

Symposium Review for:

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**Objects and Ritual.....Function – Value – Adornment
Thursday 22 November 2007 at the Harley Gallery, Welbeck, Worksop,
Nottinghamshire**

The intricate and complex relationship between humans and objects is a subject of fascination and study for many people. It manifests itself in the guise of different specialist disciplines and can be understood under the umbrella title of 'material culture'. 'Objects and Ritual' brought together an audience of 60 with 4 speakers from diverse professional backgrounds to consider 'the relationship between artefacts and ritual acts' from different perspectives. The speakers were designer-maker Maria Hanson, art historian and publicist Marjan Unger, archaeologist Melanie Giles, and historian and curator Philippa Glanville. The symposium title sets up intriguing parameters for exploration of an area which is especially pertinent to craft practice.

The focus of Maria Hanson's presentation was an series of silver objects designed and made partly in collaboration with Chris Knight (a silversmith), which draw inspiration from ritual theory and everyday ritual acts. A series of wearable silver cups exploring the language of drinking vessels draws attention to the commonplace ritual of drinking water. Yet these are not everyday cups; they are hand-made, in silver. Could this have implications for everyday rituals of use? Can a silver object be incorporated into everyday 'ordinary' experience?

Marjan Unger drew attention to the impact of a culture of individuality on art, craft and design practice, and emphasised the need for makers to be more socially engaged. She drew in part on Csikszentmihalyi and Halton's book 'The Meaning of Things', a record of research exploring how people use their possessions to create their own private set of references. The research suggests that it is difficult to define patterns in the types of object to which particular meanings are attached; the ultimate meaning of a possession is created by the user. This raises an interesting question for designers and makers; how does a practitioner make objects which people will use and love?

For archaeologist Melanie Giles objects discovered in iron-age burial sites are a means of developing an understanding of past cultures. Analysis of the visual, tactile and material properties of these objects, and their environments, provides insight into long-forgotten rituals; both the ceremonial, and the everyday and intimate. This distinction between public and private ritual was reinforced by historian and curator Philippa Glanville, who demonstrated how the symbolic, material and decorative qualities of drinking vessels reflect the ceremonies to which they were central.

The four presentations provided a very stimulating mix of interconnected ideas and knowledge, and the informal and intimate environment at the Harley Gallery provided a very effective forum for conversation and debate. Appropriately, the word 'symposium' derives from ancient Greek *syn* together and *posis* drinking, suggesting linguistic roots in lost rituals of its own.

Central to the debates which arose was the role of the contemporary craft object in everyday life. There is clearly a valuable role for the beautiful and exquisitely made object in the museum or collection, to be visited and admired. Yet, it seems the maker often intends the object to be used in some way. There are few records of how the craft object is appropriated by its owner, but we know that everyday, 'ordinary' possessions are typically mass-produced.

Can the craft (and in particular silver) object cross the boundary into the ordinary? What circumstances need to be in place?

The symposium was successful in raising some pertinent questions— although arguably these weren't fully confronted. The debates started may be a reflection of contemporary interest in the everyday and

ordinary in craft, design and art practice, and a perceived need for social engagement. On that note this report ends with a rousing statement by artist Claes Oldenburg,:

'I am for an art... that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum'.*

Julia Keyte

The proceedings of Objects and Ritual will be published in CD format. For further information, go to:
www.objectsandritual.co.uk

*Taken from his manifesto list written in 1961 declaring his commitment to the everyday.

Quoted by Jorunn Veiteberg in V&A symposium 'Fabrications, Craft in the 21st Century', 23rd November 2007