Objects and Imagination

Material Mediations: People and Things in a World of Movement

Edited by **Birgit Meyer** (Department of Religious Studies and Theology, Utrecht University) and **Maruška Svašek** (School of History and Anthropology, Queens University, Belfast)

During the last few years, a lively, interdisciplinary debate has taken place between anthropologists, art historians and scholars of material culture, religion, visual culture and media studies about the dynamics of material production and cultural mediation in an era of intensifying globalization and transnational connectivity. Understanding 'mediation' as a fundamentally material process, this series provides a stimulating platform for ethnographically grounded theoretical debates about the many aspects that constitute relationships between people and things, including political, economic, technological, aesthetic, sensorial and emotional processes.

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Introduction

Øivind Fuglerud and Leon Wainwright

This volume brings together new empirical studies on a variety of topics ranging from ritual and art to advertising and museums. It shows that, regardless of their differences, these topics hold something in common, and complement and speak to one another. While the chapters are grouped into three thematic parts, these themes are overlapping and the contributions are commented upon in this Introduction without regard to these divisions. Working to address their importance in diverse parts of the world, our contributing authors share an interest in the way that the material world comes into being, how its objects are seen and used, and how they acquire and change value and meaning. Above all, we have granted a special place to objects, which are brought to the fore in order to treat them as the locus for understanding the intersections between materiality and the imagination. Consequently, this book contributes to what is now often called the 'material turn' in the social sciences (Knapp and Pence 2003) by offering a range of cases for appreciating how objects precipitate diverse imaginaries and make 'presence' possible.

One aspect of this has to do with what Maruška Svašek, represented in this volume, has elsewhere (2007, 2012) termed 'transit' and 'transition'. This describes the movement of people, objects and images across space and time, which allows individuals and groups to overcome space–time distances through material extensions of themselves or to re-create familiar environments in new surroundings while sometimes changing the meaning and emotional value of objects and images in the process. In chapter 4, Anders Emil Rasmussen discusses presence through the medium of money in Papua New Guinea, documenting an instance of the first kind of dynamic. Chapter 5, by Stine Bruland, offers an example of the second, presenting the material

repertoire involved in rituals that are performed by diasporic supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

While we seek to emphasize the importance of such dynamics, in our opinion there is every reason to show that much more is involved in the relation of objects to space and time: that they are as capable of inertia as of movement, and of continuity as much as change. As noted by Morgan (2008: 228), the appeal of the turn to material culture lies in the opportunity to understand in what concrete ways the construction of everyday life, addressed more generally, actually happens. There are several strands of anthropological theory which are important to the historical development of this focus of interest. Not least, on the one hand, are the early studies of 'embodiment' as the existential ground of culture and self (e.g. Csordas 1990, 1994); on the other are the varieties of 'practice theory' that have broadened an understanding of human motivation and agency from being self-interested, rational and pragmatic to embedded in modes of perception and cultivated dispositions (e.g. Bourdieu 1977). Out of this has grown an interest in 'messy meaning'; the suggestion that sense is produced and reproduced in non-intellectual and often unrecognized ways through people's interactions with their material surroundings.

Within anthropology, the general interest in materialization has been accompanied by growing attention to museum anthropology and the anthropology of art. Several of our chapters focus on these fields. Chapters 2 and 3, by Peter Bjerregaard and Saphinaz-Amal Naguib respectively, deal with museum-related questions, while chapter 1 by Sylvia Kasprycki, chapter 9 by Fiona Magowan, chapter 10 by Amit Desai and Maruška Svašek and, chapter 11 by Tereza Kuldova, all deal with art. It should be noted that this contribution to mainstream anthropology by analysts of art and museums amounts to a reunion old companions. Historically speaking, anthropology is no stranger to either museums or to aesthetics. To say that the origin of anthropology can be found in the knowledge needed to judge, categorize and exhibit curiosities that came to Europe from far-flung corners of the world is only a slight exaggeration. The institutionalization of anthropology developed in close proximity to such collections, and was often led by geographers, historians and natural scientists with an interest in the exotic. For example, Adolf Bastian in Germany, Edward Tylor in Britain and Franz Boas in the United States all worked, for at least brief periods, out of museums. During that time, the study of aesthetics and 'primitive art' became part of standard anthropology (Boas 1927). This link was broken, however, when Anglo-American anthropology from the 1940s onwards lost interest in material objects, thereby relegating museum anthropology to a dusty corner of their discipline and focusing instead on social structures and contexts of interaction.

In part this turning away from 'the material' can be understood as an effort by the discipline to free itself from the burden of history; from its association with the adventurers, missionaries and colonizers whose actions epitomized the unequal relationships of power and the modern age of acquisitiveness in which anthropology was born. At the time, this was an attempted break from the evolutionist paradigm, with the items in collections being intended to document Man's climb from nature to civilization. By a twist of history, the same need may now be invoked to explain anthropology's renewed interest in art. The globalizing processes in which European nations were the chief benefactors have undergone a long phase of decolonization, and the migration of peoples from the 'global South' has helped to bring the political economy of ethnographic work – in museums and anthropology – under uncomfortable scrutiny. On this shifting ground, as indicated by the debate on 'writing culture' among anthropologists during the 1980s and 1990s (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the project of representing others, whether through exhibitions or writing, has become inherently problematic. As noted by Clifford, 'Gone are the days when cultural anthropologists could, without contradiction, present "the Native point of view"' (Clifford 2004: 5–6). A probable reason why it cannot be done any longer is that the conventional object of anthropological study – the strange and exotic – has become, by virtue of migration and the flow of images, part of the anthropologists' own societies. The 'neutral space' where anthropologists used to withdraw to in order to work out their 'translation' from one culture to the other is no longer available, if it was ever there at all. Yet it is not only that the supposed gap to be 'translated' – figured by geographical distance and lack of communications – has closed up. The very notion of a disinterested space of reflection for purely intellectual work has been systematically, and rightfully, contradicted.

Matter and Meaning

The relationship between anthropology, art and museums can also be approached from a different angle, namely in terms of what objects are and how they become significant – in those circumstances where meaning adheres at all. A suitable starting point for this is Gell's seminal book *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998). Undoubtedly one of the most important works in the field of material anthropology in recent times, its impact has been felt far beyond his own discipline. Gell's exposition is complex and the outline of his argument well known, and we will not attempt here to do justice to the work as such.[1] Suffice it to say that Gell sets out to establish an anthropological theory of art based not on art history or the categorization of objects

in terms of aesthetic qualities (and not even as such values are locally construed), but on the way objects operate as 'agents' in advancing the social relationships that are constructed through them. Art, as he conceptualizes it, constitutes 'a system of action, intended to change the world' (ibid.: 6). Seen in this way, anthropological analyses should concentrate on the production, circulation and reception of objects functioning in particular ways, not on their qualities as such (cf. Layton 2003: 449). This functional approach does, of course, serve well for a volume like ours which deals both with art and non-art objects as normally conceptualized in the Western world. Even so, set against that background we are seeking to raise a number of questions.

From the position of new materialism (see below), Gell's notion of agency has been critiqued for retaining a conception of the human mind as the source of creativity, thereby not overcoming the mind–matter divide of Western science (Leach 2007). We will here pick up on another issue, his refutation of art as a carrier of semantic meaning and communication (Layton 2003; Morphy 2009). According to Gell, art objects are neither part of language nor do they constitute an alternative language (Gell 1998: 6), since that would imply that their meaning and significance rest on socially established conventions. This point is reiterated repeatedly in his work. He writes, for instance, that he is 'anxious to avoid the slightest imputation that (visual) art is "language-like" and that the relevant forms of semiosis are language-like' (ibid.: 14). Instead, art objects attain their agency as indexes of their producers or users, the term 'index' being Gell's preferred term to identify the meaning of a 'natural sign' by which the observer can make a causal inference (Gell 1998: 13; Layton 2003: 452).

The main issue here, of general importance to the field in which this book places itself, is to what extent the impact, and therefore the significance, of objects rests on social convention or on something much more material – that is, the extent to which its impact makes itself felt through an object's own 'thing-ness'. That the latter is sometimes the case, for example when a person is run over by a bus, must be conceded, but is this also applicable to the circumstances normally studied by anthropologists and art experts? The question has recently come to the fore through the much acclaimed volume by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Thinking Through Things,* suggesting that 'meanings are not "carried" by things but just *are identical to them*' (2007: 3–4; italics in original). While, frankly, we suspect that the precise meaning of this statement is not clear even to the editors themselves, it seems natural to assume, by implication, that to the extent that things are significant to humans at all, such significance must lie in some kind of causal impact. In actual fact, this discussion is older than both that volume and Gell's book. In an earlier discussion of the question, taking the form of a critique

of earlier formal readings of Oceanic art, Thomas (1995) argues that the 'meaning' (or significance) of decorations found on Asmat war shields lies not in what they convey about the society or worldview of their users, but in their effect. This effect, basically, is to make their opponents 'shit scared, paralyzed with fright, and prone to submit meekly to capture'. These are effects 'which are indexed in a viewer's body, which precede and supersede deliberate reading' (ibid.: 101).

While Thomas's point may be valid and important, his discussion shows the difficulties involved in moving beyond a notion of meaning as based on convention when talking about objects. Clearly, the fear experienced by enemies of the Asmat when seeing their shields may not be shared by, for instance, a Western audience observing the same shield in an ethnographic museum. Somehow this fear takes us past natural signs; somewhere and in some sense convention has to enter the picture. The same point is made by Morphy with reference to Gell, observing that Gell is inconsistent in his application of the concept of index (Morphy 2009: 10). He argues that Gell's refutation of socially established – in other words, conventional – meaning actually excludes the factors making it possible for social actors to use objects as agents of their individual agency, thus becoming an obstacle to what Gell himself wishes to demonstrate. Semantic meaning includes the purposes for which people come together in action and the content of the relationships established; in that sense, conventional meaning makes action of the kind that interests Gell possible (ibid.: 14). We regard this as a valid and important insight with implications for the study of material culture. We share Morphy's view that the knowledge, interpretations and experiences that people bring to bear on objects cannot be reduced to individual agency, nor can they be thought of as contained in the objects themselves. As he has stated, 'People act in relation to objects as a part of a history of relating to objects, a history that is supra-individual yet reproduced through individual action' (ibid.: 20).

Another way of framing this would be in terms of institutionalization, something we return to below. This institutionalization can involve actual institutions as perceived in the West and decisions made by people who work there (such as professionals in museums), or it can involve authoritative traditions guarded by elders or ritual experts. In this volume, Arne Aleksej Perminow (chapter 6) shows how specific categories of culturally valued things/objects are used among Tongans to mark and stage events of social significance. Against the backdrop of ancient traditions his aim is to look for contrasts in the staging of ritual spaces of sociality among homeland and overseas-based Tongans. The central point is that processes where the meaning of objects is given shape and form should be regarded as aspects of social and political life in the societies where they unfold. Such

meaning is often the outcome of contention, conflict or social drama. In the article by Thomas (1995) already cited, he points out that Polynesian canoes were not made simply to be seen, nor to transport people, but to be forcefully presented in certain contexts in which chants, ritual and the scent of oiled bodies compounded the effects of the decorations and material objects – with the consequence of animating people with the drama and strength of their own collectivity before they went on to overpower others. For this reason the 'art forms and the overall experience must … be seen to work both in some negative sense for others confronted by them and in an affirmative way for those who can identify with the canoe or canoe fleet' (ibid.: 106). Something similar, we argue, often goes on in museums that set out to portray 'the Other'. Visual representations of otherness may be taken to be more direct and perhaps also more prone to essentialism and stereotyping than written representations. In modern nation-states, exilic, migratory and diasporic populations have been especially subject to institutionalized forms of representation that show up this inequality. There is a pact of sorts, or at least an apparent complementarity, between vision and truth, which lends visual representation the semblance of 'givenness' or 'facticity', especially in fields of production where there is a tacit acceptance of the 'realism' of visual media, and a premium placed on 'making present' through the display of objects and collections. It would follow, then, that wielding the means of visual representation is a considerable power in itself.

The notion of institutionalization does not, of course, mean that traditions and institutions, and the authority they command, do not change. As Perminow shows with his example from Tonga and the overseas Tongans, they do. In chapter 10, Desai and Svašek provide a concrete example of the way the supra-individual and the individual, pointed to by Morphy above, may be interrelated; how one influential artist defines himself and his own innovation as growing out of age-old tradition, and as a result may renew and alter this very tradition. When it comes to museums, such organizations have often felt the need to reorient themselves to presenting a harmonious view of what Gilroy (2004a, 2004b) has dubbed the 'carnival of hetero-culture' of the contemporary metropolis. They have responded to the needs of the marketplace, the wide embrace of 'multiculturalism' in public policy, corporate and bureaucratic discourse, and an intensified identity politics issuing from minority groups whose own experience of insecurity is intertwined with the disruptive processes of multinational capitalism and its global cultural modernity (Žižek 1997). The results corroborate the sense of a slow shift from 'pedagogic' to 'performative' models of democracy that were noted by Dipesh Chakrabarty, drawing from literary studies by Homi Bhabha (Chakrabarty 2000). Museums have at the same time come to contend with the proliferation of other spaces of representation in which

the historical 'Other' may speak: the increasing visibility of a plural and globalized world, shaped by the spreading availability of internet and 'new technologies', and the peculiarly distributed and resistive uses of digital and social media. When these pressures have made it seem as though museums might be left behind by external social change, they have intensified their efforts and demonstrated an 'institutional self-consciousness', in tune with the general modernizing of organizations throughout contemporary society (Prior 2003; cf. Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2012).

Such challenges have been especially patent and deeply felt in ethnographic museums. Burdened with their colonial legacy, a common strategy is to adopt an approach to museum spaces in which aesthetic qualities are emphasized and objects are largely left to 'speak for themselves' in exhibition displays. In an article first published in 1991, Clifford observes that 'treatment of artifacts as fine art is currently one of the most effective ways to communicate cross-culturally a sense of quality, meaning, and importance' (Clifford 1997: 121). Indeed, the twenty years since the publication of Clifford's paper have seen a growing emphasis on aesthetics in ethnographic exhibitions. In museum after museum, dioramas and reconstructed environments have been taken down and replaced by individually exhibited objects of 'beauty'. The display of objects as art has come to manifest a break from 'the ethnographic', and holds the purpose of relegating ethnography to an outdated path of thinking and exhibiting – a means for museums to redress their epistemological claims by way of aesthetic ones. Such patterns of display also issue from assumptions that surround the aesthetic 'autonomy' of objects and images, so that materials that were until recently treated as artefacts have undergone another sort of profound 'translation'. The blurring of the divide between artefact and art – through the entanglement of all forms of material production in a penumbra of 'aesthetics' – has gone further than Clifford's post-processual account. His invocation of Greimas's semiotic square in order to specify a diagrammatic 'art-culture system' now seems inadequate for describing how objects that are granted the value of 'cultural evidence' in a historical or ethnographic museum may at the same time acquire the status of 'art'. If museums have repositioned themselves in the present moment of heightened 'institutional self-consciousness', they have done so by directly investing in an abstracted and expanding field of aesthetics. In chapter 1, Sylvia Kasprycki raises this broad range of issues underlying the reception, classification and representation of art produced outside the Western mainstream, including the dispute over the appropriate disciplinary competence to evaluate these visual expressions. She points out that despite a growing body of literature, symposia and exhibitions that have in recent years aimed at throwing some light on the conceptual and representational problems involved, it seems that artists, curators, scholars

and the art-consuming public alike are still grappling with conflicting paradigms and (more often than not) preconceived notions of 'non-Western art' and its place on a global scale.

The reframing of the holdings of museums has served to downplay some older, once strident critiques. They were issued when demands for representation within the museological order were at their height, with the inception of the identitarian, feminist and deconstructionist approaches that framed the 'new museology'. Certainly, these complexities stem from changes taking place in democratic states where the museum has come to be recognized as a crucial institution among several others responsible for governance, social 'inclusion' and the production of citizenship. In seeming to shrug off some of that burden of responsibility, the orchestration of aesthetic encounters has gone along with a virtually libertarian argument that museums are far from the totalizing 'discursive formations' that many academics (such as Preziosi 1995) had shown them to be. The exponents of aestheticization insist that the best sort of contemporary museum is one where visitors are left to make up their own minds about what to look at, how to look, and what to conclude from their visit (Cuno 2011).

Evidently this is a disavowal of the authority of the museum by its technologists, which devolves any decision about the 'quality, meaning, and importance' (as Clifford had noted) of objects to a public which is allegedly free to inscribe its own significance and to find its own 'visual pleasure'. But quite apart from the neo-liberal purpose for museums that is at the core of such arguments, the objection may be raised that such an ideology is successfully masked by an unquestioned belief that aesthetics may have the status of a universal category, or else occupy the 'neutral' ground for 'effective', if not 'authentic', cross-cultural relations. The entire process of reification is underscored by a lately sharpened rhetoric that exploits the idea of the Enlightenment museum: a supposedly buried set of encyclopedic principles whose rediscovery promises to return objects themselves to their rightfully central place in museological experience.

It is easy to understand the countless reasons why ethnographers should see these changes as detrimental to their vocation. We take the view, however, that in order to understand what is at stake in such a turn towards aestheticization in museums, the need has never been greater for ethnographic work, together with anthropology and a distinctive 'post-museology'. Magowan's discussion, in chapter 9, of suburban-based Aboriginal artists is an important reminder of this. She shows how these exhibiting artists redefine and reclaim their rights in the present, as well as in the migratory pasts of their relatives, challenging hegemonic cultural readings of Aboriginal art.

We propose that such an approach should also draw freely from art history. The discipline has been long accustomed to unmasking the normative

claims that are made for objects and images within and beyond institutional, commercial and ideological settings in the past, to which we must now add 'global contemporary art' as a network of sites that intersect erstwhile ethnographic objects and the operation of 'art worlds'. What we have witnessed in the turn to aesthetics is the suspension of ethnography, suggesting to us that a set of approaches which involves ethnography is imperative in order to reflect meaningfully on this process. As we show, such a manoeuvre is at its most dynamic when coupled with disciplines and approaches with a history of accomplishment in the project of defamiliarizing aesthetics. On that basis, we are more capable of showing in critical terms the diverse, unstable and historical interconnections between objects and the imagination.

The New Materialism

In order to gather the resources for such an intervention, it is worth tracing out the historical emergence of the intellectual landscape of the social sciences today. As already mentioned, in the first part of the twentieth century, art and material culture were split off from mainstream developments and treated as subjects of specialist interest. Since then we have seen, among other developments, the tremendous impact across social science disciplines of linguistic perspectives and their articulations in different forms of structuralism, semiology and social constructivism. This prompts a brief mapping of the new topography that the present volume traverses. We should make it clear, however, that we do not seek to resolve or to establish a settled and shared view on the many difficult issues involved. Assembled in this volume is a group of contributors who have entered into productive disagreements on some areas as much as they have also found room for carefully reached consensus. Several of them have reservations as to the position taken in this Introduction, but even so they have worked on problems that share a common territory. What we will do here is to indicate this common ground, while maintaining a central assumption that a sharpening of focus on the imagination will contribute crucially to studies in material anthropology.

If what we are now seeing in the social sciences is a new interest in material perspectives, this can be linked to the slow waning of the linguistic turn that began in the 1970s. Led by pioneers like Latour and Ingold, many have felt in recent years that this paradigm is about to utterly outplay its role; that the description of a linguistically mediated reality misses out on something fundamental about the material foundation of people's everyday lives. The liberating potential of its deconstructive project is ebbing: as Latour has put it, that 'critique has run out of steam' (Latour 2004). The new materialism is not a coherent movement; it has found diverse expressions in

science studies, ANT (Actor-Network Theory), studies of consumption, and ecologically oriented studies on human–nature entanglements (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012). This new focus has brought fresh conceptualizations of the material world. Researchers like Donna Haraway (1991) and Annemarie Mol (2002) have shown that the material can no longer be taken as a priori, as a given and passive opposite to the cultural, but must be seen as an active and 'unstable' result of specific practices; as something to be, in a sense, 'performed'. In chapter 7, Katherine Swancutt takes on the challenges of this unstable materiality through a case study of ritualistic warfare among the Nuosu of South West China – a Tibeto-Burman highlands group also known by the Chinese ethnonym of Yi – where effigies, sacrificial meat or chicken decoys may undergo some degree of ontological slippage from being mere representations to becoming material vessels of unwanted ghostly agency. In response, throughout this book we refer to materiality in the form of a verb, as 'materialization'.

A more precise characterization of what has sheltered under the umbrella of new materialism is made difficult by the fact that several of the leading figures in the social sciences prefer not to see their own contributions in terms of theory with universalizing ambitions. Instead, they argue with questionable modesty that what they bring to the table is only a method to be applied concretely (e.g. Latour 2006: 20; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007: 7). At the same time there is no doubt that many of the studies in this genre rest on assumptions and aim to document claims that are new to the Cartesian science that took hold in the West. Latour succinctly sums up this new perspective by noting that:

> Subjectivity, corporeality, is no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an outside reality is a property of nature … Subjectivity seems … to be a circulating capacity, something that is partially gained or lost by hooking up to certain bodies of practice. (Latour 2006: 23)

Setting out from a different starting point, yet essentially in agreement on many points, Ingold has charged the social sciences working under the Cartesian paradigm with following a logic of 'inversion' where a person's involvement in the world 'is converted into an interior schema of which its manifest appearance and behavior are but outward expressions' (Ingold 2006: 11; also 1993a, 1993b). Through this inversion 'beings originally open to the world are closed in upon themselves, sealed by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings' (2006: 11).

This entire wave of material-ecological perspectives has brought inspiration and energy to the social sciences, gasping for air in the wake of the 'writing culture' debate and the 'posts' of the 1980s and 1990s (post-struc-

turalism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, and so on). Still, we cannot help but feel that something is missing in this new materialism. Somehow, the perspectives tend to remain too close to the ground. Both Latour and Ingold seem to imply that human attention is structured by the 'flow-through' of our immediate material environment. They demonstrate their conclusions by a preference to look at how the immediate physical context, the encounter or exchange with materials and substances outside their own bodies, serves to focus human brain activity on this exchange itself.

Latour, in a brief but important text (Latour 1996: 238) conjures up the image of the post office, with its counter and speaking grille, in order to explain how physical structures have a hold or exert an agency which impacts on customers. While most of the ensuing research analysing science and technology is more elaborate and larger in scale, it derives from a similar approach. Ingold's long-held arguments are comparable. With attention to a notion of *skill,* here the dynamic exchange between human and material gives shape to stone axes and dwellings. While all this is persuasively deployed across a corpus of such studies, we are left asking whether this sort of immediacy in human experience has been given analytical prominence at the cost of a more widely reaching account. It seems to us that the growing complexity of the world calls for an analysis that diverges from currently available perspectives.

A dimension of this complexity has to do with the fact that humans have a developed awareness of what goes on outside their immediate material environments, such that the material world is not the boundary of all thought and feeling. So even while we chop wood and build canoes, we may be just as involved in a vast scope of other activities: students study for their coming exams, military officers construct potential war scenarios, migrants worry about family members they left behind, families plan vacations in faraway countries, old people reminisce about days gone by. Even a cursory survey of human experience has to respect its inestimable diversity, in which there is apparently no limit to what people do. Looked at in this way, beyond what can be gathered at a glance, there is the dimension of those activities that sit between dreams and fantasy – a nexus of projected futures and remembrance which enfolds humans with the material world. In capturing some of this, ours is a move towards a notion of the imagination and a field of imaginaries.

The Nature of Imagination

In a recent paper it was pointed out that 'imagination' in anthropology is currently changing status from a 'fairly exotic topic' to 'enjoying an emerg-

ing vogue' (Robbins 2010: 306). If this is so, one should not be surprised to find that debates on the concept, and on the phenomenon as such, will implicate many of the fundamental questions of social theory: the nature of the social, the consequences of historical change, the role of human agency, the workings of power, and so on. This is precisely the ground on which we move in this book, and by way of introduction we will briefly offer comments on some of these questions.

Concerning its role in the constitution of society, one line of thought on imagination can be generally traced back, as with much social theory, to Durkheim and to Hegel (Stretski 2006, Chapter 2; Knapp 1985). In the history of thought, Hegel's concept of *Geist* is the forerunner and probable inspiration for Durkheimian notions like collective conscience, collective representations, society as a *sui generis* reality, and the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity. For Durkheim, systems of social representations – imaginaries – exist independently of individuals, anchored in social institutions like religion and family structures, reproduced and circulated in myths, rituals and art.

In contemporary debates on social imagination, this heritage of collective representations is lifted by the towering figures of Benedict Anderson, Charles Taylor and Arjun Appadurai. According to Strauss it is no coincidence that references to imaginaries are becoming more frequent just as culture is losing out in academic parlance: 'to a certain extent *the imaginary* is just *culture* or *cultural knowledge* in new clothes' (Strauss 2006: 322; italics in original). Both Taylor (2002) and Appadurai (1996) acknowledge their debt to Anderson, in particular his path-breaking book, *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), on the development and spread of the concept of the nation from the late eighteenth century onwards, which he demonstrates as ensuing from practices related to new technologies, the print media and vernacular print-languages in particular. These practices made it possible for language users to picture themselves as being part of communities sharing the same conceptual space, the same concerns and destiny, in contrast to other communities sharing other languages and other concerns. Taylor's influence in anthropology, made from an external position in the field of political philosophy, has rested largely on his conception of a modern social imaginary, or 'the way we imagine our society'. Seen by Taylor as evolving from its origin in theories that were argued and debated among elites, subsequently becoming a widely shared conception held by ordinary people, this imaginary implies a sense of both how things usually go and how they *ought* to go. The social imaginary is 'not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (Taylor 2002: 91).

The empirical focus of Anderson's book and Taylor's essay is the historical transformation giving rise to the new moral order of Western modernity.

By contrast, Appadurai's book, *Modernity at Large* (1996), draws attention to the next, and ongoing, major historical transition: what follows after modernity in its classical form, namely the postnational, the postcolonial, the diasporic, the deterritorialized. While he is not clear on the precise dating of this historical process – according to Appadurai 'the globe has begun to spin in new ways' (1996: 58) – there has been a technological rupture causing the imagination to enter 'the logic of ordinary life from which it had largely been successfully sequestered' (1996: 5). In Appadurai's historical understanding, imagination was until recently confined to the special expressive spaces of art, myth and ritual. They were domains controlled by specialists or under the domination of especially gifted individuals. Today, as a result of the proliferation of media and migration, and made possible by new forms of transport and transmission, 'ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives' (1996: 5). The work of the imagination has consequently become 'a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity' (1996: 3).

Our aim here is not so much to debate the historical specificity of these authors' arguments, but more to inquire into how they look upon the role of imagination and social imaginary, as well as how their positions are seen by others. It should be noted that all three thinkers link the role played by imagination to a process of historical change and to modernity in some version.

Interestingly, the understanding of a historical rupture is shared by Ingold, who in other respects is far removed from the perspectives of Anderson and Appadurai. In his discussion of human evolution, Ingold (1993a, 1993b) seems to imply that imagination plays a larger role in modern than in premodern societies. In hunting and gathering societies survival depended on skill. Skill, according to Ingold, is not the application of knowledge previously gained and transmitted, since through interacting with materials – whether or not mediated by tools – technical knowledge is gained and applied (1993a: 434). However, as mechanically determined systems have gained dominance, a division has been created between knowledge and practice, and we come 'to confront the spectre of a meaningless environment', the objective world 'out there' (1993b: 465). Technical evolution describes a process of objectification of productive forces (1993a: 439). We can only try to recover the meaning lost through disengagement from practical engagement with nature symbolically, by attaching cultural significance to it. It is in this process that, for Ingold, imagination finds its place. It is seen as an intellectualist and, in a sense, artificial effort to re-establish a lost enchantment.

To us this kind of historical understanding is unsatisfactory. As pointed out by Handler (2002: 71), it is one thing to argue that new economic for-

mations and communication technologies facilitate new imaginings – this is business-as-usual in human culture. It is quite another matter to suggest, like Appadurai and Ingold do, that such imaginings, or technological developments underlying them, amount to a qualitative rupture in human history. This comes close to postulating a stereotype of differences between 'the traditional' and 'the modern'. With respect to Appadurai's argument we agree with Handler that in arguing that 'the imagination' has in the past been confined to a ritual–religious domain and excluded from the ordinary lives of ordinary people, Appadurai seems to take as a starting point a contemporary Western understanding of the religious as confined to a specific corner of society. For our purposes here this is an important question, as we do suggest that objects and practices are indeed able to bring about processual imaginative effects in ordinary people's lives outside the realm of modern technology. In the same way that we believe that objects – material forms – were and are able to precipitate imaginaries without modern technology, we also believe that people in modern societies have, surprisingly often, non-intellectual, emotional relationships to objects and artefacts – many of them industrial products – of the kind Ingold seems to reserve for pre-industrial society. We can only agree with Miller (2007: 25–26), who in a comment on a critique by Ingold (Ingold 2007) on contemporary studies of materiality, characterizes Ingold's position as 'primitivism'.

Claudia Strauss, a well-known proponent of cognitive anthropology, in a broad discussion paper is ready to accept the existence of social imaginaries, provided observers are able to answer the question: 'Whose imaginaries are these?' (Strauss 2006: 339). Her attitude towards Anderson and Taylor is sympathetic, but she makes the general point that since the imaginaries they are interested in must be located in the minds of actual people, they are really what cognitive theorists have since the 1980s called 'cultural models'. This is a way of saying that the cognitivists got there first. In an introduction to a special issue of *Ethnos* on 'technologies of the imagination', Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) are less accepting. Their position is that recent writings on imagination have tended only to 'enlarge' on concepts of culture, to 'upgrade' them in newer versions (ibid.: 7–8). In their view 'imagination is best understood in non-holistic and non-instrumental terms' (ibid.: 6). They criticise the fact that social imaginaries are often 'teleologically defined in accordance to a hypostatized socio-psychological function, such as "making sense of the world"' (ibid.: 8), and go to great lengths to try to refute the belief that the imagination is something *purposeful*. The 'making-sense-of' they seek to replace with a perspective on 'imagination as an outcome rather than a condition' (ibid.: 19). Intriguingly, however, while being posited as an effect of processes of some kind, these effects are said to be 'undetermined' by the same processes. The only answer to how

this can be is that 'the imagination is *defined* by its essential indeterminacy' (ibid.: 24; italics in original). It is a proposition that we will consider in the following section in a slightly broader perspective.

The Power of Aesthetics

One important question raised by an understanding of imagination as undetermined is the question of power, which again is linked to the questions of human intention and of holism in social life. Not wishing to prolong the discussion unnecessarily, as editors of the present volume we should state that we regard the capacity to act with purpose as a fundamental human capacity, separating people from stones, trees, houses and furniture. This does not mean that humans always achieve what they try to accomplish. Nor does it suggest that their actions are not influenced or modified, or even at times made impossible, by their environment, whether human or non-human. Neither does it mean that social life is preconceived, planned at the drawing board and then implemented, as in Ingold's caricature of social sciences – *far from it*. Life, social life included, is becoming, emergent, always unfinished, and so are thought and imagination.

To the intentionality of human existence, imagination is vital. It plays out both in coming to terms with our own life and with our role in the world. Due to life's emergent character neither self nor society has any inherent essence. As noted by Taylor in another context: 'What I am has to be understood as what I have become' (Taylor 1985: 47). To maintain and come to terms with this self-understanding is for many a constant struggle, dependent on the ability – and possibility – of stabilizing illusion. For most, giving meaning to their own lives will involve seeing themselves as part of a larger story than their own, involving other people, other stories, in a plot transcending them (Hastrup 2007: 197; also 2004). This, however, is not only a glimpse in the rear-view mirror; it is a way of incorporating the future. Action is not reaction. Human agency is linked to anticipation, to a vision of a plot, or a line of possible future development (Hastrup 2007: 199). This is how society happens. As noted by Hastrup:

> All social fields, ranging in scale from the global community to villages and families, depend on illusion (as suspense of form) to be real … The point is that by investing their own interests and actions in filling out the form, social agents make the community happen. (Hastrup 2007: 198)

This is where objects, or rather aesthetics, enter the picture. The objects referred to in the title of this volume are not of interest primarily as artefacts, as 'accessories', but because, as meaningful objects, they help to give form