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## **The Stuff We Have: Ethnographies, Material Culture, and Art**

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### **Introduction**

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This first week of summer vacation, someone broke into our house. My husband and I came home from a long, hot day to find a brick on the floor in the kitchen – right below the large dent in the new refrigerator. Glass was scattered everywhere and the back door was open. It became clear pretty quickly that whoever did this never actually entered the house; throughout the home nothing was missing or disturbed. With great relief, we proudly honored our 'guard dog' Jack with treats and began to clean up the glass. As we did, I thought about what that person or persons must have thought about us – what did the objects they saw through the window tell them about who we are? I know the thieves didn't think twice about us as people, only that our dog barks very loudly and that we have stuff they wanted. But it was this invasion of space that got me thinking more deeply about the material culture of our lives, things we possess, and the things we display in our homes. To what extent are these objects a reflection of me? To what extent do those objects matter to me? When did I develop deeper ties to my things? And why?

The home itself and the objects we display in our home, are one way we express ourselves. Material things function as a vehicle for all kinds of social interactions and relationships. Theories on material culture identify "stuff" as objects we purchase such as clothing, furniture, personal care products, media, technology, etc. Does the "stuff" (hereafter to be referred to as Stuff) of our material culture give shape to our non-material choices – our ideas, beliefs, values, and norms? My extensive bracelet collection has very little monetary value; it is predominantly a collection of pieces I've made or places I've visited, and therefore each bracelet can potentially lead into a story of my life experiences. What if we turn this theory around – that our ideas, beliefs, values, and norms, are reflected in our Stuff?

My art students are savvy consumers of commercial products. They recognize that there is a message and/or a meaning that certain brand name clothing carries over others, the smart phone that displays 3-D imaging versus the voice activated technology, along with a plethora of other consumable goods. My student are the result of a generation raised on Michael Jordan's branding empire. But what my art students are less likely to recognize, but just as easily able to consume when given the tools to understand, is their ability to manipulate these consumables in a way that can create a specific social, political, or personal message. This unit is also intended to help students navigate the often-difficult path of appropriation and juxtaposition in art.

That students know themselves as consumers in a world of highly influential marketing is an important first

step. In order to turn the conversation about their Stuff around – and create a new narrative, one in which they decide how that object is to be presented to us – they must be well informed in the study of consumer culture. Under the broader theme of art as social commentary, this unit will attempt to explore some of the following key questions: Do artists have a role in reflecting and commenting on the society in which they live? Should artists provoke divergent points of view about political, moral or other social issues? What are the pressing issues that our community/school/ nations/ world are currently confronting? How might an artist depict one of these current issues in order to promote constructive discussion?

## Rationale

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To ask students to consider the contextual relevance of the work they create (or in this case, redefine/appropriate the contextual relevance of the work they create) is often like asking them why they come to school. Why are they doing it? It's a state requirement if you are sixteen or seventeen. But what is the purpose? Why do this? Without a deeper understanding of key concepts at the beginning of any unit, students will inevitably just be 'making art' or copying the design ideas from others. Students wait to be told what to do, they accept what they are told, and are willing to generate an 'answer to the problem' without really exploring or understanding the question. Here is an art project; here are some relatively significant examples/solutions to the problem, now make art. But what is art? This question, at any level of teaching studio art, opens the doors to some great discussions, for about three minutes - enough time for someone to contradict another's opinion and then for everyone to realize they don't really have a solid answer to the question (more on the critique process in the Objectives section of this unit). But there are always more questions. More than just making connections, art students must use critical thinking skills in understanding the information provided and in synthesizing that information into an art piece that conveys a message. Understanding contextual relevance in the art we make and consume helps us see the value in the conversations that art can entice us into and helps us broaden our view of our world and ourselves.

Art consistently challenges our notions of who we are and through which lenses we are viewing the world. In my studio art classes, specific critical thinking skills such as analysis, point of view, conceptualization, and synthesizing are used all the time. To be strong critical thinkers, it is important for my students to be well rounded, inclusive, and reflective in their view of themselves and the world they inhabit. A number of influential factors including age, economic status, and geography, impact how my students perceive themselves as consumers. This more specific consumer survey/evaluation will be expanded on in the last section of this unit: *An Appropriation of Stuff* - developing perspective on the things students have inherited, purchased, and consumed will be discussed as we look at these influential factors.

Over the years I've come to realize how few opportunities my students have to experience, both literally and figuratively, a change in their world. Though it is the goal of this arts educator that they feel safe to experiment with new ideas, processes and techniques. Here they inevitably move through varying perspectives. In short, in my classroom, our failures are embraced.

This past school year I met my Art III students at our Bechtler Modern Art Museum. It turned out to be yet another lesson for me in understanding perspective. The museum opened with much fanfare in 2009, yet in September of 2012, only one of the seventeen students invited had been there before. These are my top art kids! Those same kids went on and on about how they haven't been downtown since they were little. Moving

around the city of Charlotte is one thing; the county of Mecklenburg is another story. Charlotte has been touted as the next disaster (AKA. Atlanta) in urban sprawl. The majority of my students live in the northern suburban area called the university district – if you don't drive your own car, 'you can't get there'. It is a messy combination of large semi-gated communities, rural farms, and trailer parks. The lack of efficient public transportation is an inhibitive factor in the accessibility of much of what our city has to offer to those kids. The social, ethnic, and economic divisions of neighborhoods lead directly to the second factor in their ability to view themselves as more than one kind of consumer.

## Context

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I teach in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public school system, which is the nineteenth largest district in the nation with a population of almost 140,000 students. I teach studio art and art history in a school located in the Northeast learning community, with a population of roughly 2200 students, grade 9-12. My students come from fairly diverse backgrounds with approximately 55% receiving free or reduced lunch.

I have taught all levels of studio art, ceramics, and sculpture on the high school level for over sixteen years. This experience now affords me time to be more reflective with the ideas and concepts I am presenting to my students. I no longer need much practice in classroom management, pacing, or organizational skills (at least at this point I know those details will work themselves out). As a result, I have begun to question more deeply the what, how, and why of the units, lesson, and art projects that I present.

We have no magnet program or other enticements to enroll strong visual art students to our program other than the reputation we have built. As a result, our department allows for this flexible scheduling (which relies heavily on the students to be strong independent learners) in order to build our program. I teach a variety of courses within my schools Visual Arts department and regularly find myself with a schedule that has a mixed level of students in the same class period. For example, in my AP Studio Art class last year, I had six students who were developing a 3-D portfolio, four developing a Drawing portfolio, and five developing a 2-D portfolio. This is the case (though not as much of a heavy mix) in the other upper level studio course(s) for which this unit is intended. Art III Honors, a course designed for students who have achieved an intermediate level of Visual Arts standards. I will be relying on differentiated instructional strategies to teach this unit to these two groups of students.

I teach these upper level courses with an emphasis on personal voice, technical consistency and innovation, and with a rigorous sense of self-reliance and discipline. At this point in their art careers, students have a good foundation of different techniques and materials and are ready to manipulate them based on their own interpretations and beliefs. It is however, a different story when it comes talking about their own work and the work of their peers. In all studio art classes, the critique is the one area where this work is most directly challenged. I use the term directly because in both the literal sense and in the more abstract or theoretical sense, we confront works made by others (and ourselves) as

they are in the process of being created and when they are complete. In this format we are able to discover much about technical matters of materials, composition, and technique.

It is always such a challenge to get student to talk about art. In my long experience as a studio art teacher,

I've never encountered a critique day that did not feel like it went on for weeks. "I like it...they did a nice job" followed by my now standard response "*what* do you like"? Long pauses follow. It is a difficult process to get student to shape their ideas in a way that is reflective of their content knowledge as well as to formulate in words the personal decisions that helped create the work. For this unit there will be a series of guided questions specifically related to consumer culture and social commentary that will be repeated at each stage of the critique process.

## Objectives/ Strategies

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This unit will be divided into three parts; each incorporating differentiated instruction as well as a tiered learning structure (two teaching strategies that I have found very effective when teaching longer units). I will begin teaching this unit with a series of exercises that will get students thinking about their own Stuff as it reflects their identity as a consumer, as well the larger conversation about Stuff as a vehicle for social interaction. The second component - cultural studies, will expand student's perceptions about Stuff in other parts of the world. We will be researching cultural identity as narrated through the Stuff of other cultures. The third and final component to this unit will examine the works of contemporary artists who utilize the techniques of appropriation. In the visual arts, 'appropriate' means "to properly adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspects (or the entire form) of man-made visual culture." <sup>1</sup> It is within this section that students will be expected to synthesize the information from part one and two in order to produce their final artwork. Imbedded within these three parts are a number of creative thinking /warm up exercises, critiques, as well as a final work, all to be used in the assessment of their year-end portfolio.

### A Biography of Stuff

In the preface to Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things*, he guides us through his anthropological approach to view our possessions as an expression of our identity.

The book is a series of chapters, identified as "portraits", in which the author visited a neighborhood in London and interviewed home owner(s) in two ways: through conversation, but more curiously and certainly more visually expressively, through their possessions. What are revealed by these people are their aspirations and frustrations, their losses and accomplishments. In beautiful and vividly descriptive language, Miller focuses on the things that matter to these people, which quite often turns out to be material things. "These are the ways they express who they have become, and the relationships to objects turn out to be central to their relationships with others". <sup>2</sup>

Chapter (portrait) one titled "Empty" introduces us to George, whose flat contains nothing at all beyond the most basic carpet and furniture. " George is not, a self-conscious minimalist, however, but someone whose entire life has been characterized by powerlessness - dependence upon authority, teachers, employers and the state. He has never felt able to take responsibility for anything, let alone the decoration of his own home." <sup>3</sup> There is a real sense of uncertainty for both author and reader. The reader can imagine this empty space (home) so vividly described in the book and the lack of connection George has with the world and, in fact, the world has with George.

This chapter is a short enough read that my students wouldn't complain about their valuable studio time being

taken up by such a conventional teaching technique (imagine the nerve of this art teacher!). Miller's chapter/portrait is filled with eloquent visual references that I hope will inspire my students. The very idea that I am starting a unit on Stuff with a character study/portrait of someone who has no Stuff seems a bit ironic, yet it is precisely what I want my students to begin to consider. What defines us and how is that revealed?

Because this is a visual arts course and we are expected to generate more than just ideas – students will create a 'portrait' of George. Students will be expected to analyze and interpret their own ideas about George and his physical space. They will synthesize that information into a final piece of art. That said, I will encourage students to consider all the possible interpretations of what is the true subject of this 'portrait'? What does the space look like? Is it a tangible thing or a feeling that you are left with as you think about George? Is it a room, an empty box, the "...black creased and ironed trousers, clean knitted jersey, stripped socks to match the slippers" <sup>4</sup> , or is this a Classical style bust of George himself? This unit is designed to be taught to my mixed level, mixed discipline class (Drawing /2-D design /3-D design), the final product could end up being a drawing, painting, or sculpture.

In reference to one of the overarching ideas of this unit-that if our ideas, beliefs, values, and norms, are reflected in our Stuff: classroom discussions may begin with reference to some of the questions I introduced at the beginning of unit. Do artists have a role in reflecting and commenting on the society in which they live? How might an artist depict one of these current issues in order to promote constructive discussion? The answer to some of these rhetorical questions can be found in the work of contemporary artists that I will show students throughout this unit as well as in Miller's portrait of George. These questions can be revisited at each stage of the critique process of the 'George' portrait. As I mentioned earlier, the ongoing assessment of student work happens in our 30%-50%-and 70% critiques. This reflective practice helps students by giving them context, perspective, and an opportunity to practice talking about their ideas and techniques.

Chapter two of Miller's book is called *Full*. Here Miller juxtaposes the Clarke home with George's flat. The Clarkes are as devoted to people as they are to things. In his description of their " traditional English Christmas", Miller speaks to this kind of devotion:

Take for example, those little parcels, wrapped up and suspended by string at the center of each ceiling. Each visitor picks a number from a hat which corresponds to a number on one of the parcels... and this is then theirs to harvest. In this manner, the background decorations enter into the foreground of social interaction, to be consumed along with the food and drink, so that everyone ends the day feeling bloated with consideration and company. <sup>5</sup>

I will provide summary readings each day of some of the other chapters, including chapter two titled *Full*, as students continue work on their portrait of George. This reading activity will be helpful in understand juxtaposition between George, his neighbors, and my students themselves. This will provide a deeper context for the following activity that requires thoughtful selection and reflection of their own possessions as an expression of their identity.

In her book *Evocative Objects*, Sherry Turkle, a sociologist of science and technology, speaks about objects as " narrative, memories, and space are woven into a complex, expanding web – each fragment of which gives meaning to all the others." <sup>6</sup> Similar in format to Miller, Turkle collects a series of essays from artists, scientists, and designers with such titles as "My Cello", "The Yellow Raincoat", "The Bracelet", and "My Laptop." She invites us to look more closely at the "everyday objects of our lives, the familiar objects that drive our routine, hold our affection, and open out our world in unexpected ways" <sup>7</sup> She is a sociologist, not an

anthropologist, and therefore alludes to a different purpose and conclusion to the book. Theories (presented as epigraphs) are paired with the essays in a way to help us reframe what makes an object "evocative". These epigraphs remind us that we need to deconstruct the object in order to help the "abstract to become concrete" <sup>8</sup> Turkle also introduces the idea of 'transitional objects'. These are objects that a child experiences as both a part of the self and of their external reality. My well-loved and worn Snoopy stuffed animal was a catalyst for the development of my self-expression and self-creation (and prepared me to care for and love real dogs!).

Students will be asked to bring in three or four objects of personal significance. The qualifier for this task is that they consider questions about the cultural artifact's physical nature as well as its personal narrative. Is this a visually flat object or does it have some dimensional qualities so it can be viewed and understood from more than one perspective? Does it reflect or absorb light? Where does the object take you? What do you understand? The kind of description composed in this book implies a strong sense of expressive and creative histories. The language is both appropriate and practical for art students as we continually develop vocabulary to help articulate and analyze their own work. "My big bracelet is somewhat crudely made, but the design is unique and bold...The contrast of dark and light enhances the exaggerated dimensionality of the design....my bracelet is a weathered and venerable monument." <sup>9</sup>

Like the George project, students will create a 'portrait' of their cultural artifact. I have developed two strategies to help students deconstruct their object. First they will create a cultural biography of the object - asking the questions one asks of people. Igor Kopytoff writes, "What would make a cultural biography is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective" <sup>10</sup> Students will have to follow such rules as truth (or factual objectivity), value (to the reader), and a form of history (an investigation of an identity. I will encourage students to consider all the possible interpretations of what should be included in this 'portrait' (Is Snoopy in a grassy field chasing butterflies or being chased by Cujo).

In the past, I have asked students to bring their Stuff to class as subject matter for still life drawings, 'personality' portraits, or the like. It has been with a limited perspective on my part as to how to uncover the various narratives associated with their Stuff. As a result - and I would be lying if I said that I don't have some trepidation still within this unit - much of the work that was created read as kitsch and trite.

Early in his career, Clement Greenberg, an influential twentieth century art critic, argued that "Avant-garde art arose as part of a movement of cultural critique... appreciated by only a few in society; and the new art of the masses, or kitsch, is fundamentally both conservative and uncultured. Kitsch is tied to mass production, and is not genuine culture" <sup>11</sup> What was brought to my classroom, in my opinion, was essentially all Kitsch. My choice to revisit Stuff as subject matter for a variety of art projects is very much influenced by the discussions from this seminar and my new understanding of consumer culture as a means of social interactions and social commentary. I plan to work out some of the problems of repetition and simplicity by having students create a list of items that come to mind as soon as I present this activity (before they have a chance to go home and look around). As a class we can then edit duplicate and simple items. Hopefully this will censor the kitsch! I have also listed in the activities section of this unit, warm-up exercises to help create more divergent thinking about Stuff.

## **A Cultural Study of Stuff**

Since ancient times and across the world, art has been created to communicate beliefs and express ideas about the human experience. As cultural documents, art provides insight into different cultures and helps us



understand how others have lived and what they valued. Some of these documents are politically motivated, others religiously or socially inspired. Through these practices and the art that accompanies them (masks, vessels, altarpieces, figurines), people define identity, build a sense of community, negotiate power, and express their beliefs.

In a project called *Material Culture*, photographer Peter Menzel "demonstrates the present context for the emerging global economy, what it means to be "statistically average, by displaying families in more than thirty nations outside their homes - with all their possessions in view" <sup>12</sup> Accompanying each family photo is their response to a questionnaire that asks such questions as: size of home (square footage), number of televisions, most valued possession, and wishes for the future. The pictures presented of each family are a powerful reminder of the depth of our material culture — particularly the impact commodities such as television and radio have on 'family' values, practices, and beliefs. The most common response to the 'most valued possession' and 'wishes for the future' question is the ownership of a television.

Using this book as an introduction to the culture study of stuff, will help student see the real social, political, economic similarities and differences that all cultures share - and where we can begin to gather 'steam' for a work of appropriation that deals with larger issues and the use of social commentary art.

The book *Material Culture* is really just a catalyst to help student make discoveries about contemporary cultures around the world, too deepen this understanding, and possibly provide a broader context for the impact / juxtaposition consumer culture has had on the ideologies of people around the world. Students will begin their research through an art history book collection I have available for them. The goal for this portion of the unit is to introduce students to particular fetishes and idols that, long before the television, represented much of the ideologies and style of a given culture. For example, the ancient African Nkisi, a type of figure sculpture, had long guided the spiritual powers and spirits of the many of the African people. Too powerful to be owned by ordinary individuals or housed in ordinary dwellings, these figures belonged to the whole village and were kept by the spiritualist. Only the spiritualist could control the power of the Nkisi, but the entire community would participate in the rituals centered on them; it was a common to have many different Nkisi within the community.

In another example, the African American tradition of hanging bottles on trees to repel or trap "evil forces has parallels all over Africa, where charms, plates, and bottle-like gourds perform similar functions. They are also used to scare off trespassers. This art is not only used to embody aesthetic values, but also to honor and communicate with the supernatural" <sup>13</sup>

Native American fetishes were hand-carved objects, which represented the spirits of animals or the forces of nature. From the earliest times in North America, the Indians have used fetishes in an effort to master the arbitrary and unpredictable forces beyond their control. They are naturally formed stones that seemed to resemble people or animals, sometimes made more realistic with the features accentuated by a carver. " Fetishes may be used in many ways, either by the individual or by the whole tribe: for good luck in the hunt, initiation into a society, the diagnosis or curing of illness, fertility and propagation purposes, and/or for personal protection." <sup>14</sup>

Contemporary portraits from Peter Menzel's book scarcely show these once indispensable community/household items. How much history is lost in our modern consumer world? What stylistic trends have remained intact, if any? How does our new globalized consumer world change our values and beliefs of the past? This section of the unit gives students time to investigate these questions about the histories of

objects from people of a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Students will choose one region of the world and investigate the Stuff as both anthropologist and ethnographer. As ethnographers, students will be asked to express their own conclusion about the cultural constructs of that region based on the Stuff.

Why were these objects selected as having value in that culture? What does the material, subject, style and function reveal about that culture/people. Placing the object in the 'private' lives of the individuals who once held them, students will create a biography of the object of study – much like the biography of their own object. They will then create a work of art that demonstrates their understanding of the history of the region, juxtaposed with an object.

This section of the unit addresses North Carolina's new common core curriculum developed for Visual Arts in which I specifically focus on one of the six essential standards: applying creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression. This can be demonstrated through how students: implement their plan to arrive at original solutions to artistic problems; recognize how personal experience influences the perception of the environment; and understand the relationship of creative expression to the development of personal style. The activities and assessments within this unit will be guided by these specific objectives.

### **An Appropriation of Stuff**

If the thieves that attempted to break into our home this summer took my Stuff (my bracelets) and gave it a new function, recontextualised in the art marketplace, would I excuse them because they did it for Art's sake? Or would I do what photographer Patrick Cariou did in March 2011 to the artist Richard Prince and sue in a court of law? Prince's recent work appropriated images from Cariou's, *Yes Rasta* photography book published in 2000.

Appropriation is the practice of creating new work by taking a preexisting image(s) from another source art history books, advertisements, the media and transforming or combining it with new ones. Artists like Prince are creating works that intend to communicate to the viewer, an examination of the meaning of the original in a different context. Other appropriation artists like Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger utilize media imagery to interpret consumer society. These ideas can be traced through time from Andy Warhol to Marcel Duchamp.

Cariou's lawsuit cites Prince's work where he "re-used photographs that had been mass-produced in the form of a book, in order to make his collage-like paintings...The "Canal Zone" ... Prince took more than 40 of Cariou's images, scanned them, blew them up, affixed them to enormous canvases, collaged and squeegeed them together with other elements, oil stick and paint, producing one-of-a-kind objects. These large-scale collaged paintings reference their sources by re-instituting them as singular objects." <sup>15</sup> Where do we draw the line between recycling and stealing?

The point of originality and authorship are central to this timely debate and it is with this point that we will be looking at some of the appropriation artists listed and consider some of the following questions: What elements of the work are appropriated? What is the source of the appropriated image? What techniques were used to create the work? What is being expressed? (Support your ideas through specific visual references within the work). How does the source of the appropriated image help create the meaning of this work?

There is difficulty with this topic on a number of levels; in particular, high school students do not always have the depth and breadth of historical knowledge that many of these artists are referencing. Guided questions



along with supporting images will steer the conversation to a broad understanding of the source along with the appropriated image. (I share a lot of art history images with the World and European history teachers - together we have created some very effective slide shows for students in both classes).

Continuing on the topic of originality and authorship, we will review the themes in Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*. This famous essay by the French literary critic argues that we should not look at the creator of the work when attempting to interpret meaning inherent within. "The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who created it... (but) it is language which speaks; not the author." <sup>16</sup> With appropriated works, students are less likely to consider the role of the author or artist in constructing interpretations and opinions of the work if they are aware of the work from which it was appropriated. Questions are more likely to concern the validity of the work in a more current context, and the issues raised by the re-contextualizing of the original. Barthes finishes his essay by affirming, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." <sup>17</sup>, this suggests that we can and should only interpret a work on it's own terms and merit, not that of the person who created it. An interesting conversation for art students to say the least!

The framework for this culminating activity is appropriation in art. Included the 'borrowing' can be another style, composition, idea, process. At this point, students should be able to synthesize the information from their different biographies of stuff and

create a work that exemplifies their understanding of appropriation in contemporary art and how this reflects the postmodern climate of deconstruction and reconstruction of the world we live in today. This activity will essentially require that students deconstruct the Stuff in their world in order to create works of art that challenge a larger social issue.

Activity number three listed below is how I will begin this culminating assignment.

I have provided here three artists names along with a brief description of their work. These are artists that I will use for this portion of the unit to help guide students through their own analysis of their Stuff, and how they can begin to consider their own reasons and possible techniques for appropriation.

Artist Brian Jungen says that one of the best ways to get people to look at artwork is to create it out of materials that they recognize, he uses everything from basketball sneakers to plastic chairs and baseball gloves. Jungen conducted informal surveys on the street asking people to sketch their ideas about native art and culture, he calls them "reverse ethnographic study," <sup>18</sup> He then "exploited" these ideas by turning them into satirical drawings and wall paintings "a way of kind of reclaiming the term 'Indian.' On a 1998 visit to New York City, Jungen saw some red, white and black Nike Air Jordan basketball shoes in a store window. They were the traditional colors of the Haida, an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast. Meticulously restitching the shoes into ceremonial masks, he fashioned shoe tongues into curled ears, reinforced toes into chins and Nike swooshes into eyes. His interest in the way professional sports fill the need for ceremony within the larger culture of society is a great visual study of juxtaposition and appropriation in art. In doing so, say the critics, he bridges the gap between indigenous and mass cultures.

Renee Stout is a contemporary artist who began to explore the roots of her African American heritage as she looked at belief systems of African peoples as well as her immediate environment to create works that encourage selfhealing and empowerment. Many of her assemblages appropriate the fetishes of Africa culture and spiritual history of self.

elf-empowerment and self-healing.

Kehinde Wiley's portraits of African American men of modern culture with the influence of Old Masters. Incorporating a range of everyday recognizable art-historical references, Wiley's work melds a fluid concept of modern culture, ranging from French Rococo to today's urban landscape. By collapsing history and style into a unique contemporary vision, Wiley interrogates the notion of master painter, "making it at once critical and complicit." Vividly colorful and often adorned with ornate gilded frames, Wiley's large-scale figurative paintings, which are illuminated with a barrage of baroque or rococo decorative patterns, posit young black men, fashioned in urban attire, within the field of power reminiscent of Renaissance artists such as Tiepolo and Titian.

## Activities

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The following activities are warm-ups intended to take anywhere from ten to twenty minutes and are created to encourage creative thinking. As I stated earlier, one of the biggest obstacles I foresee in teaching this unit will be to encourage creative thinking about Stuff, to avoid the kitsch and trite work. The activities introduce some of the creative thinking tools used by Nicholas Roukes, in his *Design Synectics* and *Art Synectics* books. The tools introduce ways to think about, respond to, and create works of art that have more personal meaning and content. Again, thinking about the overarching questions this unit is built on: does the Stuff of our material culture give shape our non-material choices – our ideas, beliefs, values, and norms or is it that our ideas, beliefs, values, and norms, are reflected in our Stuff? Here, students will begin to understand how to look at and manipulate these consumables (Stuff) in a way that can create a specific social, political, or personal message.

Objectives for each of these exercises will be introduced immediately following the initial activity. The practice with objective writing (copying of), is an opportunity for me to be reflective in my teaching practice. Each student copies the objectives in his or her sketchbook before any discussion begins, and they are given time to write down or highlight anything in the objectives that they don't understand. This 'privacy' allows them to consider language, context, and expected outcomes. I can reflect on this as I monitor the class during this time or when I am doing sketchbook reviews.

Objectives: 1. Visual Literacy -Identify the art and design elements of a given object. 2. Critical Response-Construct creative and convincing arguments to defend the analysis of art (Stuff) 3. Visual Literacy/Contextual Relevancy - Identify the specific tools for creative thinking that are applied to the activity and be able to apply those tools to personal work.

### 1. 20 Questions. (...or so )

As students enter the room there is an image projected of a light bulb. (any ordinary object will do). In groups (four or five students), they need to answer the following questions about the object they see. 1. What is it? 2. What is the function of this object? 3. What is the origin of the object? 4. List seven things/associations you have with this object. 5. Describe its texture. 6. How is the color of the object relative to the object itself? Why? 7. How is this object beautiful? 8. What other function could this object have? 9. Re-name this object. 10. Invert the object and give it a new function. 11. What is opposite of this object? 12. Create a list of seven words that how the object makes you feel. 13. How was this object produced? 14. If you were to reproduce this object, what changes would you make? 15. Etc.

Students will be given between fifteen to twenty minutes to complete these questions. Students will then be asked to copy the objectives and as a class we will address our conversation around the objectives before we share responses to assignment. Classes will then share/discuss their responses to the twenty questions. The art studio follow-up assignment will be to appropriate the light bulb into a work that reflects one or more of the responses from either their own group or from the class.

## **2. The Missing Link.**

As student walk in the classroom there are five random objects (Stuff) on their table. In smaller groups (two or three students), they are asked to brainstorm and make a connection to each of the objects- to create the missing link(s). It would be most helpful to do this activity as a follow-up to the 20 Questions activity so students will have had guided experience in attempting to reconfigure an object and in part, begin to create new narratives for them. The objects will be reviewed and we will focus on some of the key terms Roukes has identified in his *Art Synectics* book: Repeat, Combine, Substitute, Subtract, Analogize, Isolate, Transfer, Superimpose, etc.

The art studio follow-up assignment will be to create a work that reflects the 'missing link' as two or more of the objects become the main subject for the piece.

## **3. Market Manifesto -A declaration of product as social commentary.**

As students enter the room they find a number of packaged products for them to select (cereal boxes, candy wrappings, detergent containers, soda bottles-any common, name brand will do). This plan may work better if students are asked to bring in an empty package from a product they are familiar with, have a brand loyalty to, and use regularly at home. Working independently they are asked to write a manifesto claiming how that particular product of our consumer culture, defines our cultural ideals. Given the nature of manifestos, and having already become aware of art movement manifestos such as the Futurists and the Dadaists, students will be free to follow any number of writing styles and formats as long as they follow the intent of a manifesto as: "A manifesto is a written public declaration of the intentions, motives, or views of the issuer, be it an individual, group, political party or government. It often is political in nature, but may present an individual's life stance. Manifestos relating to religious belief are generally referred to as creeds." <sup>19</sup> We will take time here to consider the consumer survey mentioned early in this unit. There are a number of 'consumer surveys' online that may at first glance seem fairly superficial, but I think they will be a great way to start the conversation about the individual tendencies we all have when it comes to buying Stuff. These surveys ask questions on how we purchase items, where we purchase them, and when we purchase items. Another great resource for this is the business or DECA program in my school; much of their curriculum is focused on understanding consumer trends and marketing.

Essentially a creative writing assignment, it is recommended to tier these warm-ups in this order. The other exercises provide guided questions and group sharing whereas this requires independent thinking and personal perspectives and/or histories with the product. The art studio follow-up assignment will be to create a work that reflects the 'Manifesto'. This, like all of the follow-up assignments can be applied to a Drawing, 2-D Design, or 3-D portfolio students.

## Endnotes

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1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriation\\_\(art\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appropriation_(art))
2. <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0745644031.html>
3. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-comfort-of-things-by-daniel-miller-854750.html>
4. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 12
5. Ibid, 23
6. Sherry Turkle, *Evocation Objects*, 316
7. <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=11121>
8. Sherry Turkle, *Evocation Objects*, 307
9. Ibid, 113
10. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 68
11. <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>
12. [http://books.google.com/books/about/Material\\_World.html?id=NGQ7Ng2MDLIC](http://books.google.com/books/about/Material_World.html?id=NGQ7Ng2MDLIC)
13. Arnett, Paul and William Arnett. *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South Vol. 2*. Tinwood Books: Atlanta, GA., 2000
14. <http://www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa025.shtml>
15. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/garnett/cariou-v-prince-the-copyright-bungle-3-31-11.asp>
16. [http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf)
17. Ibid
18. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/ATM-Back-to-Basics.html>
19. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesto#Artistic>

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David, Bayles, and Orlando Ted. *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. 3 ed. Santa Barbra: Capra Press, 1993.

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Klamer, Arjo. *The value of culture: on the relationship between economics and arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996.

LaFeber, Walter. *Michael Jordan and the new global capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999. This book, albeit slightly dated, gives a great perspective about the vast holding celebrities/athletes have in the marketplace. He writes about a battle of capital versus culture; siding with culture, he identifies two markets - economy and society. Essentially this was most helpful in helping me think about the vast influence and power both markets have on us all.

Low, Setha M.. *Behind the gates: life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America*. New York: Routledge, 2003. The extreme lives of suburbanites. This is a great extended personal reading about consumer culture and is only suggested as so. It would make for great conversation with students and I plan on using it in some form later in the year followed -up with The Dome)

McQuilten, Grace. *Art in consumer culture: mis-design*. Farnham, Surrey UK, England: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2011.

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The North Carolina Essential Standards will be used for teaching and assessment beginning in the 2012-2013 academic year, with the exception of the information skills standards, which will be taught in the 2011-2012 academic year.

Advanced Visual Arts

Visual Literacy

A.V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.

A.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to explain compositional choices.

**A.V.1.2** Create art based on personal expression and applied design.

**A.V.1.3** Create art that responds to contemporary themes in art.

**A.V.1.4** Analyze the compositional components of art.

A.V.2 Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.

A.V.2.1 Create original art in response to artistic problems.

**A.V.2.2** Create art using experiences and observation to represent individual perspectives.

**A.V.2.3** Generate art based on a creative exploration of a concept.

A.V.3 Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.

A.V.3.1 Produce art by using a variety of tools and media appropriately, safely, and effectively.

**A.V.3.2** Produce art by using a variety of processes appropriately, safely, and effectively.

Contextual Relevancy

A.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

A.CX.1.1 Interpret visual arts from personal, cultural, and historical contexts.

**A.CX.1.2** Implement a personal philosophy of art.

**A.CX.1.3** Apply personal artistic style while creating art.

**A.CX.1.4** Apply a personal aesthetic to the creation of art.

**A.CX.1.5** Apply environmental responsibility to the creation of art.

A.CX.2 Understand the interdisciplinary connections and life applications of the visual arts.

A.CX.2.1 Design a portfolio to reflect personal choices and growth over time as an artist.

**A.CX.2.2** Create art using skills and knowledge learned in other disciplines.

**A.CX.2.3** Understand the collaborative relationship between the artist and the community.

**A.CX.2.4** Analyze the influence of digital media and technology on creating art.

Critical Response

A.CR.1 Use critical analysis to generate responses to a variety of prompts.

A.CR.1.1 Construct convincing and logical arguments, individually and collaboratively, to defend analyses of art.

**A.CR.1.2** Critique personal portfolios using personal and teacher-generated criteria.

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nces2010-visualarts/7167>



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<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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