Objects and People Symposium on life & death among things

Friday May 3rd, 2019 • 10:00 am – 6:00 pm • 1501 UH
Panel 1 – the world in an object 10.00-12.00

Krzysztof Pijarski
Perpetual Inventory. Zofia Rydet Archiving the World

Agata Zborowska
Between Hostility and Hospitality: The Life of Things in Post-War Poland

Katarzyna Bojarska
An Object that Wasn’t There: the Unthinkable History of a Monument to Female Victims of Majdanek

Lunch break 12.00-13.00

Panel 2 - words and objects 1.00-3.00

Michał Paweł Markowski

Karen Underhill
Renegade Objects: On Sholem Aleichem's 1905 Stempenyu as lieu de mémoire

Andrzej Brylak
Leo Lipski’s Theory of Subjectivity: The Abyss of the Sea - Where People are Dying...or Not

Coffee & snack break 3.00-3.30

Keynote Lecture 3.45-5.45

Erica Lehrer
Awkward Objects of Genocide: Vernacular arts, ethnographic museums, and Holocaust bystander memory in Poland
When, in 1978, Zofia Rydet began working on the series that would later be called Sociological Record, little did she know the extent to which the project would consume her. Photographing people in Poland in their homes, or on their doorsteps, as well as in their surroundings, she produced a massive archive of nearly thirty thousand negatives replete with faces, interiors, objects, and pictures. “Perpetual inventory,” a job description that drew the attention of Robert Rauschenberg, seems to perfectly describe the character—encompassing, interminable—of Rydet’s life project. Rosalind Krauss used this description as title for her account of Rauschenberg’s involvement, in his practice of collecting and reusing silkscreens of popular imagery, and his project to produce a photographic record of America, “foot by foot, ‘in actual size,’” [Krauss, 1999] with the idea of an archive that she defined as a “photographic corpus through which reality is somehow ingested, organized, catalogue, and retrieved.” [Krauss, 1999] The same could be said about Zofia Rydet’s Record, except that the focus of her interminable quest was a world – of objects and people – that was on the verge of disappearing, and the way she chose to approach it could be called one of “participant objectification” (after Bourdieu): the encompassing character of the project in tension with the individual focus, the objectifying, unifying logic of the lens in tension with photography’s tendency to invite the contingent, material accumulation of the experienced world, the presence of the sitters in tension with the presence of their past selves (in pictures hanging on the walls), the logorrhea of the objects in tension with the enigma of Rydet’s sitters as embodied beings. What I will try to do is to try to develop Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of participant objectification in the context of Rydet's work, in order to better understand this equation of people and objects, this focus on stark materiality or bare objecthood in Rydet's perpetual inventory.

Agata Zborowska  
**Between Hostility and Hospitality: The Life of Things in Post-War Poland**

The presentation examines the personal experience of post-war migration to the “Recovered Territories,” focusing on questions: “How did people deal with this resettlement?” and “How did they organize a new life?” The Recovered Territories have been treated in popular culture (literature, films, and newspapers) as a version of the “Wild West.” Apartments were frequently left in a hurry; they were open and “waiting.” The new authorities encouraged Poles to settle on the new lands and take over everything that was left there. So, everything awaited their arrival.

Maps and landscape imagery was supported by the image-making of “material things”—everyday objects, operated as a “products of imagoes, that are widely shared, practically useful, and publicly verifiable” [W.J.T. Mitchell, 2006]. Images of German things were a source of representations and desires that influenced social practices— that “taught” their viewers how to obtain, use, and enjoy them. In this paper, I explore how everyday objects left by Germans were used and transformed into “hospitable things” waiting and longing for new caregivers. Structured around a series of close readings of visual materials (reportages, documentary films, and cartoons), as well as diaries and memories of the Polish settlers, the paper examines the importance of this kind of personification in personal experience, reconstructing a complex affective post-war landscape.

Agata Zborowska post-doc Fellow at The University of Chicago, Department of Anthropology, editor of View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture Journal www.pismowidok.org
Katarzyna Bojarska

An Object that Wasn’t There: The Unthinkable History of a Monument to Female Victims of Majdanek

This is going to be a story along the lines of Benjaminian potential history. This is going to be a story of two monuments raised in the midst of the Nazi death factory at Majdanek, in Lublin, Poland by Polish inmates of the camp to its male and female victims. This is going to be a story of political and ethical responses to the experience of loss, and of the idea of the monument of genocide and of difference, and of making difference. During an archival research at Majdanek I carried out for a short documentary on monuments in former concentration camps, I came across a testimony of a female architect, Helena Kurcyjuszowa, the survivor of Majdanek who not only was one of the key witnesses in the trials of the SS team of the camp, and the chief architect of the postwar Szczecin, but also the author of the project (in 1943) of the monument of the women murdered in Majdanek, the female victims of the Nazi genocide. Her gesture was a response to the “monument” that was raised on the “male field” couple of months earlier. The story of this object that wasn’t and isn’t there opens up a space not only for a historical fantasy, but also for a serious theoretical reflection on the idea of the monument and commemoration of the genocide, as well as on the role of the witness.

Katarzyna Bojarska

Fulbright Visiting Professor at the Department of Slavic and Baltic Languages and Literatures, University of Illinois at Chicago, assistant professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Science (Warsaw), editor of View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture Journal www.pismowidok.org
Michał Paweł Markowski

“The Most Beautiful Object Is the One Which Doesn’t Exist”: Herbert and Miłosz On Things, Modern Art and Nothingness

Drawing on a discussion in the 1960s between Herbert and Miłosz about the former's Study of the Object, I will show how two major Polish poets went into the opposite directions towards Modern art and abstraction, establishing a general framework within which thinking about objects was developed in the second half of the 20th Century. In the end, I am returning to Kasimir Malevich, whose Black Square served as a possible reference for Herbert, to show how his Suprematist theory and practice of painting helps to understand the place of represented objects in the Modernist art.

Michał Paweł Markowski

Stefan and Lucy Hejna Chair in Polish Language and Literature Professor and Head, Department of Slavic and Baltic Languages and Literatures University of Illinois at Chicago

https://lcsl.uic.edu/slavic-baltic/people/faculty/micha%C5%82-pawe%C5%82-markowski
Karen Underhill
Renegade Objects: On Sholem Aleichem's 1905 Stempenyu as lieu de mémoire

This talk presents research into a Yiddish-language manuscript found among bags of Yiddish newspaper clippings, children’s plays and personal papers in a used bookstore near the University of Chicago campus. Research revealed that this previously unknown manuscript is the original 1905 dramatization, by Sholem Aleichem, of his own first novella Stempenyu. Treating the disappearance of the manuscript as a metonymy for the spectralization of Yiddish culture within American Jewish communities, this talk also asks: what is the peculiar power of the recovered manuscript as material object? As a renegade piece of pre-war, pre-holocaust cultural history, that makes its uncanny appearance outside the archive, outside the museum and the auction house? When such an object does appear, what demands does it place on us?

Karen Underhill
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Andrzej Brylak

Leo Lipski’s Theory of Subjectivity: The Abyss of the Sea - Where People are Dying...or Not

This paper discusses the work of Leo Lipski in relation to his archive located in the Emigration Archives in Torun, Poland. Lipski’s personal notes reveal what can be provisionally called his theory of subjectivity, in which the level of subjectivity is measured through sexuality. Sexuality in Lipski’s view essentially takes the form of various degrees of objectification. Lipski’s subjectivity is destined to be lost in three consecutive stages: 1. The Subject becomes 2. An Object 3. An Object dissolves into the abyss and loses all human features in the process of the unification with nature yet maintains some degree of consciousness and perhaps memory. The third stage Lipski writes about in the 1950s calls for an interpretation in the light of the contemporary discourses of necropolitics, the ontology of dead bodies, human agency, and the Anthropocene.

Andrzej Brylak

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Erica Lehrer
Awkward Objects of Genocide: Vernacular arts, ethnographic museums, and Holocaust bystander memory in Poland

What insights can be gleaned about Polish Holocaust memory and testimony by examining “folk art” made by Polish “vernacular” artists, documenting the German occupation of Poland? How might a range of disciplinary approaches, including art history/visual culture studies, oral history, anthropology, and museum studies, tell us about the motivations, functions, and ethical implications of such seeming “arts of witness”? Based on preliminary research, this talk considers the status of “art naïve” in the contexts of Holocaust art history; ethnographic museology; and bystander testimony.

Erica Lehrer
Sociocultural anthropologist and curator. She is currently Associate Professor in the departments of History and Sociology-Anthropology at Concordia University, Montreal, where she also is Founding Director of the Curating and Public Scholarship Lab (CaPSL).
https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/history/faculty.html?fpid=erica-lehrer