The Inner Life of Nouns

By

Raechel Cook

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________________________________
Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

________________________________
David Brackett

________________________________
Maria Velasco

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The Thesis Committee for Raechel Cook
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

The Inner Life of Nouns

Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

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Abstract

By what means do objects become significant to individuals? What experiences shape our relationship with particular objects? What experiences can an object evoke? More than 200 artifacts from every decade since 1900 and corresponding stories have been gathered to further explore the relationship between people, objects, and experience. Acquired objects and collections are only a sampling representative of the interests, values, and quirks of their keepers. Even the smallest of trinkets from the handmade to the mass-produced take on new significance when tied to a story, memory, person, or experience. Objects were on view from March 2-7, 2014 in The Reading Room of Objects, Oddities, and Stories (The Reading Room) in an exhibition titled *The Inner Life of Nouns*. Planning materials and preparatory sketches for this project are included as a supplemental file.

The Reading Room can be described as a place formed between people, stories, and objects. It provides a temporary space for discovery through the use of multiple senses, curiosity, and story-sharing. The Reading Room is a constructed space made from second-hand or borrowed items that have been culled from friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and the surrounding environment. It is designed to give visitors the time and space to have what literary critic Walter Benjamin described in his 1940 essay *On Some Motifs of Baudelaire* as a “long experience” (*erfahrung*) in contrast to the fragmentary moments (*erlebnisse*) more commonly experienced in daily life. For this project, the “long experience” is being considered as a decelerated space for lingering. The purpose of this project is to explore constructed conditions that might allow a slow space to emerge by using some of Benjamin’s theories about interiority and objects.
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Thesis Committee:
David Brackett
Maria Velasco
Mary Anne Jordan

Studio Assistants:
Carissa Scroggins
Jonathan Holden

Photography:
Ryan Waggoner

Installation/
De-installation Crew:
Carissa Scroggins
Colin Roe Ledbetter
Debbie Baker
Devin Nelson
Eli Gold
Ella Weber
Ellen Raimond
Emily Ryan

Jason Mindrup
Kendon Brawner
Kristin Decker
Lindsay Waugh
Nathan Babb
Sarah Stringer

Contributors of Objects,
Stories, and to the
Planning Process:
Angela Watt
Andrea Pitt
Amy Duke
Anna Youngyeun
Anne Lusk
Beatriz Parra Thompson
Betty Colbert
Brian Hawkins
Carissa Scroggins
Celka Straughn
Connie Stewart
Cotter Mitchell
Dale Fisk
Danielle Yakle
Darrell Oka
David Brackett
David & Mountain Peak
Taxidermy
Denise DiPiazzo
Devon Nelson
Eli Gold
Ella Weber
Ellen Raymond
Emily Ryan
George & Yvonne Oka

Greg Stone
Janet Dreiling
Jaime David
Jake Oxnard
James Sterbenz
Jonathan Holden
Kristin Decker
KU Art Department
KU Libraries
Laura Minton
Lindsey Waugh
Liz Kowalchuk
Marilyn Holden
Mary Anne Jordan
Paul Keefe
Paul Witte
Pearl O’Brien
Rachel Forrest
Ray Cook
Rebecca Blocksome
Richard Klocke
Robert Hickerson
Ruth Bowman
Sam Pepples &
KU Surplus
Sarah Podrasky
Shelby Burchett
Sofia Galarza Liu
Stephen Johnson
Steve Goddard
Susan Thomas
Sue Ashline
Wendi Oster
Yvonne Hood
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Introduction

By what means do objects become significant to individuals? What experiences shape our relationship with particular objects? What experiences can an object evoke? More than 200 artifacts from every decade since 1900 and corresponding stories have been gathered to further explore the relationship between people, objects, and experience. Thirty-two participants volunteered to contribute things that they keep, collect, and/or have significance in their daily life, as well as, share stories about their object(s). Objects were on view in the Art and Design Gallery at the University of Kansas from March 2-7, 2014 in a constructed environment called The Reading Room of Objects, Oddities, and Stories (The Reading Room).

The function of The Reading Room echoes those seen in contemporary institutions such as museums, public libraries, and archives. The Reading Room houses collections, cultural materials, books, and historical information about the objects in the space. Unlike most institutions, visitors have open access to curatorial files and are encouraged to touch the objects, riffle through drawers, and peek into the storage area. Visitors are also invited to engage with The Reading Room by leaving behind a trace from their pocket or backpack, loaning an object and sharing a corresponding story, using the space to study, or simply taking a break from their daily routine. An attendant is present in the room to answer questions and facilitate these interactions.

The Reading Room can be described as a place formed between people, stories, and objects. It provides a temporary space for discovery through the use of multiple senses, curiosity, and story-sharing. The Reading Room is built from second-hand or borrowed items, which have been culled from current friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and the surrounding environment. It is designed to give visitors the time and space in their day to have what literary
critic Walter Benjamin termed “long experience” (erfahrung) in contrast to the fragmentary moments (erlebnisse) more commonly experienced in daily life.

Benjamin describes the term experience by writing: “Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside.”

Experience is something acquired over time or through a way of being. Benjamin later distinguishes between two forms of “experience” in his 1940 essay On Some Motifs of Baudelaire. He describes these fragmentary moments as erlebnisse or “instantaneous or isolating experiences” and contrasts them with erfahrung or the “long experience.”

It is Benjamin’s theory that the bourgeois of the 19th-century tried to maintain this long experience through objects, collections, and densely furnished homes “that…carried in the immateriality of the proverb might, under certain conditions, be provided in a material substitute, that the hearth and its mantelpiece might materially encode the mythical fireside and the situation it provided for the telling of stories.”

In hindsight, collecting objects and maintaining a well-furnished home is more than a representation of one’s status. It is also an attempt to sustain conditions necessary for the long experience; a way for a memory or story to be passed along to someone else in a tangible format. Emerging notions of interiority in Europe during the 19th-century can also be thought about as a response to city life and industrialization.

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Summed up in the words of Benjamin, “Against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with textiles.” The interior space of the home then becomes a shelter from the urban city and its disjunctive, isolating experiences.

For this project, the long experience is being considered as a decelerated space for lingering. It is impossible to permanently capture this long experience through object, story, or anything else for that matter. Experience, whether fragmentary or aggregate, comes from an active life. However, the 21st-century lifestyle that constantly emphasizes speed and newness makes it challenging to find space for sustained reflection on our experiences and meaningful ways in which to share those experiences. The purpose of this project is to explore conditions that might allow a slow space to emerge by using some of Benjamin’s theories about interiority and objects.

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4 Photograph by Ryan Waggoner
Limitations of the Project

All of the objects for this project were gathered over a two-month period. Many of the items in The Reading Room originated from people living the Mid-West and Western regions of the United States. This project is by no means a comprehensive samplings or diverse representation of the things people keep but rather the collection is largely reflective of the geographic regions from which the objects originated. In the words of one Reading Room visitor, “This feels very much like a house in the Mid-West…”

5 Photograph by Ryan Waggoner
Description of the Reading Room

Since contents of The Reading Room are mostly on loan, the visual qualities and configuration will change with any future installments. People make the place; therefore, in order for The Reading Room to remain a place reflective of its current locus, the interior space will continue to contain items gathered from local people. The description of The Reading Room for this rendition is as follows:

There is a room without walls
Instead sheets of white
delineate a space.
Permeable;
Wavering with currents of air.
Creases and wrinkles hold
memories of objects live in folds.

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6 Photograph by Ryan Waggoner
To enter this room
is to unwrap these objects
To uncover the stories
is to lay bare the threads
intertwined across time and space.
Intersections of people and place
Things and ideas
States of mind and being
Aglow from within,
No florescent in sight.
Just warm white light

Rugs carpet the ground
Miscellany grace metal shelves
Density dampens sound
There are shell and scissors
Books about lizards
Hats and nitrile gloves
Quilts made with love
Toe-nail and newsprint clippings
And labels remnants for shipping
Drawers to open
String to untie
Hundreds of things to find
Vehicles;
Transportation of mind
To the past
to the parallel present and beyond
In the room without walls

**Historical Roots of The Reading Room**

The word “interior” was used for the first time in 1829 to indicate the inside of an architectural space. The Reading Room references the form of two architectural spaces found in upper middle class English houses during the 1800s: the drawing room and the library.

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Partitioning the 28’ x 48’ Art and Design Gallery space at the University of Kansas into an intimate room presents a challenge. After thirteen floor plan drafts of various configurations, The Reading Room has been scaled down to an 18’ (W) x 19’ (L) room with a 6’ (W) x 10’ (L) adjoining storage space. The final size of The Reading Room is based on the recommended measurements of drawing rooms in Robert Kerr’s book *The Gentleman’s House* which states, “In size, a small drawing-room will be about 16 feet wide by from 18 to 20 feet long: 18 by 24 feet is a good size: 20 by 30 to 26 by 40 is enough for a very superior apartment.”

Architectural spaces such as the drawing room and library reflect European social structures during an era with clear gender and class divisions. Although drawing rooms and libraries were built in private residences, they are semi-public in the sense that they were used for social gatherings. The drawing room was used by women immediately following a dinner party. The women would withdraw to this room while the men continued to converse at the table. The men eventually joined the women in the drawing room for further conversation and sometimes entertainment. Smaller houses also used the drawing room to receive calls from visitors throughout the day. The library was more than a repository for books. It also contained familial documents, heirlooms and other objects of curiosity. Families with grand libraries sometimes allowed outside guests to visit for scholarly purposes and often showcased artwork.

Proper 19th-century modern houses had multiple rooms, each space having a specified function. This division of daily activity reached its apex in the late 1800s when architects started proposing the ‘need’ for an absurd numbers of similar spaces such as thirteen living rooms.

These houses were comfortable, well furnished with an appropriate amount of technology,

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8 Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan*, 113
9 Ibid., 116-119
affordable, and overall poetic in design. Throughout the poetic home, decor, lighting, colors, and textures were strategically employed to create rooms arousing mood and character. Such homes are examples of “dwelling in its most extreme form as a condition of the nineteenth century.”11 The 19th-century house with its densely packed interior, social rules, and spatial division is smothering in a sense, like a shell encasing its residents.

Although many 21st-century western houses have evolved into much less formal living spaces, reverberations of the 19th-century ideas of interiority can still be felt. Most of us are still inclined to arrange and decorate living spaces in aesthetically pleasing or poetic way. Our interiors are filled with traces of our lives. We keep, collect, and display items representative of our interests and memories. A sense of comfort, warmth, and perhaps even coziness are all still often associated with the term “home”.

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Photographs on this page by Ryan Waggoner
Form and Function of the Reading Room

The re-contextualizing of such 19th-century dwelling spaces like the library and drawing room leaves The Reading Room as a place for collections, books, embodied memories, and encounters with other visitors. Predominantly lamp lit and reminiscent to some guests as “home”, The Reading Room also offers a kind of intervention in daily life; a moment to pause, linger or maybe have a new experience. The first day The Reading Room opened, a group of freshmen students visited. They were most fascinated by the phonograph player from the early 1940s. Although a few students had seen phonograph players in movies, it was an object they had never experienced first-hand. They gathered around the machine in a semi-circle while listening to the Bartender’s Polka, snapping pictures with their smart phones. How far technology has come!
The assemblage of objects labeled with hanging tags and paired with mismatched furnishings, is reminiscent of an old five and dime store. The scalloped edged pieces of paper with handwritten numbers mimic price tags but nothing is for sale. In place of a dollar amount is an accession number, linking the object to a curatorial file which discloses non-monetary forms of value such a story, memory, and personal experience as told by the lender. The curatorial files are readily accessible to The Reading Room visitors, encouraging self-directed investigation. Over 400 books offering additional information about objects in the Reading Room are also present for personal enjoyment and to satiate or perhaps further provoke curiosity.
Guests of The Reading Room are encouraged to not only read about an object but to read the object itself by utilizing the five senses. In terms of semiotics, the object is a sign; a text to be read. We can make meaning of this text by looking at the physical form of the object (signifier) and simultaneously making associations with the concepts represented by the text (signified). However, our understanding of an object is further enriched through touching, hearing, tasting, smelling, and other paratexts.

French literary theorist Gerard Genette introduced the term paratext in the 1980s. Paratext in context of a book includes “familiar “framing elements” as titles, dedications, forewords, prefaces…indexes, appendices, paper, type design, and bindings.” The paratext of an object can be the scent, weight, texture, or display mechanism. In a broader sense, paratext can be described as “liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex meditation between book, author, publisher, and reader.” When applied to a group of objects in a constructed space (i.e. museum), paratext can be thought of as mediation between object, maker, curator, and audience. All paratexts influence how we process and interpret the main text. The Reading Room encourages visitors to experience objects through multiple senses, giving access to the object’s paratext in a tangible way. Uninhibited interaction with an object allows a variety of narratives to unfold for each visitor.

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15 Basbanes, A Splendor of Letters, 229
Responses

Although people were hesitant at first to interact physically with the items in the space, this changed over the course of the week. Having an attendant present in the space was vital to the creation of an interactive environment. The attendant was present to welcome visitors and encourage them to explore the space. The Reading Room was well visited throughout the week. There were several repeat guests and even a student who did his reading for class in the space. Most objects mentally transported people back in time through memory in a more sentimental fashion (i.e. “My grandma had a phone just like this one.”) This makes sense considering the contents of the room were mostly vintage or antique.

One of the more historically significant objects in The Reading Room was a newspaper from May 8, 1945, the day after the Nazi surrendered. This triggered a slightly different response from a student. He stood in the room for several minutes, reading the newspaper front to back. He was in awe to be holding a piece of world history in his hand and wondered aloud what it would be like to wake up and no longer be at war; to see the headline on the paper which reads, “VICTORY Nazis Reveal Surrender to Western Allies, Russia.” A history he knew only from books suddenly seemed more vivid while holding that newspaper.

Few people ventured into the storage area. While storage was not the focus of this project, it is an underdeveloped component that can be improved in future iterations. The space should be larger and contain a wider variety of items composed in a more visually appealing way. The light in the storage area was residual, cast into the space from the main area of The Reading Room. Storage would have benefited from having its own dim light source.
Victory

Nazis Revel Surrender To Western Allies, Russia

The unconditional surrender of Germany to the Western Allies and Soviet Russia was announced by the German government yesterday morning. The news, which was broadcast from Berlin by radio, was expected to be welcomed by the Allied governments as the final blow to the war. The surrender was confirmed by the German Foreign Office, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, speaking in a broadcast to the nation, said that the United States would make an official announcement of the surrender and that it would be made to the British, French, and Russian governments.

King George VI of England and his government, until simultaneous surrender, could be made by the three governments, until simultaneous

Nazis Still Fight, Pray, Laugh

The German Army has not surrendered completely, and fighting continues in various parts of the country. The Allied troops are advancing rapidly, and it is expected that the war will be over soon. The Allied forces are well equipped and well trained, and they are determined to win the war.

The Allied governments have declared that they will not negotiate with Germany until the country is completely surrendered. The Allied forces are ready to attack Germany, and they are determined to win the war.
Although there were several seating options in The Reading Room, the couch was the most popular. The choice to include the couch in the space was a conscious decision based on the fact that couches are rarities in the Art Building. Guests responded well to the warmth evoked by the use of soft white lights. Reoccurring comments pertained to the warmth of the space, the sense of home, desires to have a living space of similar size and arrangement, and the quiet and peaceful nature of the room. There was enough material in the space that several people expressed a desire to stay all day or had ended up spending more time in The Reading

17 Photograph by Ryan Waggoner
Room than planned. A few people additionally commented that they would like The Reading Room to be in a more permanent location.

Having The Reading Room open and accessible for a longer period of time will allow a more diverse collection of objects and stories to accumulate. The physical location of the Reading Room has the potential to direct the prompts for objects collected, especially if The Reading Room is located in a historical site. The idea of collecting is a very Western European endeavor. Fresh interpretation of prompts may emerge if this project leaves the United States. Long-term establishment of The Reading Room in the United States also has the potential to grow into a third place. Third place is not home, or work but rather a place in between the two. It is a place “…where members of a community interact with others and come to know the ties which they have in common.”

Third places are welcoming and informal gathering venues with easy access. They are places people can go for good conversation or to unwind at the end of the day. Third places provide opportunities for serendipitous encounters with other human beings and relationship building. The development of such places requires time and may be fodder for future projects.

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Conclusion

Moth and rust—forms of memento mori reminding us that nothing on earth lasts forever. In spite of the ephemerality of objects, we do our best to preserve pieces of history so future generations might learn and grow from past experiences. The object is a kind of mnemonic device helping us to recall other times, places, and spaces. Even the smallest of trinkets from the handmade to the mass-produced take on new significance when tied to a story, memory, person, or experience. Encountering unfamiliar or unexpected objects in a new context also has the potential to spark curiosity and raise new questions; an experience with forward motion. In both of these situations, the object acts an intermediary between past, present, and future.

Bibliography


