

Objects on the Loose: Ethnographic Encounters with Unruly Artefacts

A Foreword

Kenneth M. George, Guest Editor

The essays gathered for this special theme issue of Ethnos have to do with things and their social circumstances. Though the contributors and commentators in "Objects on the Loose" work in different ethnographic and disciplinary precincts, and draw from a diverse set of theoretical writings, we share a common debt to the essays of Arjun Appadurai and those of his collaborators in the Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (1986). As will become clear, our interests have less to do with formulating critiques or theory-driven responses to this seminal work than with setting out to explore possibilities for ethnographic expansions, revisions, and variations on its themes, and for linking the "social life of things" to questions of modernity, nationalism, and transnational cultural projects and dilemmas. In our discussions, we observe that as things become unmoored or dislodged from their place of origin, manufacture, or intended use, they are inevitably snared in new hierarchies of value, exchange, and recognition. Thus our discussions have to do with the social and moral orbit of things that have broken loose from some prior "life," or that mimic the lives of other objects. Different scenes of exchange and consumption are clearly influential in the shaping of such hierarchies. But so, too, are the national and international projects that encourage social identities and anxieties to attach to certain kinds of objects. For this reason, we have felt obliged to take a look at the moral debates and crises of mourning that travel along with circulating objects. In addition, our conversations have put special emphasis on the traffic in art and its confusions, contradictions, and coercions. In particular, we have taken an opportunity to explore some of the dilemmas that have attached to the

appropriation of "emblematic" works of art--works that have become exemplary signs of national or regional identities. We find that many of these problems spring from persistent discourses about modernity, taste, authenticity, artistic genius, historicity, and cultural heritage, discourses that have commingled in a thoroughly commodified and globalized art market and that have fed the desire to possess or look upon such emblematic works of art.

Our essays draw from ethnographic and art historical research in Germany, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Although the articles speak to each other in their concerns, special emphasis has been placed on comparative conversations. A story about East German products resuscitated for the current "Ostalgia" boom (Daphne Berdahl), another about forgeries sold as paintings by the late Vietnamese artist, Bui Xuan Phai (Nora Taylor), and one about faked paintings and faked signatures in Bandung, Indonesia (Kenneth George), point to the ironies and fantasies of longing that can surround commodities and works of art. Conference rhetoric on regional Indonesian textiles (Lorraine Aragon) and the traffic in stolen temple carvings from Angkor Wat (Lindsay French) suggest how globalizing markets, shifting economies of value, and competing constituencies of artisans, connoisseurs, blackmarketeers, designers, curators, and preservationists have disrupted the moral meanings of objects considered emblematic of specific national or local identities. So juxtaposed, these papers call attention to the unruly lives of objects that are incessantly subject to appropriation and reappropriation and that have moved beyond the horizons of their intended use and value.

More could be said here, of course, about the unsettled social life of things, but I instead invite readers to settle into our essays and the thoughtful commentaries written by Fred Myers and Bruce Owens, hoping that unruly readings of this work will push us in fruitful directions.

Acknowledgments

Sketches of our work were first presented at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association and at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. The conference discussions included all the contributors and commentators who appear in the following pages, as well as Christopher B. Steiner. I am delighted that we could resume and expand our discussions in this issue of Ethnos, and wish to thank the authors, Editors Don Kulick and Wilhelm Ostberg, Advisory Board member Byron J. Good, and Managing Editor Ann-Cathrine Lagercrantz for making it possible to do so. I truly regret that Chris Steiner was unable to take part in this special issue; we miss here his striking and important paper on the aesthetics of cultural appropriation.

K. M. G.

