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Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)

Bill Brown

Amnesiacs that we are, we believe that they adored the god or goddess sculpted in stone or wood. No: they were giving to the thing itself, marble or bronze, the power of speech, by conferring on it the appearance of a human body endowed with a voice.¹

—MICHEL SERRES, *The Natural Contract*

George Stocking, the historian of anthropology, edited and published *Objects and Others* in 1985. That was the year after New York's Museum of Modern Art staged its blockbuster show "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," which provoked a steady, indeed roaring, stream of commentary. The essays Stocking collected on "museums and material culture" were historical, "institutionally oriented studies, focusing on what has been called the 'Museum Period' in the history of anthropology" (1880–1920) while raising decidedly broader issues—about the "relationship of humanist culture and anthropological culture, and of ethnic artifact and fine art; and most generally the representation of culture in material objects."² The Stocking collection was ask-

For George Stocking.

I'd like to express my appreciation to the Vancouver Art Gallery for the invitation to speak in conjunction with the gallery's Brian Jungen retrospective survey (2006), curated by Daina Augaitis. For their responses to various versions of my argument I am indebted to several audiences and in particular to Lauren Berlant, Janet Berlo, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bradin Cormack, Brian Jungen, Richard Neer, Laura Tanner, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, and Anne Wagner.

1. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (1992; Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995), p. 47.

2. George W. Stocking, "Essays on Museums and Material Culture," in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Stocking (Madison, Wis., 1985), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated "EM." The dating of this "museum period" varies according to the historian, and

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ing how the West has represented “other” cultures and the otherness of other cultures through the display of artifacts—a question that, as he himself later put it, “caught a wave of rising interest.”³ MoMA’s “Primitivism” exhibit was asking how artifacts from “other” cultures became integral to the Western aesthetic imagination and its understanding of the aesthetic tout court. In sum, such questions precipitated subsequent exhibitions, conferences, graduate seminars, and new essay collections on the history and theory of museum practice; most paradigmatically, perhaps, were three formidable collections coedited by Ivan Karp, each based on conferences (involving art historians, anthropologists, and folklorists, as well as curators and museum directors): the first two held at the Smithsonian, all three funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The first, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991), testified to the new “contestability of museum exhibitions,” as to the ways that “museums attempting to act responsibly in complex, multicultural environments are bound to find themselves enmeshed in controversy.”⁴ The most recent, *Museum*

Stocking reviews several possibilities; still, “in the Anglo-American tradition, the shift toward a more behaviorally oriented anthropology . . . had by the outbreak of the second World War left museum anthropology stranded in an institutional, methodological, and theoretical backwater” (“EM,” p. 8). See also Stocking’s contribution to the volume, “Philanthropoids and Vanishing Cultures: Rockefeller Funding and the End of the Museum Era in Anglo-American Anthropology,” pp. 112–45. For the shadow history of the argument I make in the present essay, the point is that as the anthropological interest in artifacts waned (from 1905 to 1940), the aesthetic interest in them grew; indeed two dramatic and emblematic events occur within two years of one another: Franz Boas’s resignation from the American Museum of Natural History that accompanied his decision to abandon museum work (1905) and Picasso’s incorporation of the African mask motifs in *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907). On such aesthetic interest, within the Stocking volume, see Elizabeth A. Williams, “Art and Artifact at the Trocadero: *Ars Americana* and the Primitivist Revolution,” pp. 146–66. And see William Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” in *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. Rubin, 2 vols. (New York, 1984), 1:1.

3. Stocking, “Retrospective Prescriptive Reflections,” *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison, Wis., 1992), p. 9.

4. Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Karp and Lavine (Washington, D.C., 1991), pp. 1, 5.

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Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations (2006) provides an international set of cases for understanding how globalization presents new possibilities and problems for museum and heritage practice—how, as the editors put it, “museum-based processes and globalizing processes come together.”⁵ Important specialized monographs also appeared within this time span, most relevantly for my inquiry here *The Storage Box of Tradition*, in which Ira Jacknis tracks the changing aesthetic and epistemological status of so-called tribal artifacts. What anthropological encounters and social networks led to the preservation of specific objects and to their metonymic value? What histories of taste led to their institutionalization as artworks? Museums and museum studies—the new museology—may no longer be enduring or enjoying that frisson of crisis from the 1980s, but the field continues to respond to the histories presented and the questions posed in that decade.⁶

My questions, while no less responsive, are differently lodged and obliquely formed. For one thing, I focus on contemporary work produced in one of those “othered” cultures and draw attention to the ways that an individual artist—working on and within the many logics that animate museum history—recycles certain “ubiquitous” global consumer products (in itself a customary practice, within and beyond the art market) on behalf of dilating a spectator’s sense of time and on behalf of expanding any understanding of cultural systems and cultural space. Indeed, Brian Jungen represents a new wave of First Nation artists whose sophistication predictably locates their work at the very edge, or beyond the edge, of the

5. Corrine A. Kratz and Karp, “Museum Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Karp et al. (Durham, N.C., 2006), p. 26.

6. Among the many catalyzing arguments from the decade, three historical essays (which are now canonical) have been particularly influential: Douglas Crimp, “On The Museum’s Ruins” (1980), in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wa., 1983), pp. 43–56; Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936,” *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984–85): 20–64; and Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations*, no. 4 (1988): 73–102. All but needless to add, within the same decade the field of anthropology began to undergo significant self-scrutiny. See, for instance, George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986). Moreover and more important, the decade’s cultural politics and politicized institutional histories helped to publicize, if not to facilitate, the repatriation of ceremonial objects. George Bush signed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in November 1990. On the repatriation of Northwest Coast objects, see Ira Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition: Kwakiutl Art, Anthropologists, and Museums, 1881–1981* (Washington, D.C., 2001), chaps. 7–9, and James Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections,” *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 107–47. For an overview of the topic and a bibliography, see the third edition of Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (Cambridge, 2007).

analytic grids deployed to understand the dynamics of collection, institutionalization, and display. Second, I want to think of this work as part of the ongoing artistic extension of what André Breton called (in a lecture he delivered in Prague in 1935) “*a fundamental crisis of the object*,” a crisis effected as much by the surrealist dismissal of “reasonable” beings and objects as by the surrealists’ work as *amateur* ethnologists (as William Rubin has put it) and by their passion for collecting objects from Africa, Australia, the American Southwest, and the Pacific Northwest.⁷ It was the impact of these objects from elsewhere that helped to provoke, to legitimize, and to generalize this destabilization of the object. Third, I’m eager to imagine Jungen’s work itself as an archeology of the present and as a kind of anthropological practice in plastic form—what Wayne Booth might call the rhetoric of things, what Kenneth Burke might call the symbolic action of objects. And finally, I’m interested—in this case as in others—in what works of art teach us about the otherness of objects as such, the differentiation between subject and object, as between human and nonhuman, serving what I take to be the phenomenological infrastructure on which an apprehension of alterity as such is built. All told, then, while Stocking’s anthology of essays addressed the ways that objects have been used to represent “others,” I’m interested in how particular objects dramatize the problematics of otherness, which is to say the uncertainties that inhere in any identification of sameness or difference be it argued or experienced or acted out. But before I engage the work of Brian Jungen, with a focus on production (more specifically, on refabrication), I want to begin, with a focus on consumption (or, say, perception: the scene of spectatorship), by following C. L. R. James on his trip to two museums in London—a trip establishing the nodes that organize my subsequent engagement.

1. Time and the Object

In one of his first letters from London for the *Port of Spain Gazette*, written during his inaugural trip to England in 1932, C. L. R. James reports on “A Visit to the Science and Art Museums.” He begins the article with a sight by which he was “knocked silly”—the “sight of the airplane in which Lieutenant Stanforth won the Schneider Trophy at a speed of 407 miles an hour; that is to say, from Port of Spain to St. Joseph in one minute.” “The plane,” he goes on to say, “is the most beautiful thing in the museum and

7. André Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), p. 257. See Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism,” p. 1.

one of the most beautiful things I have seen in London. . . . Nothing superfluous, all cut and line. . . . It looks so light. . . . The body is like nothing so much as a long fish. . . . The whole thing looks like a toy, and it is a thing for photographers to think about, that what has been built solely for utility turns out to be so beautiful.”⁸

His fascination with the object has little to do, finally, with this moment of Corbusian appreciation. It has to do, rather, with a recognition of how “scientific knowledge goes forward” provoked by competitiveness and the seemingly irrational dedication to “mere speed,” for instance. It has to do with his estimation of how such public displays—the museum’s combination of historical artifacts and elaborate models—can serve to inspire a next generation of inventors. “So Galileo must have looked at the pendulum,” James writes, “noting how evenly it swung” (“V,” p. 9). And it has to do, too, with a sense of lack and of longing: “‘Why haven’t we got such a place at home’” (“V,” p. 3)? “We, in Trinidad, know what the answer to any such effort . . . [would] be. No money, and probably a hint that, ‘Oh, the people will not be interested,’ the people this and the people that” (“V,” p. 10). To his readers back in the West Indies, James describes a perverse projection (of what “the people” can’t appreciate), just as he describes the distinction between wealth and poverty, extraordinary access (“Everything free”) and inaccessibility, center and periphery, metropole and colony (“V,” p. 11). My interest lies in the way that—for a writer who was to become one of the twentieth century’s best known analysts of “civilization” and its colonial, class, and race relations—a particular and particularized object occasions this cultural comparison and charged complaint. The Stanforth plane embodies technological sophistication and passion, *and* it serves as an allegorical object that stands for those opportunities presented by the twentieth century and those denied.

As a point of departure in his account of this foreign yet familiar land, James registers the importance of objects—indeed, their hyperpresence—within the psychological, social, and political dynamics among modern human subjects. The account of Stanforth’s plane is a brief yet theatrical example of how objects mediate our sense of ourselves (as individuals and as collectivities) and our sense of others. Spotlighting the role of the inanimate object world within culture, as culture, and as a means for apprehending culture, James has found (if I may paraphrase Lévi-Strauss), a thing to think with.⁹

8. C. L. R. James, “A Visit to the Science and Art Museums,” *Letters from London*, ed. Nicholas Laughlin (Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 2003), pp. 3–4; hereafter abbreviated “V.”

9. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. pub. (Chicago, 1966), p. 26.

How might we describe this thinking—this field of thought? James produces as his object of address and analysis the object culture of London. By *object culture* I mean to designate the objects through which a culture constitutes itself, which is to say, too, culture as it is objectified in material forms. A given object culture entails the practical and symbolic use of objects. It thus entails both the ways that inanimate objects mediate human relations and the ways that humans mediate object relations (generating differences of value, significance, and permanence among them), thus the systems (material, economic, symbolic) through which objects become meaningful or fail to.¹⁰ Although the phrase may not be common (however commonsensical), in fact the analysis of *object culture* has multiple genealogies. Among those who heard Georg Simmel lecture on the material everyday (as we'd now put it) in the first decades of the century, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer each in his way pursued the engagement with object culture, that pursuit achieving its most compressed and celebrated realization in Benjamin's exposé of the *Passagen-Werk*, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935), where he imagines how object culture, "from enduring edifices to passing fashions," stores "the unconscious of the collective."¹¹ Whereas Marx recognized a history of human labor that lay congealed in every human artifact (accounting for its value), Benjamin recognized multiple histories congealed there together: a history of production but also of circulation and consumption and use, thus also a history of collective fascination, apprehension, aspiration.

Still, insofar as ethnology developed the culture concept as such through the rearrangement of objects on exhibition (displaying a given basket not within an evolutionary history of basket weaving but within a contextualizing scene of use), the field of cultural anthropology remains (historically and currently) the privileged site in which object culture be-

10. Of course, the term *object relations* comes from the field of psychoanalysis, where (in the work of Melanie Klein, for instance) the object has the habit of standing for a human subject, or a human body part. Within this essay I deploy the phrase without psychoanalytic connotations. Elsewhere I've tried to suggest how the concept might be expanded within a psychoanalytic paradigm. See Bill Brown, "Object Relations in an Expanded Field," *Differences* 17 (2006): 88–106.

11. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," trans. Howard Eiland, *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 3:34. As Adorno said of Simmel, he "was, for all his psychological idealism, the first to accomplish the return of philosophy to concrete subjects, a shift that remained canonical for all who were not drawn to the banging of the critique of knowledge and of spiritual history" (quoted by Jürgen Habermas, "Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture: Postscript to a Collection of Essays," trans. Mathieu Deflem, *Critical Inquiry* 22 [Spring 1996]: 406).

comes visible.¹² From the museum work of Franz Boas (c. 1900) to Mauss's work on the gift (1923–24), Lévi-Strauss's analysis of masks (1975) to Arjun Appadurai's edited collection of essays on the "social life of things" (1986) and Nicholas Thomas's history of "entangled objects" (1995), anthropology has repeatedly centralized objects. Nonetheless, shortly after World War I, while some anthropologists "sustained to some extent an object orientation insofar as they conceived of culture as a collection of easily transportable thinglike 'elements,'" Boas himself had abandoned museum work in 1905, and in both Britain and the U.S. the field lost faith in objects: "While 'others' themselves might in a metaphoric sense still be objectified by the scientizing orientation that long survived the demise of evolutionary anthropology," Stocking argues, "in both countries 'objects' as such" could no longer "provide a focus for the unity of anthropology."¹³ The point was that culture could not be reduced to object culture. And though objects have consistently resurfaced, the recent study of object culture persistently begins by expressing frustration about the fate of the object within the academy: Why have objects "consistently managed to evade the focus of academic gaze"?¹⁴ Why have the social sciences "ignored" the "ceaseless and varied interactions among people and myriad kinds of things"?¹⁵ "Why has the physical and 'thingly' component of our past and present being become forgotten or ignored to such an extent in contemporary social research?"¹⁶ The "very materiality of objects," Webb Keane argued, in 2001, "means that they are not merely arbitrary signs," by which he meant that objects get caught up, *analytically*, in economic systems or sign systems that prevent us from attending to their material specificity and that specificity's semantic ramifications.¹⁷

12. The key document for understanding how the critique of evolutionary ethnology leads to an understanding of culture, and for understanding how this critique was mediated by objects, see Franz Boas, "The Principles of Ethnological Classification" (1887), *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911*, ed. Stocking (Chicago, 1974), pp. 61–67. See also Stocking's preface to *A Franz Boas Reader*, pp. 3–6. And see Jacknis, "Franz Boas and Exhibits: On the Limitations of the Museum Method of Anthropology," in *Objects and Others*, pp. 75–111.

13. Stocking, "Philanthropoids and Vanishing Cultures: Rockefeller Funding and the End of the Museum Era in Anglo-American Anthropology," *The Ethnographer's Magic*, p. 182.

14. Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987), p. 217.

15. Michael Brian Schiffer and Andrea R. Miller, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication* (New York, 1999), p. 2.

16. Bjørnar Olsen, "Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 87. In 1998, though, Daniel Miller was willing to declare, moving to a "second stage" of material culture studies, that "the point that things matter can now be argued to have been made" (Miller, "Why Some Things Matter," in *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, ed. Miller [Chicago, 1998], p. 3).

17. Webb Keane, "Money Is No Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in Indonesian

But even as it makes obvious sense to track the analytic history of object culture within anthropology, archaeology, and, say, material culture studies (Jules Prown in the U.S., Daniel Miller in the UK), I don't want to pretend that there is anything genuinely ethnographic about James's essay; indeed, as his *aesthetic* attention to the Stanforth plane adumbrates, he concludes his letter on the museums not with inventions (culture) but with a work of art (Culture), not with some metonymically or metaphorically English piece, but with a sculpture by Rodin: *John the Baptist*—"a statue of a naked man walking, that's all" ("V," p. 12). "I was dreadfully tired out but the thing made me fresh again" ("V," p. 13). The refreshment prompts (if it is not prompted by) a brisk proliferation of other affiliations, identifications, interpellations. Suddenly James writes about what "we" of the twentieth century will be able to say to the ancient Greeks—to the ancient Greek who could sit with James and stare at the statue "with much the same eyes and feelings," as would in fact "some wanderer from the West Indies" seeing the statue of the man walking "three thousand years from now" ("V," p. 14). While the Stanforth plane would be "meaningless" to the Greek and dismissed by the future West Indian "as one of a crowd of obsolete designs," the Rodin "cannot grow old. It cannot go out of date. It is timeless" ("V," p. 14). The object prompts an unanticipated sequence of first-person plurals—*we* moderns, *we* humans, *we* West Indians present and future—and it is as though the object suddenly releases James from the confines of modernity, including its colonialist history, to provoke a very differently imagined "us." The "timelessness" that James projects onto the object is in fact a timelessness he himself seems to experience, at one with the ancient Greek and the future West Indian. However scripted this experience may be by the science/art binary, by aesthetic ideology, by a particular class habitus, I think it's worth noting that Jacques Rancière might say, echoing Schiller, that James here occupies a "region of being" where the asserted equivalence of experience eventuates in an inevitable, if unexpressed, afterthought on behalf of the material realization of a common humanity.¹⁸

Society," in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred R. Myers (Santa Fe, N. Mex., 2001), p. 71. In sharp contrast, and despite his august capacity to explain the modes by which artifacts achieve semantic plenitude, Lévi-Strauss, for one, insisted that no "empirical properties of beings or things" could interrupt the system of knowing (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 217).

18. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2004), p. 27. See also Rancière, "Thinking between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge," trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia*, no. 1 (2006): 1–12, where he responds to Bourdieu's attack on Kant.

The acts of identification elicited by London's object culture—the Rodin statue and the Stanforth plane—occur within a more general dynamic by which human subjects depend on inanimate objects to establish their sense of identity, dynamics described not just by anthropologists but by philosophers. John Locke, among others, imagined that identity was an effect of remembering thoughts and actions, but Hannah Arendt came to argue that our sense of ourselves and what we call identity stabilize foremost in relation to concrete objects. “The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life,” she wrote, “and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradistinction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table.”¹⁹ But most things of this world—food and clothes, computers and cars—are eminently consumable, fungible, disposable; far from interrupting the transience of our lives, they illustrate ephemerality at its most banal. This is why Arendt distinguishes between labor and work, between human effort that disappears without a trace (consumed commodities) and that which results in reification, some more enduring product, a material realization of an imagined product, as Marx would put it, differentiating between human and animal architecture.²⁰ Arendt underscores the “outstanding permanence” of artworks as the quality that makes art such a significant part of the human condition. “Nowhere else,” she argues, does the “thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art.”²¹

Arendt helps to elucidate the case of James in London and productively specifies the role of particular objects (what we call art, what we understand or experience as art) within object culture, even though this particularity is (of course) a historical product of the same systems (material, economic, symbolic) that particularize other kinds of objects (as food, kitsch, trash, and so on). Her assertion helps to dramatize the oddity of any emergent “new materialism” that proceeds by isolating one very distinct kind of object (an art object) within an object culture in order to render that object culture (other objects within that culture) newly apprehensible. But such an oddity could also precipitate the coding of an object that concerns itself with other objects as a *metaobject*—the work of art, say, that

19. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), p. 137.

20. See *ibid.*, p. 99.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

isn't satisfied with just being an object and seems to insist instead on taking other objects or object culture as its object of address.²² This would seem to be one of the attractions of pop, be it Claes Oldenburg's soft monumentalization of everyday objects, or Andy Warhol's participation in mass manufacture, or John Chamberlain's refabrication of waste.

Much of the art of the twentieth century renders the Arendtian binary and its predecessors obsolete in two ways: by appropriating ephemeral objects into the artwork and by making art that is itself ephemeral, as though redramatizing worldly instability. But I want to deploy her binary, heuristically, to highlight a paradox within James's essay; for the Stanforth plane *has been preserved*, after all, that act of preservation having conferred upon it a spectatorial temporality within which its art can be appreciated: "one of the most beautiful" things that James has "seen in London . . . [the] body . . . like nothing so much as a long fish." The paradox closely relates to one that Stocking describes: objects preserved from the past within the museum "are at the same time timeless—removed from history in the very process of embodying it" ("EM," p. 4). Humans have a certain penchant for preserving their things, all kinds of things. We don't just preserve "art"; we also preserve quotidian artifacts, which is why we have science museums, and space museums, and technology museums, and craft museums, and rock and roll museums, and natural history museums, and why certain objects—an Aldo Rossi tea kettle or a Haida mask, a Tupperware bowl or a ritual bronze Chinese ding—end up in different kinds of museal sites. Above all, I'm interested in the metaleptic effect whereby institutions don't preserve art but rather, through the act of institutional preservation, create art.

The temporal coordinates narrated by James and conceptualized by Arendt played a central role in the acquisition and definition of so-called primitive or tribal art. Already, the act of stabilizing ephemeral objects had the effect of stabilizing cultural identity, be it English identity or Haida identity. When full-size Haida totem poles began to be collected in the 1870s, it became clear that they were ephemeral objects. Preserving them—and thus interrupting the Indian attitude that the poles should be subject

22. The term *metaobject* is most familiar within the field of computer science, where it designates a base object that generates or manipulates other objects. See Gregor Kiczales, Jim des Rivières, and Daniel G. Bobrow, *The Art of the Metaobject Protocol* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). My own use of term has been derived from Ira Jacknis, who uses *metaobjects* to caption the way that Kwakwaka'wakw artifacts—collected, institutionalized, and photographed by anthropologists—can continue to have an artistic impact on the production of new Kwakwaka'wakw objects. See Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition*, p. 5. I also mean the term to square with W. J. T. Mitchell's deployment of "metapicture," in "Metapictures," *Picture Theory* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 35–82.

to decay—generally meant producing a new concrete base, replacing rotten parts, and repainting.²³ Those acts of preservation helped to establish the allochronic character of the cultural artifacts—conferring a timeless tradition on the poles that were in fact a rather recent addition to Haida sculpture and locating Haida culture outside the present tense.²⁴ The preservation also helped to recode such “tribal artifacts” as art objects: *the arrested time of cultural coherence became the universalized timelessness of art*. By the time that the Burlington Fine Arts Club presented *Objects of Indigenous Art* in London in 1920, it did so by accepting the most accomplished work of the Haida nation as “the outcome of inherent genius”; in 1927, the National Gallery of Canada described the work of the Haida, the Tsimshyan, and the Tlingit as “works of art that count among the outstanding creations of mankind in the sphere of plastic or decorative beauty,” “mankind” serving here as a temporal marker.²⁵ MoMA’s “Primitivism” exhibition located itself within the narrative where “tribal art,” like “all great art,” comes to be recognized as showing “images of man that transcend the particular lives and times of their makers,”²⁶ transcending, in other words, the life and the time of a particular culture.²⁷ But as James Clifford put it (in 1985), anthropology and art come to coexist as “two domains [that] have excluded and confirmed one another, inventively disputing the right to contextualize, to represent these objects.”²⁸ The “aesthetic-anthropological object systems of the West,” in his phrase, made it possible, in the winter of 1984–85, to view “tribal art” at more than seven different kinds of institutions.²⁹ The specter of such systems ani-

23. See Gloria Cranmer-Webster, “Conservation and Cultural Centres: U’Mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, Canada,” in *Symposium 86: The Care and Preservation of Ethnological Materials*, ed. R. Barclay et al. (Ottawa, 1986), pp. 77–79.

24. On the allochronism within anthropology and ethnography, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983). On the relatively recent production of totem poles within Haida culture, see Aldona Jonaitis, “Northwest Coast Totem Poles,” *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 104–21.

25. Quoted in Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition*, p. 120.

26. Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism,” p. 73.

27. This recognition was crystallized by the term *affinity*, which incited considerable criticism because it elided cultural context and collapsed non-Western history (where the modern seems not to exist). A decade later, Charlotte Townsend-Gault wrote of “the gaffe embedded in the . . . spectacular exhibition”: “the pegging of the formalist view just as the richness of this approach and its interpretations was widely perceived to have exhausted itself” (Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “If Art Is the Answer, What Is the Question?—Some Queries Raised by First Nations’ Visual Culture in Vancouver,” *RACAR* 21, nos. 1–2 [1994]: 102).

28. Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 200.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 209. See also Clifford, “Objects and Selves—An Afterword,” in *Objects and Others*, p. 243.

mates the work of Brian Jungen as he sets out to preserve, however perversely, the ephemera of North American consumer culture.

2. Misuse Value and Unhuman History

Jungen (whose father was Swiss Canadian), a member of the Doig River band of the Dane-zaa (or Dunne-za) nation (or Beaver People, a small Dene population living in the Peace River area of eastern British Columbia and northwestern Alberta), has come to rely on the act of redeploying, refabricating, and recirculating (within the art system) some of the most globally familiar objects: soccer balls and cafeteria trays and wooden pallets and plastic coolers and sports jerseys and red plastic gas cans and golf bags and baseball bats and baseball mitts (figs. 1a–1b). Of course, these days, the artistic redistribution of consumerist object culture (fully formed or ravaged) has become a major mode of production within the contemporary artworld, from the work of Thomas Hirschhorn to that of Sarah Sze, the work of Dan Peterman to that of Tara Donovan. Such artists evoke the long and global history of how things are absorbed into the field of cultural production.³⁰ Within that field, there is something disarming about Jungen's work, in large measure because the artist's act of recycling (often humorous and serious) takes place within what Clifford termed, back in the 1980s, "the predicament of culture," by which he meant the predicament of ethnographic modernity wherein one finds oneself "off center among scattered traditions" and in the midst of literal and figurative mobilities that effect "the condition of rootlessness." The anthropologist's concept of culture makes less sense once cultures have been dislodged from specific locales, rendering the location of culture an improbable accomplishment. Clifford was one of the first cultural critics to be explicit about not seeing "the world as populated by endangered authenticities," about recognizing that "people and things are increasingly out of place," while still understanding the importance of asking "geopolitical questions" of "every inventive poetics of reality."³¹ Critical ethnography, the new museology, postcolonial theory—these have each in their way worked to stage this predicament of culture, as has a considerable body of art.

In the case of Jungen, we might think of ourselves as facing not only the predicament of culture but also the predicament of nature—the predicament of their entanglement that irritates the history of museums and ma-

30. They also make it clear that the "new materialism," or "object studies," or "thing theory," which now informs various academic fields has, say, a longer and broader history in the field of cultural production. On the current state of object studies, see *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (New York, 2009).

31. Clifford, "The Pure Products Go Crazy," *The Predicament of Culture*, pp. 3, 5, 6.

terial culture. For Jungen's work, appearing in galleries and museums of art, *situates itself* at the intersection of art museums and natural history museums, whose iconic artifacts and traditional logics of display he repeatedly evokes even as he works with untraditional materials, such as the white plastic stacking chair, a globally ubiquitous object (fig. 2). These monobloc polypropylene objects, which have become, as one reporter adroitly dubbed them in 2007, "the everychair of chairs," were "invented" in the 1960s and began to be mass manufactured in the early 1980s (polypropylene as such having been polymerized in 1954). The reporter asks her readers to contemplate just how familiar the chairs have become: "Just think about how many there are in schools, bars, hospitals, parks, beaches, sports stadiums and retirement homes. And how often they appear as props in global dramas. Floating in the debris of the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Seating thousands of people at Cuban political rallies. Lurking in the hideout where Saddam Hussein was captured, and in Abu Ghraib prison."³² So, while one analyst of material culture has argued that "in some respects artifacts are like new species that reproduce themselves alongside biological ones," where one can see "an evolutionary process tending toward greater and greater complexity of function," the white plastic stacking chair would seem to be the result of a devolutionary process, leaving us with chairness at its most generic, at its most "primitive" or "natural," where economic and aesthetic minimalism converge in a kind of coarse yet clean vernacular modernism.³³

In 2000, Jungen began to produce his first chair-dependent sculptures, such as *Bush Capsule*, made from a circle of plastic chairs covered by plastic wrap, the capsule illuminated from within (fig. 3). It is a structure that brings to mind the geodesic dome or some kind of lunar domestic pod. More particularly, the construction reenacts, differently, the work that went into the makeshift shelters built by farm workers, or temporary "winter houses" made annually by some First Nation people of the Northwest, or the permanent houses discovered in an ancient village during the Thule expeditions of the 1920s, an especially productive chapter in the history of

32. Alice Rawsthorn, "Celebrating the Everychair of Chairs, in Cheap Plastic," *New York Times*, 4 Feb. 2007, www.ih.com/articles/2007/02/04/features/design5.php

33. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, ed. Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (Washington, D.C., 1993), p. 21. On the concept of vernacular modernism, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (Apr. 1999): 59–77. For an account of how a modernist aesthetic informed the production and marketing of everyday objects, and a sense of how design and art converge, see Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, D.C., 1999).

material anthropology.³⁴ Those structures were constructed with driftwood or whale bone supports, then covered by skins, then by sod and by rock. In his reenactment, Jungen has replaced the whale bone with plastic chairs and the seal skins with plastic wrap. He has taken ready-to-hand materials that are at once local (they're simply around) and representative of an Americanized global culture (that's everywhere) to represent a highly specific, traditional culture, substituting an especially "unnatural" substance for skin and bone.

Jungen intensified the relay between traditional and contemporary domesticities in *Furniture Sculpture*, constructed for his first comprehensive retrospective at the Vancouver Gallery in 2006 (fig. 4). He made the huge tepee from eleven 2006 Natuzzi leather sofas, discarding the guts of the sofas (that is, the stuffing) and using the wood infrastructure for the internal supports of the tepee. In a video that accompanies the display of the piece you see Jungen theatrically taking a sort of hunting knife to the sofas, slicing them open, ripping out the guts, and skinning them. (Although he had hoped to slaughter the sofas "more traditionally" by pitching them off a balcony, the gallery did not permit him to do so.)³⁵ Dislodged from the domestic fashion system (where leather has become the material of choice within the "casual comfort" paradigm), the sofas, at the moment of regutting, might be said to experience a rebecoming-animal, a process that places the contemporary furniture industry within an object culture where man's mere subsistence, or elegant comfort, depends on the ongoing (however occluded) conquest of nature. The intensity of his re-creative imagination lies not least in his willingness to confer (or, more dramatically, to disclose) the status of animal on inanimate, manufactured objects. This could be understood as the playful performance of a kind of animism (classically interpreted by E. B. Tyler among others to be the ur-form of religion), an unwillingness to differentiate what we call spirit and matter, what we call the organic and inorganic. This is to argue, then, that Jungen's mode of artistic production, his radical misuse, transforms a characteristic

34. For an account of the expedition, see Knud Rasmussen, *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1927; Fairbanks, Alaska, 1999). For a recent excavation, see James M. Savelle and Junko Habu, "A Processual Investigation of a Thule Whale Bone House, Somerset Island, Arctic Canada," *Arctic Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2004): 204–21. For Jungen's account of the houses, see p. 113. In an interview with Terence Dick, without reference to his *Bush Capsule*, Jungen supplied a biographical referent for the first of my analogues: "When I was a kid, especially when I was a teenager, I used to work on farms and I'd hang around with my cousins and we'd hang around in the bush with my aunts and uncles who would build these amazing summer shacks, and they were fantastic. I wish I took pictures of them back then. Not many people do it anymore" (Brian Jungen, interview with Terence Dick, *C Magazine*, no. 89 [Mar. 2006]: 36; hereafter abbreviated "ITD").

35. Conversation with the author, Mar. 2006.

of “premodern” culture into a characteristic of “postmodern” Culture; but the value emerging from the misuse, as I understand it, is to identify the singleness of a culture for which home continues to depend on stretched hide.

That transformation thus involves not just what we call culture but also what we call nature, and it is to the natural world—to the paleontological recovery and display of that world—that Jungen establishes a citational relation in a sequence of works known as his cetology series (2000–3), room-size skeletons made from plastic chairs, the chairs now replicating whale bone on behalf of representing a complete whale skeleton (figs. 5–6). Cut up, the chairs (less than \$5.00 CD each at the time of production) have been reconstellated, riveted, segment upon riveted segment forming the vast spinal column and tail, the rib cage, the skull, and massive jaw. The most extensive of the figures is fifty feet long.

Of course, there is considerable modernist precedent for transforming common manufactured objects into the figure of an animal, as in Picasso’s not-quite ready-made *Tête de taureau* (1942), composed of a bicycle seat and handle bars. But Jungen monumentalizes the gesture and means to equate the final product with a familiar sight from natural history museums all over the world. Even as the hovering figures resemble the sea monsters from the Pliocene era that hang from the ceilings of those museums, so too the evident creativity and craftsmanship foreground the *constructedness of prehistory* (that is, the history of prehistory). But the formal simplicity of the bright white creatures expresses a kind of purity, especially when they are exhibited in a white gallery space that evokes a white-on-white modernism.³⁶ You could argue that these are full-scale representations of the killer whale or of Wasgo, the mythological sea-wolf that is part wolf and part whale, but the creatures are in fact generic, neither naturally nor mythologically specific; the replication—more an evocation—is iconic and gestural not grounded in any measured correspondence to a model.

In some respects, then, Jungen might seem to fit within the crowd of anthropologists (say, Lévi-Strauss) and artists (say, Robert Smithson) for whom the natural history museum serves as the site of some primal scene. As an example of his more widespread investment in “origins and primordial beginnings,” Smithson described himself as an eight-year-old interested in collecting “naturalist things, looking for insects, rocks and

36. In dialectical contrast, much of Jungen’s work infuses minimalist form with narrative, social, and political content. See Trevor Smith, “Collapsing Utopias: Brian Jungen’s Minimalist Tactics,” in *Brian Jungen*, ed. Augaitis (Vancouver, 2005), pp. 81–89.

whatever,” visiting the Museum of Natural History, and making “very large paper constructions of dinosaurs which in a way, I suppose, relate right up to the present in terms of the film I made on *The Spiral Jetty*—the prehistoric motif runs throughout the film.”³⁷ His assertion that contemporary art must “explore the pre- and post-historic mind [and] go into the places where remote futures meet remote pasts,”³⁸ like his equation of dinosaurs and modern technology, can be traced to his fascination with the convergence, or exchangeability, of the temporalities he experienced within the museum: “This sense of extreme past and future has its partial origin with the Museum of Natural History; there the ‘cave-man’ and the ‘space-man’ may be seen under one roof. In this museum all ‘nature’ is stuffed and interchangeable.”³⁹ But unlike Smithson, of course, Jungen eschews rocks and dirt in favor of the substance that is indissociable from contemporary culture. Although exhibits of this work have pointed out how the skeletons recall the threat of extinction as it has been faced by First Nation people, it is the ambition of Jungen’s work, as I understand it, to at once mark and transcend “the currency of tribal art, culture, and politics.”⁴⁰ (He himself has said in an interview that “serious political correctness” doesn’t interest him.)⁴¹ A materialist approach to art that understands materialism temporally could perceive a generalized dialectical drama of permanence and change: the relation between, on the one hand, bones that remain because they have been fossilized and, on the other, the nonbiodegradable polypropylene chairs that will remain in our garbage dumps long after we ourselves are gone: *the nonmortal remains of mortal being*. The cetology series theatricalizes the ubiquity of white plastic, not in space, but in time. In Arendtian terms, the drama begins with the question, What identity is being stabilized in relation to *the same chair*, which is at once cheap and disposable and yet undisposable?

Because the fragments of the chairs deployed as bones retain their recognizability, the metamorphosis of human products into natural creatures remains incomplete. This is not an accretion of outmoded cultural fragments conjured into some language of the fossil. Rather, it is an effort to

37. Robert Smithson, “Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution” (1972), interview by Paul Cummings, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 286, 271. For an account of Smithson’s engagement with dinosaurs, see Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 270–75.

38. Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (1968), *Robert Smithson*, p. 113.

39. Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments” (1966), *Robert Smithson*, p. 15. See also, Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (1968), *Robert Smithson*, pp. 78–94.

40. Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” p. 120.

41. Jungen, interview with Jessica Morgan, www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/jungen/Brian_Jungen_interview_web.pdf

prehistoricize the present, as though history (real human history) were an event yet to come, or an effort to posthistoricize the present, as though history were over and we simply linger, however unconsciously, in the state of our extinction. By divesting the chairs—in these acts of misuse—of their exchange-value and their use-value, freeing them “from the drudgery of being useful,”⁴² Jungen can reconfigure them into sublime objects that relocate the chairs within unhuman history—the history, not of the world, but of the earth.

Or, one might say, some new history of the *earth* as *world*, given the discovery in 1997 of what has been dubbed a new Leviathan, found in the North Pacific subtropical gyre: the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a slowly rotating mass of debris—90 percent of which is plastic—a mass estimated to be the size of Texas.⁴³ Charles Moore made the discovery when, sailing from Hawaii to Long Beach, he took a short cut through a region assiduously avoided because of the lack of current and wind, the constant high pressure that creates an “oceanic desert”: “As I gazed from the deck at the surface of what ought to have been a pristine ocean, I was confronted, as far as the eye could see, with the sight of plastic. It seemed unbelievable, but I never found a clear spot. In the week it took to cross the subtropical high, no matter what time of day I looked, plastic debris was floating everywhere: bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments.”⁴⁴ As one polymer chemist put it, “every little piece of plastic manufactured in the past 50 years that made it into the ocean is still out there somewhere . . . because there is no effective mechanism to break it down.”⁴⁵ Plastics do break down (they photodegrade) to a point: to the point of becoming confetti-like bits and then microscopic particles mimicking plankton and thus consumed by fish and birds, the toxicity of the plastic itself amplified by the toxins it has absorbed. This is why one oceanographer, a marine debris specialist who has worked with Moore, insists that “if you could fast-forward 10,000 years and do an archaeological dig . . . you’d find a little line of plastic. . . . What happened to those people? Well, they ate their own plastic and disrupted their genetic structure and weren’t able to reproduce. They didn’t last very

42. Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 3:39.

43. See Susan Casey, “Plastic Ocean: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” *CDNN*, 4 Nov. 2007, www.cdnn.info/news/article/a071104.html. In “Leviathan,” Clint Burnham considers Jungen’s cetology series in relation to Melville’s white whale; see Clint Burnham, “Leviathan,” in *Brian Jungen*, ed. Nicolaus Schafhausen (Rotterdam, 2006), pp. 69–77.

44. Charles Moore, “Trashed: Across the Pacific Ocean, Plastics, Plastics, Everywhere,” *Natural History* 112 (Nov. 2003): 46.

45. Quoted in Kenneth R. Weiss, “Plague of Plastic Chokes the Sea,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Aug. 2006, www.latimes.com/news/local/oceans/la-me-ocean2aug02,0,3130914.story

long because they killed themselves.”⁴⁶ The becoming-plastic of the human.

But my point is not that the cetology series argues on behalf of some specific ecological consciousness. Rather, it provokes the experience, however momentary, of a temporality and a natural history wherein such a consciousness might develop; it means to shock our “historical metabolism” into some dilation that registers a more totalizing *durée*.⁴⁷ The misuse of the chairs, which draws attention to their material specificity, on the one hand, and to the constructedness of the icons and emblems of the prehistorical, on the other, enables the cetological products to become dialectical objects, the compressed temporalities (present, past, and future) dramatizing some dialectic of transience and transcendence.⁴⁸ The art confronts the spectator with another region of being where man-in-the-world, in the midst of nothing more than these silly chairs, is minimized in the before and after of man, the pre- and the posthistoric.

3. The Re-creation of Things

A series of twenty-three works that Jungen produced between 1998 and 2005, his celebrated “Prototypes for New Understanding,” seem to return the focus to human history. This is a series of “inauthentic/authentic” Northwest Coast artifacts meant to evoke traditional masks but made from Air Jordans, the sneakers unstitched and recomposed into a variety of iconic forms, to which, in some instances, Jungen attaches human hair—the reminder, perhaps, that the human is a thing among things. The

46. Quoted in Casey, “Plastic Ocean.”

47. The phrase is Fredric Jameson’s: “We remember the archeological as a sequence in Disney’s *Fantasia*; . . . This is because our historical metabolism has undergone a serious mutation; the organs with which we register time can handle only smaller and smaller, and more and more immediate, empirical segments; the schematism of our transcendental historical imagination encompasses less and less material, and can process only stories short enough to be verifiable via television” (Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* [New York, 1990], p. 95).

48. Readers familiar with the importance of natural history in Frankfurt school thought will recognize the derivation of some of these thoughts. See Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History” (1932), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York, 2006), pp. 252–69. See also Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction to T. W. Adorno’s ‘The Idea of Natural-History,’” pp. 234–51. And see Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1963; London, 1977). Beatrice Hanssen clarifies Adorno’s particular understanding of Benjamin’s concept in the *Trauerspiel* book, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 13–23, and Susan Buck-Morss tracks the work of the concept in Benjamin’s *Arcades* project, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 205–330.

strange, surreal masks are metaobjects that congeal three highly identifiable object cultures (fig. 6).

The first, of course, is the traditional art of the Kwakwaka'wakw or of the Haida, whose masks, representing spirits of the woods or spirits confronted by their ancestors, were used during potlatch performances and whose object culture was originally best known beyond Canada in the form of the Haida Gwaii totem poles, written about by Tylor and Boas and cherished by major institutions—the Pitt Rivers Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian, and so on (fig. 7). The traffic in Haida artifacts has played a prominent role in anthropology, in ethnographic display, and in tourism, the tourist literature of the late nineteenth century identifying the Indians of the Northwest Coast as “the artistic savages of the world.”⁴⁹ As Stocking puts it, “the very materiality of the objects of material culture” meant that they could be dislodged, exchanged, or stolen, readily entering “Western economic processes of the acquisition and exchange of wealth.” He goes on to argue that the “objects of ‘material culture’—which in traditional contexts often had spiritual value—are respiritualized (in Western terms) as aesthetic objects at the same time that they are subjected to the processes of the world art market,” a market that always threatens to compromise their authenticity (“EM,” pp. 5, 6).⁵⁰ There was already a market, in the first half of the nineteenth century, for seamen, traders, and tourists, who purchased argillite carvings and masks (made for the market); by the 1860s model totem poles became the favorite souvenir; and by the end of the century (smallpox having reduced the population to twelve hundred and that population having left its traditional home) well-known artists (notably Charles Edenshaw, whose transformation mask from 1890 resides in the Pitt Rivers Museum) worked very self-consciously to learn and preserve traditional techniques and designs. These days, when the work of Haida artist Bill Reid appears on the back of the Canadian twenty-dollar bill (the aboriginal in Canada and

49. Quoted in Jonaitis, “Northwest Coast Totem Poles,” p. 104. On the traffic in Haida art, see Jonaitis, “Traders of Tradition: The History of Haida Art,” *Robert Davidson: Eagle of the Dawn*, ed. Ian M. Thom (Vancouver, 1993), pp. 3–23. On totem poles and museum culture, see Jonaitis, *From the Land of the Totem Poles: The Northwest Coast Indian Art Collection at the American Museum of Natural History* (Seattle, 1988).

50. Ruth Phillips points out that “a central contradiction [runs] like a fault line through standard museum representations of Native art and culture. This contradiction arises directly from unresolved conflicts between the romanticized, dialectical notion of the modern and the primitive, and a persistent discomfort with the logical consequences of commoditization.” A cruder way to put the point, circa 2000, is that “authentic” artifacts were stolen; anything legitimately purchased is part of modernity and can’t exude the aura and appeal of externality, of otherness, that aboriginal objects should have (Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* [Seattle, 1998], pp. 49–50).

elsewhere coming to function as a sign of the national) the very significant high-end market includes artists such as Robert Davidson (Edenshaw's great-grandson), Jim Hart, and George Storry, well known throughout the province and beyond it (figs. 8–9). The low-end market amounts to tourist trinkets that you can pick up at several shops in Vancouver, just one dimension of what Charlotte Townsend-Gault has termed “the polymorphous proliferation of First Nation designs, images and motifs over the last 15 to 20 years.”⁵¹ Prototypical Haida design, known nationally and internationally, appears on all sorts of objects: scarves and serving trays and sweatshirts and skateboards (fig. 10). All this is to say that, from the 1840s to the 1990s, both Haida objects and “Haida” objects have become part of many object cultures. The very ubiquity of the design makes Jungen's masks recognizable at a glance as “Haida” (which is not to say that one or another doesn't suggest, far more precisely, a Kawkwaka'wakw analogue).⁵²

The second object culture evoked by the pristine display of Jungen's masks (which he insists on) is that moment in the history of European aesthetic sensibility—primitivism—when “tribal artifacts” became redesignated as art, their further recontextualization exerting a new “power over their viewers,” but, as Stocking says, “a power not simply inherent in the objects, but given to them by the museum as an institution within a particular historical sociocultural setting” (“EM,” p. 5). Within the history of European art, that new power was mediated most famously by the Museum of Ethnology at the Trocadero, which provided Picasso with the formal inspiration to complete the large canvas he had been struggling with in 1907, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the premiere exhibit of the MoMA “Primitivism” show, and, arguably, the painting in which Picasso “discovered modernism.” In 1903, the new decoration for the ballroom of the governor's mansion in Victoria included Haida motifs; in 1927, a gallery in Paris exhibited the paintings of Yves Tanguy with carvings from the Northwest Coast;⁵³ and during that decade two books (one published by a school of art and design) appeared in Europe that were based on museum collections of Northwest

51. Townsend-Gault, “Circulating Aboriginality,” *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 2 (2004): 187.

52. I myself have to object to my specification of Haida design as the source for the masks, and certainly many spectators would recognize the masks as more simply Northwest Coast forms or, more generically, “tribal” forms. My specification simply follows that of many reviews of the Prototypes while seeking to add, however gesturally, a historical dimension. Still, it is important, I think, to sense the dynamics of citation and recirculation (let alone interpellation) among the First Nation cultures of the Northwest, especially given that the Dane-zaa are not coastal.

53. See Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition*, pp. 119, 127.

Coast specimens.⁵⁴ African artifacts have had a more famous art-historical presence in European art history, but work from the Northwest Coast became no less aesthetically respected, ultimately the subject of “ethnocentric awe” and “escalating markets.”⁵⁵

The third object genealogy is located neither on the Northwest Coast nor in Europe, but in the United States where Nike’s production of Air Jordan sneakers, originally designed by Peter Moore, began in 1985 (fig. 11). Banned at first by the NBA because the dramatic color scheme violated the association’s design code, and originally disliked by Michael Jordan, who said of the first designs that they looked like “devil shoes,” Air Jordans have since become the marketing triumph of the sportswear industry, by now famous and infamous for their expense—Air Jordan VIs sold for \$125 in 1991—and for their status as collector’s items.⁵⁶ Indeed Nike itself reproduces earlier models in their Retro and Retro Plus editions; retros of the Air Jordan VII, originally on the market in late 1991, were released again in 2002 and 2004. (Of course, illegal copies have also been manufactured.) The sneakers themselves have always relied on complex, citational design. One was inspired by the F-117 Stealth Fighter; many incorporate Jordan’s number 23 (or his Olympic number 9) into the stitching or the design of the shoe itself; and the Air Jordan XXI, released in February 2006, makes use of the grill design from the Bentley as inspiration for its side vents. Increasingly the objects themselves approach the status of metaobjects.⁵⁷

Jungen has commented at some length on the initial stages that led him to the Prototype refabrications (fig. 12). He describes being in New York and visiting the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of

54. See Christian F. Feest, “From North America,” in *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 95.

55. Townsend-Gault, “If Art Is the Answer, What Is the Question?” p. 102. See Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin, Tex., 1997).

56. Jungen speaks of finding Air Jordans at Niketown for “almost \$300” (Jungen, “Aboriginal Art Turned inside Out,” interview with Danielle Egan, theyee.ca/gallery/2006/01/26/AboriginalArtInsideOut/. On eBay, 29 June 2009, the “Buy It Now” price of a pair of Nike Air Jordan IVs White/FireRed, size 12, was two thousand dollars.

57. More recently (in 2007) Nike released the Air Native N7, specifically designed for Native Americans, wider and with a broad tip. The Associated Press report (26 September 2007) explains that “the N7 name is a reference to the seventh generation theory, used by some tribes to look to the three generations preceding them for wisdom and the three generations ahead for their legacy. . . . The design features several ‘heritage callouts’ as one product manager described it, including sunrise to sunset patterns on the tongue and heel of the shoe. Feather designs adorn the inside and stars are on the sole to represent the night sky.” Response to the Nikes has been mixed (“Nike Unveils Shoe Just for American Indians: Product Aims at Promoting Fitness among Population with High Obesity Rates,” www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20980046/). My thanks to Jonathan Berliner for news of this new design.

Art, and then Niketown, “where they also present their products in big, hermetically sealed vitrines.”⁵⁸ “I went to a sports store and purchased a number of pairs of Air Jordan sneakers and began to dissect them, which in itself was interesting—in that it was almost a sacrilegious act: cutting up and ‘destroying’ these iconic, collectible (and expensive) shoes.”⁵⁹ The emphasis on the iconicity of the shoes is of particular importance because it helps to dramatize what one might call a rival act of recontextualization and appropriation, within which the sneakers attain new value or within which the exhibition value of Nikes has been disclosed as having greater priority than any exchange- or use-value. “It was interesting to see how by simply manipulating the Air Jordan shoes you could evoke specific cultural traditions whilst simultaneously amplifying the process of cultural corruption and assimilation. The Nike ‘mask’ sculptures seemed to articulate a paradoxical relationship between a consumerist artifact and an ‘authentic’ native artifact.”⁶⁰ Rather than Western art being rejuvenated by the incorporation of “primitive forms,” First Nation art is rejuvenated through the incorporation of the Western commodity, but a product that has much of the totemic potency we associate with “tribal art.” Moreover, the Prototypes enact a counterappropriation from the North American sports world that has consistently used Native American imagery for its emblems.⁶¹

Michael Jordan and the Nike swoosh have achieved an international recognizeability in excess of Haida iconography. Air Jordans could well serve as the paradigmatic object for apprehending a global object culture just as Nike often serves as the paradigmatic global corporation; the title of *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* makes immediate sense; he is the most recognizable individual worldwide.⁶² There are college courses offered on the Jordan phenomenon and on Nike’s work to turn him into “everybody’s All-American commodity sign,” at once catering to the fascination with the black male athlete and transcending race; and on the “intertextual corporate coalition that engineered Jordan’s global ubiquity”: “Michael Jordan’s commodified image can be confronted with startling regularity when strolling through the commercial hyperspaces of the

58. Jungen, interview with Morgan.

59. Quoted in Cuauhtémoc Medina, “High Curios,” in *Brian Jungen*, p. 33.

60. Jungen, interview with Mathew Higgs, *Brian Jungen* (Vienna, 2003), p. 25; hereafter abbreviated *BJ*.

61. In Jungen’s words: “If it’s OK for North American sporting teams to use imagery and language and even some crude ceremonial practices of Native Americans, then I feel like I have every right to use sports equipment. What sport fulfills in contemporary North America is this kinship ritual among fans” (“ITD,” p. 36).

62. See Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York, 1999).

world's major cities, deindustrialized urban wastelands, excessively affluent suburban fortresses, or even rural hinterlands."⁶³ Originally signing Jordan in 1984 (for \$2.5 million over five years), Nike aired the "Jordan Flight" commercial in 1985 and sold \$100 million of its new Air Jordan line that year, the demand ultimately outstripping the supply. Nike was also one of the first U.S. corporations to depend on outsourcing (in the 1980s), establishing factories in Taiwan and South Korea, then China and Indonesia and Vietnam, finding itself entangled in labor disputes and subject to frequent publicity for its exploitation of foreign labor.⁶⁴ The Prototypes may be timebound the way the cetology series is not: "I think in 50 years people won't know what exactly Air Jordans were. They'll see these objects and it'll be like how the Surrealists used contemporary products in the 30s and 40s; you look at them now and it's like an arrangement of antiques" ("ITD," p. 36). But given how Air Jordans have depended on the global system for their production, marketing, and distribution, the Prototypes might be said to defy any specificity of place. The first sneakers that Jungen patiently unstitched were probably stitched, less patiently, in Vietnam.

For me it's useful—however traditionally anthropological—to think about Jungen's "cultural corruption" (his term; *BJ*, p. 25) with the help of Lévi-Strauss's work on the masks of the Northwest Coast—*La Voie des masques*, the way of the masks and the voice of the masks. Lévi-Strauss was trying to resolve the discrepancies in form between a particular Salish mask and a Kwakiutl (now Kwakwaka'wakw) mask, concluding that, within distinct origin myths for the masks, there are transformational relations that, from a purely plastic point of view, prevail among the masks themselves, thus explaining why the sunken eyes *here* reappear as the protruding eyes *there*. His ultimate claim was that the masks from different tribes and different locales within the region form "parts of a system within which they transform each other."⁶⁵ My sense of Jungen's work is that it functions, say, to *expand the region under anthropological scrutiny* and to

63. Ben Carrington et al., "The Global Jordanscape," in *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*, ed. David L. Andrews (Albany, N.Y., 2001), p. 181. The authors go on in their essay to address the reception of Jordan in New Zealand, Poland, and Britain.

64. Sixty-five thousand factory workers went on strike in Indonesia in 1992, eventually raising their wages from \$1.20 to \$1.80 a day. See Douglas Kellner, "The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance?" in *Michael Jordan, Inc.*, p. 55. For details on Nike's early outsourcing, see Robert Goldman and Stephen Papon, *Nike Culture: The Sign of the Swoosh* (London, 1998), pp. 1–23. Jungen most explicitly addresses the sport/labor nexus in *Court* (2004), an installation piece where 224 sewing tables make up a small-scale basketball court.

65. Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, trans. Sylvia Modelski (Seattle, 1982), p. 93.

expose other systems in which artifacts appear as transformations of one another, in which “they transform each other.” Which systems?

Most obviously, within a gallery, the art system, where the Prototypes invert and recode that appropriative act by which Western art made use of “other” cultures. Like the “tribal artifacts” recontextualized as art, the Air Jordans have been dislodged from their original scene (of display, consumption, and use). Second, the system of conspicuous display, the process of creating and preserving cultural capital. The Prototypes highlight the ways in which Northwest artifacts and Air Jordans look like versions of one another in their iconicity and sign-value, indeed even their value on the market. That is, they appear as one another not just plastically but structurally; their exhibition, sign-, and economic value seem to minimize their use-value. (Indeed, Air Jordans are often not worn because of the threat of violent theft.) Third, the international “traffic in culture,” from the anthropologist’s traffic in artifacts from the nineteenth century to the global marketing enabled by new networks of communication.⁶⁶ Fourth, the systems of fetishism through which inanimate objects “are not perceived as inert matter but as quasi-living power objects.”⁶⁷ All this is to say, more epigrammatically, that in these acts of refrabrication Jungen transforms the sneakers into what they already are.

Of course, the confrontation—or, better, simply, the conflation—of these three object cultures and these four systems provokes some new predicament of culture. Attention has been drawn, very successfully, to how Jungen’s work relies on cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes to complicate and criticize the modes by which things mediate people. Jungen himself has spoken eloquently both of the influence of growing up in a household where “improvisatory recycling was born out of both practical and economic necessity” and of his attempt, with the Prototypes, to transform these objects into a new “hybrid object, which both affirms and negates its mass-produced origin and charts an alternative destination to that of landfill” (*BJ*, p. 29). But it also works to disclose a certain thingness derived from what Keane calls the “very materiality of objects.”

In Heidegger’s famous account of Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes, he works to discover the equipmental quality (the equipmental being) of equipment, the reliability of “a pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. . . . From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. . . . In the shoes vibrates the silent

66. I’m borrowing the “traffic in culture” from Meyers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham, N.C., 2002), pp. 342–61.

67. Medina, “High Curios,” p. 33.

call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.”⁶⁸ But shoes as Jungen has reconfigured them disclose a different being, a different thingly feature, a certain uncanniness that unsettles the thing as formed matter for human use. Not at first glance, perhaps, but with some concentration, these works prove so arresting because they are neither one thing nor the other, which is to say, by my light, that their thingness emerges from a kind of oscillation: neither plastic chairs nor whale skeleton, yet both skeleton and chairs.⁶⁹ Neither sneakers nor mask. Both mask and sneakers. The relays between these object forms might finally disclose the life and longing of the constituent materials; the oscillation enchants dyed leather into a thing that drifts in excess of any object form. It allows us to imagine, I think, a world where the material around us—the denim of your jeans, the glass of your watch crystal, the wood of your chair seat—has, as the object of its desire, perhaps, the desire to be some other object. It is as though Jungen’s work begins to expose a newly animate world, a secret life of things that is irreducible to the object forms with which we have constructed and constricted our world. And it is the recognition of that life, I think, that holds some promise for transforming life as we know it.

68. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 33.

69. Jungen told Alexander Varty that “someone once told me that when they look at the whales it kind of hurt their eyes, because they were jumping back and forth between the chairs and the skeleton. . . . It was a kind of like looking at an optical illusion” (Alexander Varty, “Culture Shock,” 2 Feb. 2006, www.straight.com/article/culture-shock?#).



FIGURE 1A. Brian Jungen, *The Prince*, 2006. Baseball mitts, dress form 208,3 cm × 49,5 cm. Sender Collection, New York.



FIGURE 1B. Brian Jungen, *Carapace*, 2009. Industrial waste bins, 11.63' \times 26.25' \times 21.9'. Courtesy of the artist, Casey Kaplan, NY, and Frac des Pays de la Loire, France. Photo: Mathieu Génon. © Brian Jungen.



FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3. Brian Jungen, *Bush Capsule*, 2000. Plastic chairs, polyethylene, fluorescent lights. Dimensions variable. Catriana Gallery, Vancouver.



FIGURE 4. Brian Jungen, *Furniture Sculpture*, 2006. Natuzzi sofas, wood. Photo credit: Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery.

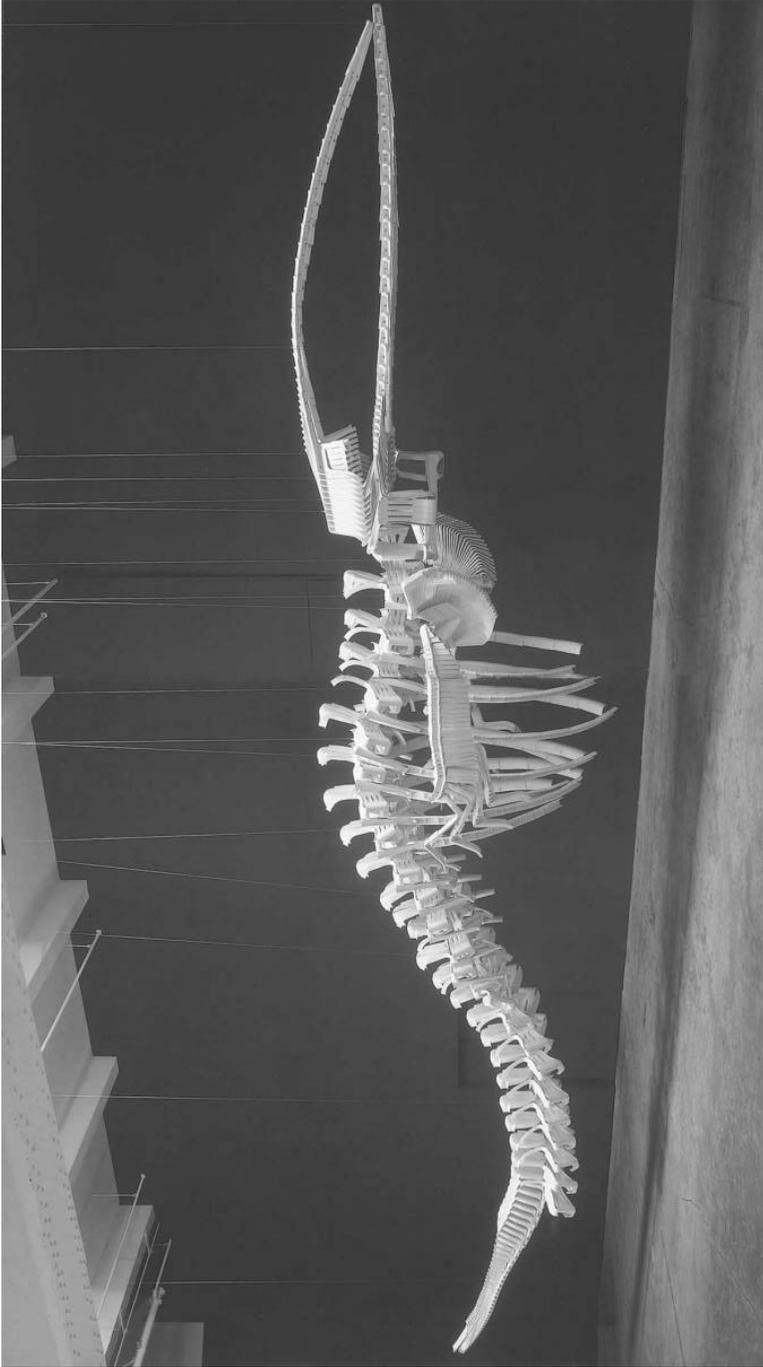


FIGURE 5. Brian Jungen, *Cetology*, 2002. Plastic chairs. 403.9 × 421.6 × 1491 cm (159" × 166" × 587"). Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery.

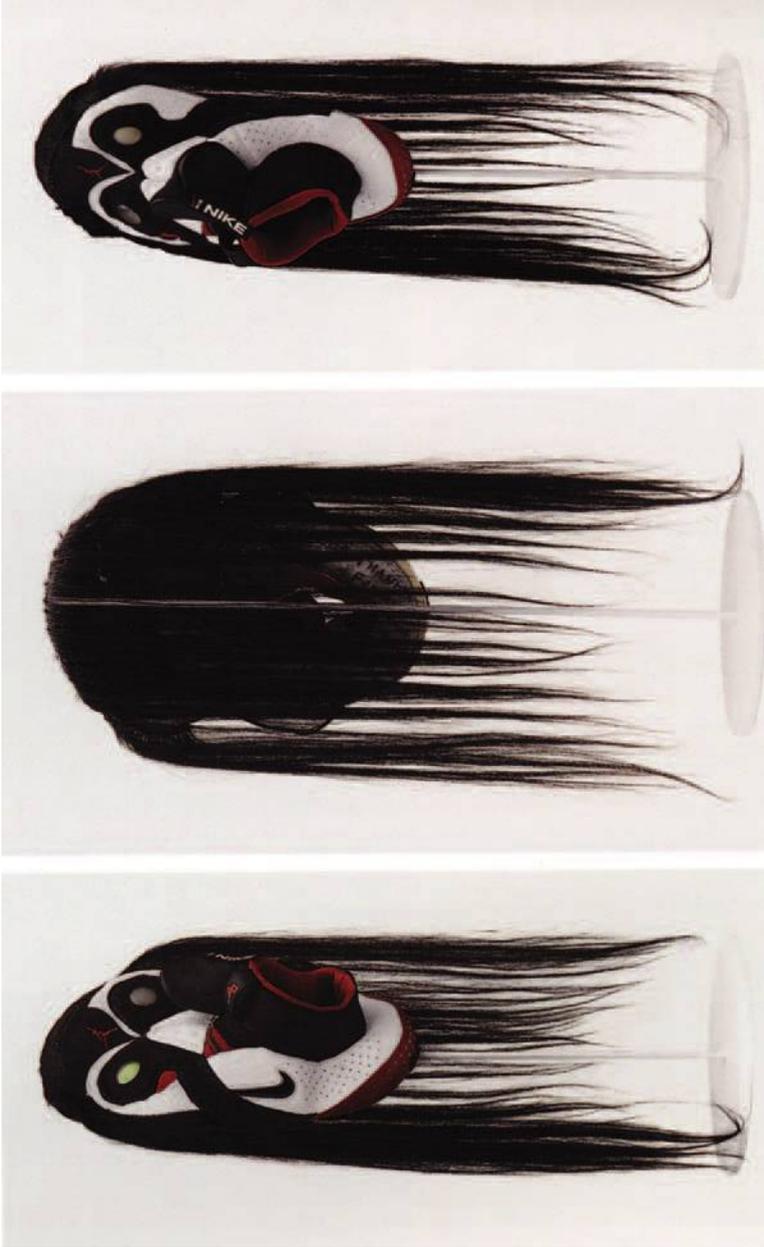


FIGURE 6. Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding* #9, 1999. Nike Air Jordans, human hair. 60.5 × 25.4 × 12.7 cm (233/4" × 10" × 5"). Collection of Greg and Lisa Kerfoot, West Vancouver/Whistler. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery.



FIGURE 7. Transformation mask. Collected on Haida Gwaii (probably at Skidegate) in 1879 by Israel W. Powell.



FIGURE 8. Robert Davidson, *Eagle Transforming into Itself*, 1990. Red cedar, acrylic, goat hair, operculum, cedar bark. 121.9 × 91.4 × 55.8 cm. Collection of Stuart O. McLaughlin, Grouse Mountain Resorts, Ltd., North Vancouver.



FIGURE 9. Robert Davidson, *Three Variations on Killer Whale Myths*, 1986. Private collection.



FIGURE 10. Haida-design skateboard.



FIGURE 11. Nike Air Jordan.



FIGURE 12. Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding #7*, 1999. Nike Air Jordans. 27.9 × 35.6 × 55.9 cm (11" × 14" × 22"). Collection of Joe Friday, Ottawa. Photo: David Barbour.