

**Postscript 59:
The Social and Soulful Lives of Things**

**MILLIE CREIGHTON
on YUJI AGEMATSU**

Memory Vignette #1, January 1995:

I walk the streets of Kobe one week after the Great Hanshin Earthquake. It shocks my taken for granted assumptions of how objects—including large buildings—are spatially arranged. Cars are upended vertically, half buried in the ground; buildings no longer “behave,” multiple floors have shifted, hanging precariously over floors below. I see them in the debris, two small blue and white dishes intact except for some chips along the rims, partially buried in heaps of rubble and dust. I feel unsure whether I notice them, or they are attempting to attract me. I pick them up, “salvaging” them from the otherwise next, and likely last, stage of their lives as the rubble is removed to trash processing centres.

Yuji Agematsu presents us with objects reverberating with their very thingness. His work compels us to contemplate objects, confront our preconceptions of them, reconsider their social lives, their possible soulful lives, our relationships with them and their relationships with us. These objects are not glamorous nor beautiful; they are not shiny and new. They are broken down, used up, discarded, tossed out, or are just pieces of such things. They beg the question, “Is this Art?” Some may see them more as garbage. These objects have become “Art”—with a capital A—partly because they are displayed in an art gallery. Hence potential garbage becomes what anthropologist and art analyst Jacques Maquet (1986) calls “Art by metamorphosis.” Certainly there is more to art

than that. There are numerous discussions surrounding ‘what is Art?’ or how it is defined or conceptualized. One frequent association with art and one often persisting in the general public, is that art evokes the idea of beauty. Being beautiful seems not what makes this Art, at least at first. Another concept of art is something that presents us with new perspectives, challenging us to think in new ways. This criteria I can immediately apply to Agematsu’s work. It has been said that things are good to think with. These objects are things to think with, and about, and through. Viewers bring their own backgrounds as lenses to contemplate these things. Mine is as a Japan specialist. This exhibition prompts the memories of experiences with objects in Japan, which I incorporate into this essay, one at the beginning and the other two dispersed through it.

Agematsu has lived between Japan, where he was born and raised, and the United States, particularly New York. Although he may not necessarily think of himself as blending those two backgrounds, I see them merging in this work in which New York meets Japan. “New York” is seen in an art heritage from those such as Andy Warhol whose work shocked audiences with its very “thingness”—giving viewers the “thingness of things.” Warhol and his contemporaries broke boundaries between fine art and commercial art, between everyday objects and art objects. Agematsu goes further, breaking conceptual boundaries between that which is refuse and that which is art; are these things ‘objets d’art’ or ‘objets de trash?’

Memory Vignette #2, February 2006:

The ceremony is listed in a Kyoto magazine. I go and find the kimono clad women representing seamstresses and housewives entering the temple for the annual *Kuyo* (memorial service) for old needles. Used up in their occupations, these objects are bent, tarnished, and no longer usable. The Buddhist priest expresses gratitude to the needles, essential for clothing makers. Each woman then stands and walks to the central area, and inserts her needles into the wax slab positioned there. The needles' lives are passing, but not without recognition.

Objects are important to humans; touching us in literal and intimate ways. In *The Social Life of Things* (1986) anthropologists explore the meanings of things, their life stories, ways they are used in constructing identities, relationships, and social networks. Agematsu not only presents us with things, but things arranged in a context framing them in relationship to other things. Many are things Agematsu picked up that may have otherwise been swept away as rubble like the two small plates I "rescued" from the aftermath of a great earthquake. Once collected by Agematsu they may have been bagged, and later removed, revealing traces of metamorphosis as time and elements continued their slow transformations even while these objects were stored. The arrangement of the objects convey connections. Bits of cigarette butts link with other cigarette butts. Objects hanging under the display table suggest connection to

those above it—like unseen roots have connections to things above ground. By suggesting movement their placement elicits another category of objects—animals or 'animate objects'; a matchbox is upended with match heads appearing as if they will crawl across the tableau like small crabs scuttling across a beach, pieces of auto tire positioned like snakes about to slither past each other.

Memory Vignette #3, November 2012:

I visit Mondoyakujin Temple in Nishinomiya to see the dolls displayed prior to the big bonfire. I am attracted to these objects, and note many from decades past, no longer made. Many are worn out, but others do not seem so. No longer needed by the people whose lives they shared—or belonging to someone of an earlier generation no longer part of a family household—they are brought to the temple to end their social lives in the annual doll burning ceremony in which their souls are released with gratitude.

If Agematsu's art offers "Something New York, Something Japanese" what might be the something "Japanese?" Different cultural lenses provide different ways to contemplate objects. Those writing about "things" and their social lives in the West write about the importance of human relations with objects. Seldom is the boundary between objects and humans questioned. In the Japanese version that boundary is not so emphatic,

and the distinction differentiating animate and inanimate things is also not as strong. Animate objects, such as animals, are understood as living beings but still as objects—with a “thingness” to them. Likewise, Japanese nomenclature allows one to more easily sense the “thingness” of humans. A Japanese word for object or thing, *mono* (or *sha*) when used for things with material form can be applied to humans with no derogatory connotation. Agematsu allows us to contemplate human connections to objects, and perhaps ourselves as objects. We share with the objects displayed a material form that takes up space, that transforms or changes through our existence. Like them we have biographies, social histories and relationships, and also like them we are not destined to be permanent. The vignettes in Japan of the ceremonies for old needles, and dolls soon to be burned, project parallels of human and non-human objects. They express gratitude to things used up in service for humans and are symbolic stand-ins for humans. People who have lived long or well are often conceptualized as having been used up; their lives have been of service, they have worked and contributed. They are not merely to be discarded but considered with gratitude. Such sentiments can be applied to “other” non-human objects. Kim Nguyen’s text on Agematsu points out that by the time someone reaches 58 years of age, that person will have spent nearly 1770 hours brushing his or her teeth. Viewed inversely, by the time someone has reached 58 years of age, objects called toothbrushes have given nearly 1770 hours of service helping maintain the person’s health and oral hygiene.

To cultivate such a sensitivity for other objects is to also cultivate a grateful heart towards objects of the human variety. In our contemporary consumerist lives a modern retailer proclaims that Toys R Us. It is not just toys that are us; Things R Us, and we are things—objects with material form.

Things are good to think with. Thinking with the objects presented by Agematsu allows us to rethink our boundaries between different kinds of things. It was initially via this perspective that I was able to experience his work as “Art.” The exhibition and objects displayed did not fit ideas I had of “beautiful” things or of Art engaging beauty. Then I recalled a line from *The Museum of Innocence* (2009) in which Nobel Prize recipient Orhan Pamuk contemplates objects. He writes, “the past is preserved within objects as souls are kept in their earthen bodies, and in that awareness I found a consoling beauty that bound me to life.” With that awareness, the glimmerings of Agematsu’s work as Art via a now differently understood potential beauty in the objects displayed also began to glow.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, Arjun (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Maquet, Jacques (1986) *Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Pamuk, Orhan (2009) *Museum of Innocence*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.

Dr. MILLIE CREIGHTON is a professor and Japan specialist in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia where she was one of the founders of the Centre for Japanese Research. She has researched and published extensively on Japan and other parts of Asia, on topics including consumerism, work and leisure, gender, minorities, civil society, the Japanese constitution, Article 9, tourism, advertising and art. She was awarded the Canon Prize for her work analyzing the interplay of culture and consumerism via Japan's department stores.