

story. The language of Tupperworld is full of character: Tupperware 'burp', Poly Party, Lazy Susan, Cake-Take, Econo-Canister, Salt-n-Pepper Caddy'. And many of the illustrations are laden with period charm. Advertising and promotional pictures emphasize context. These are well balanced, however, by Tupper's fantastic design sketches, patent drawings and photographs of Tupperware, as displayed by the Museum of Modern Art, included to demonstrate the abstract purity of the designs. The result is a rich study that explores its subject on a variety of levels and in relation to a wide range of contexts.

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Notes

- 1 Gregory Votolato, *American Design in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester University Press, London, 1998, pp. 255–8.
- 2 John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto, London, 1989, p. 100.
- 3 Richard Hofstadter, William Miller & Daniel Aaron, *The American Republic*, vol. 2, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, p. 298.
- 4 Titles by Horatio Alger include *Making His Way: Frank Courney's Struggle Upward*, *World Before Him*, and *Ragged Dick Or, Street Life in New York With the Boot-Blacks*.
- 5 Jeffrey I. Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1997 and 'Into the fourth kingdom: representations of plastic materials, 1920–1950', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1992.
- 6 My mother, Mary Votolato, hosted Tupperware parties in the early 1950s in a middle-class Italian community where guests contributed regional dishes to the ethnic catering. A local Tupperware representative, who ensured that entertaining displays of the product line kept the party lively, orchestrated the events. Everyone bought, and all proceeds were donated to Saint Rocco's Church.
- 7 See Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, p. 38.

Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life

Judy Attfield. *Berg*, 2000. 318 pp., 30 illus. £14.95 paper. ISBN 1 85973 369 7.

In Judy Attfield's words, *Wild Things* is 'a first step in establishing a theoretical starting point which,' she hopes, 'can contribute to a larger project in the investigation of the material culture of everyday life'

(p. xiv). As such, *Wild Things* should partly be seen as a theoretical intervention in the field of design history aimed at reconfiguring the study of 'things' (ordinary material things) under the more variegated umbrella of material cultural studies. This, then, is a claim that our object world (our designed environment) will benefit, not from the scrutiny of a canonical history of design, nor from being subsumed within the field of 'visual culture', but from being studied within the emergent fields of material culture and everyday life. Crucial to this argument is the insistence that what has been missing in academic attention to things, is any address to the 'thingness' of things: to their *lived* materiality.

Wild Things is an ambitious book and its objective appears to be twofold. On the one hand, by positing 'everyday life' as the arena where 'things' are found, Attfield continually refocuses design history on the less prestigious, more ubiquitous world of reproduction furniture, suburban semi-detached housing, and such like. On the other hand, the more substantial ambition is to generate theoretical 'scenarios' (so to speak) that might accommodate these things in all their wildness. Attfield is suggesting that, within the everyday, things function in a way analogous to the 'wild' cards in a card game (p. 74); their meaning is not simply unstable but non-existent until they are played and their value is designated. Yet the card game analogy is less than perfect. More useful for understanding *Wild Things* might be the way that the term 'wild' operates in the work of Michel de Certeau (a French theorist who, while often mentioned in *Wild Things*, is not someone Attfield particularly engages with). For de Certeau the 'wildness' of the everyday resonates in both a major and minor key. At one level, the wildness of the everyday is simply the 'untamed': it is what gets remaindered when the everyday is scrutinized from a rationalistic perspective (major key). It is also, more mundanely (and more appropriately), all those burps, hisses, whispers, crackles and slurps that sound engineers refer to as 'wild' and that get filtered out in the production process of sound recording (minor key). It is this minor sense of the wild that seems most appropriate to *Wild Things*. 'Wild things' for the traditional design historian, like wild sounds for the sound engineer, are the unwanted, unanticipated, extraneous, excessive meanings that have to be filtered out in accounts of objects.

To get the 'wild' back into the mix, Attfield orchestrates a number of theoretical discussions around notions of authenticity, ephemerality, time, space and 'containment' (this last term being the theoretical construct that Attfield uses to suggest the way that 'wild things' are managed and put into 'a particular kind of eccentric order' by individuals). In a fine account of reproduction furniture, Attfield manages to wrestle the notion of authenticity away from its more insistent association with 'originality'. In doing so she returns the meaning of 'authenticity' to the sphere of everyday life, where the emphasis is not on provenance and innovation but on a lived connection to temporal continuity. In this way, 'reproduction' can be lived as authentic because it offers (both maker and owner) a link to tradition. Similarly, in her discussion of the 'textility' of fabric she suggests that the material qualities of clothes (the evidence of wear, the intimate relationship with bodies) make them particularly suited to bearing memories (albeit in ways unavailable to scrutiny). In one particularly poignant passage she reveals that, following the recent death of her father, she now keeps his 'most loved cardigan' in her jumper drawer.

To invoke the 'material culture of everyday life' as the topic of study means to privilege an experience of the world in its most deeply felt yet uneventful form. Material things are often invested with desire but this desire is not recoverable by simply confronting the material thing. What needs recovering is the intimate history of the objects and the way that the physical qualities of things become invested with content. One of the cornerstones of her account of cultural materiality is provided by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's theory of transitional objects. For Attfield 'the child's comfort blanket' (which is the exemplary transitional object) is 'the paradigmatic cultural object' (p. 130). For Winnicott, the child's comforter (my daughter's is a mass-produced soft toy known, for obvious reasons, as 'smelly duck') acts as a palliative for the traumatic transition from babyhood to childhood. In practical terms such comforters often facilitate weaning, but in a more 'gothic' sense they help the child negotiate the path from a state of non-separation (where everything within the infants range, including its body, parents, toys and fabrics is experienced as coextensive and where there is not yet a sense of 'self') to the recognition of separation (of subject-hood). Attfield uses Winnicott to consider

the physical materiality of transitional objects, and more generally the psychic investment that can obtain to things. For this she suggests that transitional objects operate at a metaphoric level: that is they substitute like for like. In the case of a 'smelly duck' the likeness that it activates is (I would assume) the smells, orality and softness of my daughter's suckling past. This sense of metaphor allows for a general consideration of the properties of materiality; it tells us why fabrics become transitional objects and not building blocks. Yet this does only tell us about the generality of things. I would argue that it is not metaphoric operations so much as metonymical ones that allow us to consider the particularity of things.

Now, while this might seem like a particularly obscure point to pick up on, it does have very real consequences. Towards the end of the book, Attfield relates some ethnographic research on the way some older people negotiated moving into sheltered accommodation, and the inevitable 'editing' of their material possessions that accompanied it. When Mrs Tucker was interviewed about her valued possessions she described her statue of 'Buddha' (one of the few possessions to make it to the new address): 'My uncle brought that from India when I was a baby. And it was in . . . my mother's home and I was the only one who ever polished it. I was attached to that Buddha from my earliest remembrance. And I've never been without it' (p. 258). While, no doubt, the statue's polish-ability is crucial here, it is not the metaphoric sense of substituting like for like that seems at issue (what, materially, could the statue be 'like' that would make it so important?). More significant is the metonymical link back to the uncle and to the household where the young 'Mrs Tucker' was the only one who cared for the uncle's gift. In a similar metonymical way, what is crucial about smelly duck is its link back to a state of more amorphous plenitude. In fact the transitional object might best be thought of as a synecdoche (a particular kind of metonym), as a fragment that represents a greater whole, in this case the amorphous wholeness of pre-selfhood. Metonymy suggests that material objects act as *witnesses* to a past (they were there at the scene, so to speak), which gets relayed through the object in a variety of forms.

If the metonymical aspect of material culture is privileged (and this is the implicit assumption of the ethnographic examples cited in *Wild Things*) and seen

as central to the everyday life of material culture, then a number of issues are at stake for studying 'things' as part of the everyday. First, it might suggest that the object is not what is actually being studied; rather, 'things' are being used as ciphers that can relay particular memories. If this is true then the umbrella term that might incorporate design history is not so much 'material culture' but a more general sense of the social history of everyday life. Second, and much more important as far as I can see, is the difficulty that it evidences in providing *general* interpretative accounts of cultural objects (or cultural history for that matter). The metonymical dimension of things seems to insist on their absolute *particularity*. If this is the case, then things might be seen to generate the historical on an exponentially enlarged yet microscopic scale. In the end, this might simply result in a massive (not to say unmanageable) archival practice that is in danger of not being able to speak because everyone (or everything) is talking at once. Of course, as Attfield so rightly suggests, just because meaning is particular and resolutely individual, does not mean that it is not also social. And it might well be that the social dimension of metonymy (the social dreams, fears and aspirations that accompany 'things') is what could allow the study of the everyday life of material culture to provide important accounts of our social world.

Wild Things is an initial foray into a territory that, for all its ubiquity and ordinariness, remains acade-

mically uncharted. For me it is not a book to agree with or disagree with, but a book to *think with* (and what more could you ask for?). In many ways, though, *Wild Things* is not a book that is centred on 'wild things'; or rather it does not take the wildness of things as its primary subject matter. It is a theoretical book that tries to pave the way for allowing the wildness of things to emerge. In doing this we might well ask what would happen if 'wildness' became the primary subject? What would a book look like that tried to be true to the 'wild' orchestration of the heterogeneous everyday? How would it write the uneventful stubborn excess of the everyday without cleaning it up, smoothing it out and ultimately taming it? In the preface to *Wild Things*, Attfield states that her writing practice 'has been to adopt a style of tacking back and forth between rhetorical questions, theoretical devices, items taken from the personal minutiae of everyday life, and illustrative case studies' (p. xiii). The style is purposefully 'inconsistent'. Perhaps, then, the way that we write the material culture of everyday life will require us to embrace inconsistency and to experiment with the very form of articulation. The muffled cacophony of the everyday and the stuttering things that reside there offer an imaginative challenge to those who want to write about 'wild things'.

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What does the life of everyday objects after the check-out reveal about people and their material worlds? Has the quest for the real thing become so important because the high tech world of total virtuality threatens to engulf us? This pioneering book bridges design theory and anthropology to offer a new and challenging way of understanding the changing meanings of contemporary human-object relations. The act of consumption is only the starting point in objects lives. Thereafter they are transformed and invested with new meanings that reflect and assert who we are. Defining design as things wi