

**Week Four (15/17 Sept): The repository of things: museums. Field Report ONE**
Go to either the Getty Museum or Getty Villa (free), LACMA (pay what you wish after 5 pm) or MOCA (free Thurs 5 pm-8pm) and think about how you experience the things you see there. All are accessible by public transport – see website.

**Readings:**


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**Week Five (22/24 Sept): The comfort of things. Field Report TWO**

Here you look closely at yourself and your friends. Visit someone unannounced and conduct your own ethnography in the manner of Miller

**Readings:**

Week Six (29/1 Oct): okay, so a cell phone is technology – what about architecture? Does it shape us, or do we shape it? What is our relationship to the built and unbuilt environment?

Readings:


Week Seven (6/8 Oct): the architecture of making things – form or function?
Readings:


Week Eight (13/15 Oct): Making things: creation or copying?

Does artistry (whatever that is), evolve? What is the relationship between contemporary works of art and artifact and ancient ones?

Readings:

http://www.yourbrushwiththelaw.com/cart/rakowitz.htm


Week Nine (20/22 Oct): Things as repositories: but of resistance, subscription, or compliance?

Do our emotions drip in to the things we make? How can we tell what political or social aspirations or oppressions are contained in things? If we look at a sneaker do we know the conditions under which it was made and how the maker felt about it? Whose thoughts are reflected in a factory good? Are these questions better contemplated in terms of those who use the thing rather than those who make it?

Readings:


Week Ten (27/29 Oct): And clothing? Do clothes make the man? Is there a dynamic between clothing and identity?

Readings:
Week Eleven (3/5 Nov): Speaking of clothing – what’s the difference between fad and fashion? How, and why, do styles spread and change?

Bourdieu and habitus

Readings:


Week Twelve (10/12 Nov): Tracking things.

For a long time the commodification and consumption of things was the dominant concern of those who think about things. Then the social life of things took over. How do these two sets of ideas connect?

Readings:


Week Thirteen (17/19 Nov): Exchanging Things

Can things be so much part of us that they actually are us?

Readings:


Week Fourteen: Thanksgiving

Week Fifteen (1/3 Dec): Living without things – can we??
PLEASE NOTE:

*Failure to submit any piece of assessment may result in a failing grade.*

**Class participation:**

Those students unwilling or unable to participate in class discussion on a regular basis will be expected to hand in one page written opinions each week that discussion takes place.

**Papers:**

Papers will be properly referenced at all times. Failure to do so will constitute plagiarism (see below). The first paper will be submitted, reviewed, then reworked before grading.

**Online sources when used must be credible and properly cited. Wikipedia is not considered an adequate source for research.**

**Readings:**

Students will be expected to approach both primary and secondary reading materials with analytical and critical rigor. They will be required to track down many of the readings for themselves using the library and USC on-line databases (a class in the use of these materials is included in the schedule). I reserve the right to change any of the readings at any time.

**Statement on Plagiarism:**

Here is the link for the Undergraduate Guide to Preventing Plagiarism:
Please be sure to familiarize yourself with USC's policies concerning plagiarism, which we strictly enforce. Many students are insufficiently informed about what precisely constitutes plagiarism; before writing your paper, be sure that you have read the student affairs website entitled, "Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism." As this Guide notes, the University Student Conduct Code (published in the current SCampus) defines plagiarism as follows:

"The submission of material authored by another person but represented as the student's own work, whether that material is paraphrased or copied in verbatim or near verbatim form;"

"The submission of material subjected to editorial revision by another person that results in substantive changes in content or major alteration of writing style;"

and

"Improper acknowledgment of sources in essays or papers."

Consult this Guide for concrete examples of what this definition means, and if you have any doubts about this policy please consult with me.

**Academic Accommodations:**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.