

## Material culture and the problem of agency

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In the months between his grim diagnosis and his death, Alfred Gell sat down to write the book that would seal his intellectual legacy. By this time, 1996, Gell was 51 years old and widely respected for his path-breaking studies of art, ritual, and symbols in Melanesian societies. His final book, published posthumously, became the repository of his remaining thoughts, of long-simmering ideas thrust to the front burner and brought to the boil in 258 pages. Gell's previous work asked bold questions about art and human relations, and he broke a few windows in the house of established anthropological theory. This last book set the roof on fire. Its incendiary sits squarely in the title: *Art and Agency*, signaling a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between two elements absolutely central to human culture.

Partly because he wrote the book so quickly and partly because his thinking was always unconventional, Gell's core thesis in *Art and Agency* is difficult to distill. Readers with a passing knowledge of the argument will probably associate with it a line such as "Objects have agency" or "Artworks *do* things." These lines are not untrue, and they are also not complete. Gell devotes extraordinary care to explaining *how* objects act, what things artworks can do, and why this sort of acting and doing differs from human agency. His was not a sci-fi vision of statues stepping off the pedestal and wreaking havoc while we sleep. Rather, in Gell's theory object agency is purposive and structured. Objects created by human hands are an extension of the human actor's intentions. They are not the passive helpmeet of a master artist, but nor do they have free rein. Two concepts were especially important to Gell as he built his theory of object agency. The first is efficaciousness. Artworks have *efficacious agency*. They are made with an effect or outcome in mind. The second is

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abduction. Drawing from Peircian semiotics, Gell argues that “art-like” objects are indexes or natural signs from which we can infer intentions or capacities on the part of another person (Gell 1998, pp. 14–15). Abduction is the cognitive process by which we infer intention, and it is how we concoct explanations of art-like things. Gell doesn’t have much time for meaning-making, asserting “meaning” to be the purview of spoken language and rejecting the elision of paintings and books as equally textual (Gell 1998, p. 6).

What does any of this have to do with sociology? The study of materiality within this field, by which I mean the systematic investigation of how people and non-human, physical matter jointly create culture, is a sustained debate about intention and reception. Gell is one of the intellectual ancestors presiding over this debate. I suspect that for many sociologists, his contribution remains largely invisible. Most of us are more familiar with Haraway, Latour, Callon, and Tarde, each of whom has added to our understanding of how humans and things interact to generate knowledge and action, and hence “the social.” One way Gell differed from these scholars was his explicit commitment to anthropological theory. As he put it, where sociologists are concerned primarily with institutions and are supra-biographical in their approach to human social agents, anthropologists provide a depth of focus that is biographical, or hewing closely to the time perspective and context of life of human participants (Gell 1998, p. 10). Another way he differed was in privileging art, or art-like objects, above other kinds of objects, as having human properties. Gell’s humanism has direct bearing on current developments in the study of materiality within sociology of culture.

The three books under review here are in some sense all a product of the Gellian legacy. In the edited volume *Distributed Objects*, Liana Chua and Mark Elliott and their collaborators try to make sense of Gell’s key ideas and their explanatory powers for the study of material culture and society. In *Patina: A profane archaeology*, Shannon Lee Dawdy focuses on the city of New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina and argues that curated material decay, the “Katrina patina,” helps situate Nola residents in a dialectical relationship among time, place, and personhood. Finally, Terence McDonnell’s *Best Laid Plans: Cultural entropy and the unraveling of AIDS media campaigns* examines the problem of cultural entropy, or the immanent physical and social forces that disperse an object’s communicative energy and thus disrupt the messages it was intended to convey. While the first book is essential reading for new and continuing scholars of Gell, the second and third demonstrate contrasting explanatory advantages for choosing more humanist or more naturalist frameworks. That both McDonnell and Dawdy can cite Gell positively and yet move in distinct conceptual directions tells you everything you need to know about Gell’s own ontological ambivalence about humans and things.

Chua and Elliott’s book consists of an introduction and nine chapters. The introduction offers a comprehensive overview of Gell’s ideas and legacy, and is essential reading for anyone new to Gell. Eight chapters are by scholars from anthropology, history, sociology, archaeology, and music studies, and the ninth is a reprint of Gell’s 1985 essay “The Network of Standard Stoppages,” on Marcel Duchamp’s works and creative process. I will focus on just two chapters here,



because they represent the best of what this mode of intellectual meditation and revision can yield.

Chris Gosden, archaeologist and specialist in Romano-British sites and artifacts, takes on Gell's arguments about style. For Gell, it was clear that there is a link between style and culture. His work held out the possibility that close analysis of form and decoration could lead to broader understandings of social structure and meaning. Gosden's particular interest is the application of Gell's stylistic theory to historical cases. He (Gell) explores individual links among artist–work–viewer. Where he forges new ground is in arguing for the plurality of linkages: “Artworks are never just singular entities, they are members of categories of art works, and their significance is crucially affected by the relations that exist between them.” In other words, Gosden explains, this is a way of thinking about objects *en masse* (vs. a single artwork, a relatively rare occurrence in human–object relations). We may encounter art-as-art crossing campus or in a museum, but for every memorial sculpture or painted canvas we encounter hundreds of mundane things—pens, coins, coffee cups, bus passes and key chains, fire hydrants and post boxes—the list is endless. Theorizing “thingly mass” is what we need to do better, and Gell helps us get there.

Gell insisted that there is no single, fixed relationship with art objects but rather different moments in a relationship. Not all moments are profound, even if “objects of wonder” still have the power to dazzle us. It is in these routinized forms of artifacts and human actions, Gosden writes, that we can see the emergence of profound social change. Focusing on the case of decorated metals and jewelry in Bronze Age, early Iron Age, and early Roman assemblages in Britain, Gosden finds a change in emphasis from quantity to quality and back to quantity. That is, elites went from being interested in mass (the more torques the better, regardless of style and décor) to quality (fewer good pieces prevailed over heaps of inferior ones) and back to mass. In an earlier era, archaeologists might have explained this change in economic terms, linking quality/quantity to matters of resource access, or in cultural terms, for example the availability or absence of highly trained metalsmiths. Gosden foregoes instrumental explanations, preferring to think with Gell about matters of style. “The links between the formal qualities of objects and the intelligibility of the world,” Gosden writes, “are key to archaeological considerations of material culture” [Gosden (in Chua and Elliott 2013), p. 55].

Where Gosden uses Gell to key into mass and mundanity, Georgina Born's interest is manifold. Her chapter, “Music: Ontology, agency, creativity,” examines three distinctive musical ontologies from the 19th century to the present, and in so doing engages with the essential properties of objects and the socio-cultural matrices that generate them. In Born's telling, Gell's “ambivalent humanism” may be related to his Durkheimian influences. Sharing conceptual space with Latour's Actor-Network Theory, Marilyn Strathern's work on gendered objects, and Nicholas Thomas's theories of human and non-human connections, Gell sometimes overlooks the thing itself in favor of the thing's surrounding network. For this reason, while Gell's enduring impact is often identified with object agency, Born makes the case for his work on relational ontologies being an equally important, if not surpassingly critical, contribution. It is in his theory of style—in his words, “relations between relations”—that we see the ontologies played out. What he



misses, however, according to Born, is music, a cultural “object” with its own ontological concerns.

Born criticizes Gell’s approach to artistic oeuvres and his inclination to depict social groups as holistic and homogeneous, on grounds that he re-inscribes conceptual dualisms between subjects and objects, and between West and non-West [Born (Chua and Elliott 2013), p. 137]. What she advocates instead is an account of social mediation that fully recognizes the particular cultural practices, or the “social world of cultural production,” that inform the object’s place and significance. Her account is built on four orders of social mediation, which together illuminate the capacity of music to animate imaginary collectivities, to refract a broader landscape of social relations that exist outside of music, and to identify the wider social and institutional conditions that allow a particular form of music to exist in the first place. The accusation of Durkheimian duality is debatable. More straightforward, to my mind, is the achievement of Born’s development of mediation theory and the distributed nature of music. Taking a page from Gell, she explains that music is socially distributed, an aspect that is missed if the analyst focuses only on performance and reception (the privileged locus of observation for many scholars of music). Thinking about music as a distributed object opens a lens onto the social interrelations that create and signify it. For cultural sociologists, it is a new way of thinking about the nexus of material *being* and material *meaning*.

It is in the space between ontology and mediation that McDonnell identifies the thorny problem of disruptive cultural objects. McDonnell takes as his empirical case HIV/AIDS prevention media in Ghana and the work undertaken by health professionals to counteract the stigma of diagnosis and treatment. Of all African countries devastated by the infection, Ghana has fared better than many of its neighbors: a prevalence rate of 1.47% in 2014, with an estimated 250,000 women and men living with the disease at that time. (By comparison, adult HIV prevalence exceeds 20% in Swaziland, Botswana, and Lesotho, according to data from UNAIDS). In Ghana, nevertheless, the disease destroys lives and leaves behind orphans as ruthlessly as it does anywhere else. It also stigmatizes individuals, their bodies, and entire neighborhoods. “There is too much stigma and gossip in this area, so as soon as any man is counseled and his positive status declared to him he goes home to commit suicide by hanging or drink rat medicine. They kill themselves, because they could not stand the discrimination. Last year over 70 men committed suicide after being declared HIV positive” (McDonnell 2016, p. 52). This sad dispatch is an excerpt from a letter written by an HIV-positive woman in the Ghanaian town of Bolga. It suggests that for infected Ghanaians the diagnosis portends two deaths: the decline and eventual shutting down of the body itself, and the social death of the person’s identity. To address the physical and social health of its citizens, Ghanaian health officials and international NGOs pour money into prevention measures. Public awareness, they believe, is the key to lowering infection rates and disseminating accurate information about what the HIV/AIDS viral strains are and how they can be managed. Focus groups on messaging and images are carefully organized, and print materials and handouts are professionally produced. For all its fine-tuning by human hands, however, it is imperfect. Messages don’t always “take.” They become garbled. Their point is lost. Ink fades, signs are



torn, and sample condoms are repurposed. These are disruptions in communication, and by studying them closely, argues McDonnell, we can learn something not only about public health campaigns but also about the nature of cultural objects and material instability.

McDonnell, who spent 2 years observing and interviewing HIV/AIDS campaigners, health professionals, policymakers, patients, and ordinary men and women in Ghana, notes that the concept of communications breakdown is nothing new. Communications scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks for studying audience-based explanations of interpretation and message effectiveness. Largely driven by semiotic approaches to text and meaning, audience-based explanations miss something important: “the dynamic nature of *culture itself*” (McDonnell 2016, p. 28). Media messages change over time—they are always locally and temporally informed—and they change because the material vehicles of their dissemination won’t sit still. Disruptions in meaning, he argues, are multiple and diverse. “Some disruptions are structural, as when gender dynamics lead women to feel they cannot suggest condom use to their partners. Other disruptions are symbolic, as when condoms signify distrust. Others are material, as when a sexual partner feels latex inhibits sensation or when women stretch the rings into bracelets” (p. 25). The multiplicity of disruption helps explain the transformation of a female condom from health clinic handout to jelly bracelet sold in the market, one of the principal illustrations of McDonnell’s powerful study of communications and materiality.

The story of the jelly bracelet is told through a young woman’s visit to a clinic in Accra. Clinic staff noted a sharp increase in the number of female condoms requested by patients. One day, a young girl visited the clinic and asked a nurse, “Grace,” for a boxful. Grace was alarmed by the girl’s age, and pressed her for an explanation. “They are not for me, but for my sister,” the girl confessed. Her sister turned the condoms into bracelets by boiling, dyeing, and reshaping them. The bracelets were trendy and it was a good business. Grace and her colleagues saw things differently: the repurposing of the condoms was a perversion of their health education work, and a failure of their message about the importance of protected sex. The story nicely illustrates McDonnell’s conceptualization of cultural objects as inhabiting a space of human social relations, with all of the shifting directions and values therein. Like Gell, McDonnell urges a move away from semiotics by drawing our attention to the linkages among people, object, and setting. This basic triad is familiar from art historical and anthropological studies. McDonnell’s intervention is to show that each node has two dimensions, material and symbolic. The object itself, for example, draws significance from its symbolic *and* physical properties. Setting comprises both place and physical space, and people—the makers, recipients, and interpreters of objects—do their part physically as well as cognitively. A condom becomes a jelly bracelet not because its intended function is unclear, but because the social setting of a given object always upends *stability*, diverse audience members’ consensus about an object’s meaning and use (McDonnell 2016, p. 23).

The concept of stability is closely linked with the major concept of McDonnell’s book: entropy, “the process through which the intended meanings and uses of a cultural object fracture into alternative meanings, new practices, failed interactions, and blatant disregard” (McDonnell 2016, p. 29). The actors in McDonnell’s study



recognize this issue, even if “entropy” is not how they think about it, and they don’t expect their campaign materials to do all of the talking. Audiences must be persuaded to pay attention and, at times, they need to have the message restated and validated by respected community members. *Cultural ombudsmen* are local experts and community leaders who “mediate between the needs of the organization and the public interest, especially regarding tradition and local cultural knowledge and practice” (p. 107). Their “insider status and veto power” make cultural ombudsmen especially important stakeholders because they can give health officials access to communities that might otherwise ignore the media overtures. Even here, however, the conjunction of material and symbolic destabilizes communications experts’ best-laid plans. Every new arrangement of people, things, and setting brings new meanings and practices that derail the intended outcomes. Cultural entropy, McDonnell writes, “happens at every turn” (p. 119).

It was this phrase—*happens at every turn*—that had me reaching for *inherent vice*, art conservators’ phrase for the ticking time bomb of pigments, canvas, wood, and so forth that naturally erode an artwork. Inherent vice is just as it says: breakdown is inevitable, and it comes from within the object. McDonnell’s cultural entropy shares the idea of material agency with inherent vice. Whereas inherent vice is unavoidable, cultural entropy, however, can be resisted or avoided altogether. He chooses the language of physics to explain his concept: “The physical sciences define entropy as the dissipation of energy. As I see it, cultural entropy is also about the dissipation of ‘energy,’” but in the Durkheimian sense of ritual objects and charged emotions (p. 30). For Durkheim, and later for Randall Collins (whom McDonnell cites), emotional energy was the outcome of a ritual in which people who are physically present turn their attention to the same symbols, objects, or people—thus constituting a bounded group. The ritual amplifies a group’s collective emotion, and a successful ritual generates motivating, or positive, emotion. As with Collins, McDonnell recognizes the precarious position of objects in constituting collective meanings. In interactive ritual chains the object is “charged” with energy through the ritual but this does not ensure stable, coherent ideologies. McDonnell’s point of departure from Collins, however, is the argument that energy is directed not only from social groups toward objects, but also through and back from objects. At this point, it may be helpful to draw another connection between Gell and McDonnell. Just as *Art and Agency*’s pithy reduction into “Objects have agency” is too simplistic, so the favored gloss on *Best Laid Plans*—“Objects break down”—misses the nuanced insights of McDonnell’s argument. Objects break down, yes, but in a non-linear fashion. Breaking down, moreover, is not the only thing they do. Objects “break into” new meanings, the key word here, occurring on page 29 and cited above, being *fracture*. Intended meanings and uses fracture into pieces, shards of a common symbolic process whose continuous sub-division eventually resonates but distantly with the original object.

There is tremendous intellectual value in McDonnell’s conceptual framework. Cultural entropy makes space for a range of responses to cultural objects, beyond the bleak dead-end of erosion. His careful study of the process through which AIDS campaign posters are designed reveals the close interlock of human intentions and their physical objects, an interlock that is never fully rent. What we don’t get with



McDonnell's theory of cultural entropy, however, is a clear understanding of the actual processes through which it occurs. Entropy "happens," but in this account its origin, direction, and outcomes are diffuse. On page 29, we hear about "some ways objects resist entropy and some conditions that make objects more or less open to entropy." On pages 74 and 75, campaign designers' best-practice documents "confront" cultural entropy, and the convergence of research practices and community buy-in "leads to" cultural entropy. By page 192, "All of this entropy adds up," suggestive of a partible dimension to what was earlier described as a wholistic system. Entropy is sometimes presented as an object-level natural process, inherent to the material composition of the thing itself (its plasticity, its friability, and so forth). Elsewhere, it operates both on/in the object and within the "cultural system" of meaning, hinting at a social process: "Individual cultural objects may stabilize and 'lose' or resist entropy, but overall the system only gains entropy" (p. 30).

The basic problem with this approach is that when entropy is object or system, nature or social, and divisible or whole, the contributions of human thought, imagination, and activity are subsumed by a haze of entropic force. Importing the word "entropy" and its definition from physics is a categorical commitment on McDonnell's part. It prioritizes natural processes over social ones. As a heuristic move, it corrects sociology's long neglect of the active role played by objects in social life. For my money, however, the appropriation of physics terminology over-corrects and ends up surpassing even Durkheim's structural mannerism by delimiting human creativity to conditioned responses to energy dissipation.

I stated above that McDonnell's and Dawdy's books situate us at a crossroads, the first pointing in the direction of natural processes, the other firmly humanist. I want to turn now to Dawdy's work and show how materiality studies in cultural sociology can be strengthened by this humanist approach.

New Orleans, America's "antique city," is one of the oldest European settlements in the New World. Nola residents maintain deep relationships with old houses and old things as a way of making sense of socio-historical complexity. In *Patina*, Dawdy, an anthropologist and leading scholar in the archaeology of the contemporary, concentrates on assemblages of artifacts to explore the significance of material objects in rebuilding lives post-Katrina. Hurricane Katrina, which struck in autumn 2005, was at that point the strongest storm ever recorded in Louisiana's Gulf Coast. Such was its traumatic impact that New Orleans residents still divide their time horizon into "pre-K" and "post-K" chapters. What Dawdy wants to know is how the city has been remade through nostalgic practices and material things. The particular conjunction of practices and things is *patina*, the look of age, and in post-storm New Orleans it is specifically embodied in the phrase "Katrina patina." For Dawdy, patina is "not only a political aesthetic but a political *force* flowing through alternative circuits of value that are both moral and material" (Dawdy 2016, p. 7).

In addition to developing the central concept, patina, Dawdy generates new and productive ideas about fetish, aura, critical nostalgia, social stratigraphy, and chronotopia, active and sensuous "bubbles of time" with overlapping aesthetic experiences of uncertain vintage (Dawdy 2016, p. 110). She builds these ideas on a rich and deep empirical base, weaving together insights and experiences from



business owners, public officials, shop employees, and ordinary residents with their memories and things. Things, here, constitute a vast collection of old clocks, glass bottles, Victorian wardrobes, children's toys, Mardi Gras beads, and cheap parade "throws" (pp. 119–121). These are the stuff of "profane archaeology," a concept developed by Dawdy in conversation with Walter Benjamin's "profane illumination." Profane archaeology is an analytical approach that takes into account the shifting meaning of everyday objects and the ways in which they alter the present by activating the past (8–10). The profanity of Dawdy's concept lies both in its audacious attention to dirty, mundane, used, and monetarily worthless things, and in its refusal to conform to traditional methods of archaeological research. Her stratigraphy comprises nostalgic practice, memories, buildings, and artifacts, a humanist orientation that introduces a powerful set of concepts for any social scientist curious about how material things shape social structures and relationships (p. 40).

Haunted houses demonstrate the social forces and predispositions that influence people's interpretation of common experiences in a specific, intimate way. As revealed by Dawdy's conversations with local residents, New Orleanians have a special relationship to the paranormal. They report sensing presences that cannot be explained, and accept that in a city steeped in death and loss some old souls are bound to stay put. One informant, the proprietor of a bed and breakfast, recounted ghost sightings by his guests:

[They] report it here or generally in this room [the dining room]. At the foot of the steps over here [pointing]. People are convinced, yeah. Or heard, it's more hearing. At the foot of the steps, a number of people have reported being tapped on the shoulder. (Dawdy 2016, p. 74)

The proprietor is discomfited. He's usually chatty, so Dawdy recognizes the change in tone for what it is: the reluctant admission of overlapping temporalities. All old houses creak and sag; foundations suffer, floorboards groan, and pipes shudder and wheeze. New Orleans's old houses are no different that way. Because their occupants live in a "haunted house society" (Chapter 3), so their own shuddering pipes and creaky steps become forgotten old men and long-dead orphans. The material facticity of old buildings provides a bridge between new and old memories and the past, the living and the dead. People do not exactly rush toward the ghosts. Dawdy's informants are wary of them. But they accommodate them, and as Dawdy argues, the ghoulish element informs Katrina patina with a particular kind of antique.

The antique, Dawdy reminds us, is a conglomerated object or a composite of materials, periods, and interpretations. It is not one thing, static through time and definitively propounded. Our preferred version of the antique, rather, changes according to prevailing contemporary ideas about the past. Patina, as a specific manifestation of the antique, connects material, temporal, and aesthetic dimensions. For materiality scholars, Dawdy's concept of patina is vital for expanding our analytical framework of how material agency intersects with time. Material agency is unavoidable, because wood will swell and rot if the floodwaters overcome your granny's chest of drawers. It is also not wholly tamable. We can "arrest" decay, but



eventually nature has its way. Social life is then a series of subtle adjustments to material things, which both shape and reflect back to us our ideas about our relationship to imagined times and places, past and future. This sounds a lot like McDonnell's discussion of cultural entropy. But where McDonnell's subjects are engaged in a localized contest with entropy, Dawdy's are more ruminative in learning to live with the hoary age of a creaky house or granny's dresser. The long horizon of time, stretching back and forward, humbles Nola residents to their limited powers to arrest decay. Some of them grow frustrated and weary of the rot, the mold, and the loss; as with the Ghanaian HIV/AIDS campaigners, they despair over the instability of their things. It's not always romantic. Dawdy's decision to look deep into her subjects' relationships with things uncovers a dialectical process in which what it means to be human is revealed through the long, slow, and at times tense back-and-forth with things.

Do objects act alone, and do they act on us or do we act on them? Sort of; yes; and yes. The authors reviewed here take us deep into the nooks and crannies of things, people, and relationships to show us how. Returning to Gell as I began with him, he asks us, in *Art and Agency*, to understand humans as uniquely endowed with an "extended mind," whereby personhood is distributed and made complete via purposive objects. Gell thanks Mauss for this insight, yet I cannot help but think that he would have arrived at it independently; the prospect of death has a way of concentrating one's mind on physical attestations to the life lived. It is personhood, rather than objecthood, that has the final say in Gell's book, and for sociologists concerned with culture, meaning, and social life, it offers a way of thinking about materiality that gets us closer not only to what objects do and how, but also why we need them in order that we can be fully human.

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