

i s r f b u l l e t i n

Issue XXI

The Secret Life of Objects

Edited by Dr Lars Cornelissen

i s r f b u l l e t i n

Issue XXI

The Secret Life of Objects

First published July 2020
Copyright © 2020 Independent Social Research Foundation

See the online ISRF Bulletin (www.isrf.org/bulletin) for more articles by ISRF
Fellows and associates, including earlier versions of some of the pieces included
in this print issue.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL	4
DR. LARS CORNELISSEN	
DIRECTOR'S NOTE: OUR SECRET LIFE OF OBJECTS	7
DR. LOUISE BRADDOCK	
TOOLS IN THE SEARCH FOR HUMAN REMAINS	9
DR. LAYLA RENSHAW, MARINA ÁLAMO BRYAN, DR. ZUZANNA DZIUBAN, AND DR. CLAIRE MOON	
THE ASSEMBLAGE OF WORTHLESS SCRAPS INTO COMPOSITIONS	21
LEAH DURNER	
GIFTS FROM ARMS FAIRS	29
DR. JILL GIBBON	
LISTENING TO OBJECTS	37
DR. JEFFREY MURER	
BUSTING 'CHURCHILL'	51
DR. LARS CORNELISSEN	

EDITORIAL

Dr. Lars Cornelissen

ISRF Academic Editor

As I am preparing this issue of the ISRF Bulletin for publication in July 2020, the social order as we know it feels like it is being shaken to its core. Challenged not only by the Covid-19 pandemic and its myriad social, economic, and political implications but also by a global wave of anti-racist demonstrations, today's dominant mode of governmental reason seems once again to be facing a crisis of legitimacy. Although one should be careful not to announce its demise prematurely, it feels increasingly unlikely that the liberal status quo will come out of these times unscathed.

It feels strange, therefore, to be compiling a Bulletin issue that does not address these topics head on. As an organisation that is focused on the critical analysis of real-world problems and that, both academically and politically, unreservedly supports anti-racist struggles, the ISRF certainly encourages and supports reflection on these topics, as it has always done. Now, as ever, timely and informed critique is crucial.

But this is not to say that the need for timely critique exhausts the role of scholarship in times of crisis or disruption. In other words, even if thoughtful reflection on current affairs is undoubtedly necessary, a case must also be made for the continuation of what feminist criticism has come to call 'slow scholarship.'¹ Good research more often than not requires time: time to think, to ruminate, to edit, to deconstruct. The demand that scholarship be of immediate relevance to the present, that research agendas adjust themselves to ever-changing circumstances and to the temporal regime set by the news cycle,

1. See Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, Winifred Curran, "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235–1259. My thanks goes to Craig Jones for bringing my attention to this work.

runs counter to critical scholarship's ultimate horizon: an alternatively organised world that is not marked by the forms of injustice that scar the present.² But thinking—and thinking through—alternatives is laborious, and is not easily rushed.

It is in this spirit, then, that I present the latest issue of the Bulletin: not as an alternative to reflection on current affairs, but as a complement to it, as a companion and interlocutor. As a collection of pieces that were written, conceived, or researched long before the outbreak of Covid-19, this issue speaks to a conceptual and methodological theme that has emerged across a number of ISRF-funded projects over the past few years. This theme is objects and their place in the social sciences.

In what way, this issue asks, may the study of objects inform our understanding of social or cultural life? What conceptual or methodological challenges arise from the study of (or with) objects? Where do material objects sit within broader structures of signification? And how do they supplement, undergird, or otherwise interact with human subjectivity? In posing these questions, this issue builds on the well-established notion that objects do not form a wholly separate and silent backdrop to human agency but are woven into it, are required for and complicit in it.

Each of the pieces included here, then, explores those uncanny moments at which objectivity and subjectivity, the world of things and the world of meaning, are not so easily distinguished. In their contribution, Layla Renshaw, Marina Álamo Bryan, Zuzanna Dziuban, and Claire Moon explore some of the objects that populate the field of citizen forensics, inquiring into the way that forensic tools intersect with human remains and become liminal objects that exist somewhere between the realm of the living and that of the dead. Painter Leah Durner reflects in her piece on the central role that materiality plays in her own artistic practice, focusing on a particular range of collages she assembled and reflecting in particular on the various materials used and her reasons for choosing them. By foregrounding the materiality of

2. On this topic see also chapter 1 of Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

her art in this way, Durner sheds light on the point at which seemingly worthless objects and aesthetic practice meet.

Jill Gibbon uses the complimentary gifts that are commonly handed out at arms fairs—toy bombs, facsimile arms, emblazoned stationary—as a window into the morbid culture that not only surrounds the arms trade but that also props it up, providing it with a veneer of decency, hospitality, and playfulness. Jeffrey Murer, for his part, explores the interplay in museum spaces between aesthetic objects, architectural space, and affective experience, proposing a ‘hermeneutics’ of curated objects as a means of stimulating one’s engagement with that which is Other. In my own contribution to this issue, finally, I discuss the complex relation between aesthetic objects and the political realm, looking at the way that some busts of Winston Churchill have in recent years become hotly contested political signifiers.

More than collecting a number of excellent articles, the present issue also marks something of a threshold for the Bulletin. Indeed, the Bulletin was recently moved online (at www.isrf.org/bulletin), meaning that it has now become a platform not only for short scholarly articles—such as the ones included in this print issue—but also for exactly the kind of timely critical intervention alluded to above. The Bulletin’s online presence will not endanger the print edition, which will continue to appear on a termly basis, but is meant to supplement and complement it.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: OUR SECRET LIFE OF OBJECTS

Dr. Louise Braddock

ISRF Director of Research

Freud was interested in objects; as artefacts from the past they stood, often literally on his desk, for objects in the mind: archaic, enigmatic, inscrutable, with memories to guard or with riddles to pose, like the Sphinx. Such images are readily understood as metaphors for Freud's archaeological conception of the human psychical past. Less well understood is his theoretical use of the idea of an object, which has its origin in his exposition of the basis of depression in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. The melancholic is a mourner, reproaching and attacking someone now lost but still ambivalently viewed and so perpetually retained in the mind as recipient of love and hate together. As the object of these conflicting emotions the lost person cannot be relinquished and instead is incorporated into the mourner's own self-image so that the reproaches and hate aimed at the lost person land back on the mourner's own self. Freud writes that 'the shadow of the object fell upon the ego' to produce melancholia, a depression characterised by feelings of self-vilification and worthlessness. But his account shows quite generally how a person can be held in mind as an object of love or of hatred, can be idealised or vilified, preserved or attacked.

In the subsequent development of object relations theory Melanie Klein showed how young children's play with dolls and other toys depicts an inner world of family life. In the child's imagination the family is a field of relations among parents and children who exist there as objects of the child's emotions. A key step in emotional development is the recognition that those objects, rather than being created under the 'shadow' of one's own feelings, are possessors of feeling and capable of emotion in their own right. Klein named this the depressive position, to mark the realisation by the person reaching this understanding that the inner warfare and aggression has been carried out on figures who are also loved and needed. The depressive position



Freud's study with his desk. Image courtesy of the Freud Museum, London (Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0).

is a developmental achievement we struggle to maintain against the more psychically gratifying—though also more primitive—position of paranoia, in which people are again equated with things, are reified or objectified, are not treated as persons at all. That this does indeed happen, all the time and a lot, is down to the way people's minds work in the situations they find themselves in.

All this is by way of saying that, 'the secret life of objects' parses as: persons have secret lives hidden from themselves; these are their lives with their objects. This quite neatly captures the thesis behind object relations theory, and it explains quite a lot about people and how they behave towards each other.

TOOLS IN THE SEARCH FOR HUMAN REMAINS

*Thinking Through Objects
in Forensic Practices*

Dr. Layla Renshaw, Marina Álamo
Bryan, Dr. Zuzanna Dziuban,
and Dr. Claire Moon

From the late 20th century onward, scientific techniques of forensic investigation have been increasingly applied to cases of death and disappearance resulting from political repression, war and disaster. Forensic techniques are used to locate and recover bodies, identify the dead and reconstruct how they died. Widely reported and well-studied examples include the investigations into Latin America's Dirty Wars, or the break-up of Yugoslavia.

These large-scale forensic investigations are often associated with states rebuilding themselves after conflict, or as part of political transition, under the auspices of transnational organisations such as the United Nations. Forensics as a means of confronting disaster and atrocity have accrued strongly positive moral associations of objectivity and certainty, perceived as bringing order and emotional closure, and countering historical revisionism or impunity.

Citizen forensics is the emergent phenomenon whereby laypeople, often close relatives of the dead, undertake the scientific investigation of crimes themselves, assuming investigative roles normally associated with state actors such as the police, or technical specialists and scientists. Key examples of this include the grassroots movement to exhume hundreds of Republican mass graves of the Spanish Civil War, and community-led searches for tens of thousands of abducted

and murdered civilians in Mexico, in light of the state's near-total abnegation of this duty over the past decade.¹

When coming together as an interdisciplinary group encompassing the social sciences and forensics, with diverse geographical and historical contexts including the contemporary violence in Mexico, the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and the battlefields of World War I, an important starting point was our shared attention to material practices.² An attention to the materiality of both the remains of the dead, and the tools used to find, contain and analyse the dead, crossed these disciplinary boundaries. The experience of fieldwork had left each of us with the lasting impression of the physicality of searching for the dead, learning the affordances of tools and equipment that are used. The long, drawn-out process of finding the dead had made us very conscious of the different steps in this chain, and the material transformations that occurred. Reflecting on the material practices surrounding different tools is a useful analytical approach to these encounters and transformations.

The tools considered here—the sieve for recovering fragments of teeth and bone that are mixed into the soil or scattered on its surface; the drill for penetrating through layers of burials that cannot otherwise be exposed or opened for conventional exhumations; the swab that samples the cells of living people so their DNA can be matched with the dead—are all windows into the different stages of the recovery of human remains. These tools are used in traditional archaeology and forensic science. Attending to these objects is particularly pertinent in

1. See Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Arely Cruz-Santiago (2016) "Forensic Civism: Articulating Science, DNA and Kinship in Contemporary Mexico and Colombia," *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, pp. 58–74 (DOI: 10.7227/HRV.2.1.5) amongst their important and pioneering body of work in this field, also first developing the concept of citizen-led forensics in their 2014 ESRC-funded project on the subject (see <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FM00063X%2F1>).

2. This piece emerged from presentations and discussion during the ISRF residential project *Citizen Forensics: Materializing the Dead from Grave to Gene* in 2019. The original invitees to the project include Marina Álamo Bryan, Arely Cruz-Santiago, Zuzanna Dziuban, Claire Moon, Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Sarah Wagner, convened by Layla Renshaw. The authors would particularly like to thank Sarah Wagner for her valuable contributions and insights to these discussions of forensic tools.

citizen-led forensics, as the tools are functioning as boundary objects between both layperson and expert, and, more unusually, boundary objects between the living and dead.³

A common reality in citizen forensics is that these endeavours are grossly under-resourced, especially in relation to the magnitude of the task. This means that tools may be adapted from other walks of life. The tools then carry associations from their previous uses. The large sieves used to catch fragments of human skeleton are the same sieves used to sort grades of sand and gravel, loosen earth in gardens and farms, or even sift grain for food. Archaeology has a long history of borrowing tools from geology and the natural sciences and repurposing them for human remains. These prior uses may seem jarring at first, but also add new layers of symbolic associations to working with the dead. For example, the extractive nature of the drill, originally designed for the geological sampling of soils and minerals, is highly suggestive of the way the dead and the past are mined as a resource.

The prior histories of tools such as sieves, spades or probes, are also fundamental to understanding the muscle memory and embodied knowledge necessary to using them successfully. The physical knack that surrounds their usage is transmitted between groups of relatives and campaigners, blurring the boundary of who is an expert and what constitutes expertise in these searches for the dead. Forensic work is popularly thought of as a minute attention to detail, and the reading of faint traces, but much of it is also manual labour. In attending to acts of digging or sieving, it becomes very apparent that the use of these tools is cathartic, and can be a physical expression of postmortem care for the dead.

Conversely, the workings of these tools expose the violent and reductive processing of human bodies and human identities, and those moments of destruction and selection inherent to forensic science.

3. See Claire Moon (2013), "Interpreters of the Dead: Forensic Knowledge, Human Remains and the Politics of the Past," *Social & Legal Studies* 22(2), pp. 149–169, which incorporated Star and Greisemer's 'boundary object' idea (1989) into the study of forensics and human remains to theorise the ways in which human remains sit at the intersection of diverse sets of interests, relationships and temporalities as well as political and ethical imperatives.

Dead bodies are frequently imagined as fixed or unitary entities. But an analysis of forensic tools destabilises this perception. Attending to objects reveals how much the physical form and ultimate fate of the dead are conditioned by the tools used to recover them. The breadth of tools needed highlights how many different ways the dead are materialised—in dusty fragments, in traces in the soil, or even in the DNA of their descendants.

These investigations are hybrid acts that encompass political protest, citizen science, and profound expressions of post-mortem care for the dead. A focus on the materiality of tools and human remains, and the physical practices surrounding them, permits an analytical engagement with these emergent processes as all these things at once, without imposing reductive categories or narrow disciplinary approaches.⁴

The Sieve: On Sifting as an Epistemological and Political Gesture

The use of the sieve in archaeology enables a mode of observation that carries with it political implications, especially in contexts of forensic analysis of clandestine graves in the aftermath of mass violence. Sieving leads to the recovery and salvage of unnoticed material, that would be missed were it not for the intervention of the most humble of tools: the sieve, sifter or screen. In its simplicity, it is meant to divide matter of differing sizes, to better inspect objects once loose soil is eliminated from the observation environment. However, sieving or sifting, as an instrumental and bodily gesture, quickly becomes political

4. For a foundational work detailing the social and cultural impact of a war crime investigation, and the differing valences of the scientific techniques employed in this process, see Sarah Wagner, *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing* (Berkeley, CA 2008: University of California Press). For an in-depth example of how the lens of material and visual analysis illuminates forensic practices, see Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin/Frankfurt am Main 2012: Sternberg Press/Portikus). For a close semiotic reading of other forensic practices, not covered here, see Zoe Crossland (2018) "Forensic Afterlives," *Signs and Society* 6(3), pp. 622–647. For a discussion of how forensic tools and equipment contribute to the transformation of bodies and objects into forensic evidence see Layla Renshaw, "The Forensic Gaze: Reconstituting Bodies and Objects as Evidence," in Zuzanna Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the Forensic Turn* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017), pp. 215–235.



A sieve. Photo by Heriberto Paredes Coronel

as it determines what is deemed interpretable evidence and what is not, remaining outside of recovery efforts and the scope of analysis.

A sieve is such a simple tool that it easily goes unnoticed, yet its function and adequate application can be incredibly transcendental—it can, for example, define if a fragment of human bone, that can lead to identification, is retained for analysis or not. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider the nature of the sieve as object, and the gestures involved in its application. Usually composed of a wooden frame holding a metal screen, net or mesh in place—a window frame with mosquito netting is its closest cousin—its use involves the depositing of soil, dirt, sand or other matter into its midst, and the subsequent shaking of the frame, resulting in the sieving of the material: the smaller particulate matter falls through the holes of the mesh and onto the ground, while larger objects remain on the screen, allowing further inspection and selection by hand.

Various models of screen or sieve have been used in archaeological contexts throughout time, and debate frequently ensues about which method is best. Varying materialities of the sieve itself can determine what is considered analysable evidence in a forensic setting, which can have strong political implications. Sieves have varying grades of mesh that will trap fragments of different sizes, determining what will be retained during a search, and what will be discarded. Ash that falls through the holes in a sieve can remain outside the scope of analysis.

On a technical level, ash has limited potential to lead to identification through DNA analysis. Yet in the context of mass atrocity involving the burning of human remains, human ash might hold as much affective, political and even sacred value as a recovered bone fragment. The discarding of ash reveals the problems of categorising human remains based on their potential for scientific analysis, rather than on the basis of their significance in the social worlds where the intermixed ash and bone reside. Furthermore, the ash returns to the surroundings as if reintegrated into the natural environment, as if it belonged there all along, as if it was merely soil and not the material result of processes of violence that interrupted and disrupted this place and its inhabitants.⁵

Sieving implies two types of actions, first it *separates* elements into categories, dividing the world to be observed into at least two parts: what is worthy and what is worthless in the context of a specific act of observation. Secondly, sieving implies *extraction*: specific types of matter are withdrawn from their original context, to allow for observation and analysis—in a detached setting, be it the mesh, an observation table or eventually a lab bench or a specific instrument for analysis. The act of separation between coarse material and finer particles, leads to a selection process whereby some fragments become salvageable and others not. Matter deemed wanted, worthy of further inspection and analysis remains in the mesh after sifting. Below the screen, sometimes reintegrated into the complexity of context, lingers matter considered unwanted or impossible to analyse.

Sieves and sifting screens are thus decision-making tools intertwined in epistemological processes. Their use determines what is and what isn't worth inspecting, analysing, and rescuing from an environment characterised by complexity. Sieving disaggregates and separates matter into types; it is not merely an action that performs a step in a process towards analysis of material. Sieves are objects that—through their correct and incorrect use—allow or disallow the construction of signification. In forensic settings, what is and isn't considered analysable evidence quickly leads to what will and will not be considered as truth. The sieve thus might seem a simple instrument, but its application

5. On further consideration of the epistemology of ash, see: Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis, MN 2014 [1987]: University of Minnesota Press).

involves gestures that carry with them always a certain epistemological intentionality and politics of observation.

The Drill: Ethics and Aesthetics of Subsurface Extraction

There are various methods, techniques and tools that allow human remains to emerge from the soil. The destructiveness of these methods has been a matter of debate in the field of archaeology. The excavation disrupts and alters the ecology and identity of a landscape, gradually stripping it of its layers. Augering, in turn, is considered to cause minimal disruption: a drill merely punctuates the ground and thus maintains its integrity, extracting from below the surface, layer upon layer, only the core of the sediment, the profile of the soil. The investigation of disposals and burials resulting from mass political violence, in which archaeology has often been reconfigured in terms of care for the dead, invites a need to revisit this doxa and to attend to the ethics and aesthetics of the drill as it reaches to, touches and extracts the dense fabric of a clandestine burial.

While augering has been used in archaeological and forensic contexts to direct and facilitate systematic exhumation of the dead—which involves a gradual and careful uncovering of remains and their equally



Nazi extermination camp at Sobibor. The location and extent of the graves was determined by augering. The graves have not been exhumed but protected in perpetuity. Photo by Zuzanna Dziuban.

careful removal—there are cases in which a drill serves as a primary tool to establish the presence and location of graves, whose contents are not exposed further.⁶ This may be the case when political pressure, harassment of the investigators and immediate danger prevent a full-scale investigation of a grave. It may be that religious and cultural norms forbid the opening of a grave, or when the landscape as a whole has a protected status as a site of heritage or memory.⁷ The subsurface extraction performed by the drill, in this case, is the sole material presence below the surface and enables a unique gaze into those aspects of the graves which are not available to the naked eye, of the invisible-but-imagined density of a burial, composed of different soils, objects, and human remains.

A drill used to locate mass graves has a diameter of 65 millimeters (2.5 inches) and penetrates the ground to the depth of 8 meters. Driven into the ground manually, it requires physical strength in the struggle against soil resistance, often also against the resistance of tissues and bones. Extracted from a borehole is a cylindrical sample of up to 25 centimeters in length, a soil core providing information on the depth of the burial, its thickness, on the level of decay and condition of the bodies, often also on the form of their disposal. After penetrating through the grave, the drill withdraws layers of incinerated or fragmented bones, of skeletonised or organic remains in various

6. Augering, followed by exhumation of the dead, was performed by archaeologists searching for the Polish victims of the Katyń massacre in 1940. The same team of archaeologists deployed this method to locate disposal pits at the former National Socialist extermination camps Bełżec and Sobibór. The latter graves have not been unearthed. For a detailed account of this archaeological method and its application in the contexts of political violence, see Andrzej Kola, *Archeologia zbrodni. Oficerowie polscy na cmentarzu ofiar NKWD w Charkowie* (Toruń 2011: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK); Andrzej Kola, *Bełżec: The Nazi Camp for Jews in the Light of Archaeological Sources. Excavations 1997-1999* (Warsaw/Washington: The Council for the Protection of Memory and Martyrdom/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

7. For a more detailed analysis of religious and political implications of and constraints to the application of augering in the archaeology of the Holocaust, see Zuzanna Dziuban, "(Re)politicizing the Dead in Post-Holocaust Poland: The Afterlives of Human Remains at the Bełżec Extermination Camp," in: Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Élisabeth Anstett (eds.), *Human Remains in Society: Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass-Violence* (Manchester 2017: Manchester University Press), pp. 38–65.

stages of disarticulation and decomposition, and waxy residues of body fat in the form of adipocere.

What emerges is an epistemically complex material, to be subjected to expert analysis and inscribed into orders of knowledge. But it is also a sensuous matter, not easily readable or categorisable for non-experts, fragmented and fragmentary, comingled, and unruly. It is a matter that proves the drill's ability to work against the obfuscating capacities of the soil but also speaks to the limits of what can be touched, sensed, seen and imagined: what the drill extracts is a vertical snapshot, a decontextualised element of the dense ecology and identity of the clandestine burial, a dismembered part of a human body. In this way, the drill possesses a certain aesthetic and ethical violence as it punctuates the ground without allowing human remains to fully emerge—the drill disturbs and injures human remains, it incites and, at the same time, arrests the possibility of care. It forces the imagination to further roam below the ground, to the unseen, untouchable, and unreachable.

The Swab: The Transformation of Self into Sample

The swab used for DNA sampling is normally a cotton bud on a long wand that can be rubbed against the inside of the cheek in a circular motion to harvest the buccal cells, the tissue that makes up the inner lining of the cheek and sheds readily into saliva. This is then fastened into a sterile, tamper-proof tube so that it cannot be contaminated until the sample is ready to be processed in a laboratory. The genetic material within these cells is turned into a DNA profile that may be matched with other living relatives, or against a DNA profile generated from the remains of the dead.

There are other ways of sampling DNA from the living, for example from blood, but a key technological affordance of the swab is how non-invasive and unthreatening it is to use, requiring no particular expertise to harvest DNA from another person, and even to self-sample. This is part of what makes it such a powerful boundary object. A swab exists at the interface between the layperson and the closed, rarefied setting of the laboratory where the cells captured on the swab will eventually be turned into meaningful data. It is an essential

tool for those seeking scientific confirmation of their own identity or parentage, their deeper ancestral origins, and proof of their kinship with others, including their children, grandchildren, or long-dead relatives, lost in war or disaster.

A swab is the mechanism for taking a substance that already exists in your body and separating it off into a partible sample of yourself. This selection is the first stage in simplifying a complex person down to their essentials, for ease of comparison with others. The transformation of self into sample reveals the forensic potential of your body as reference data to serve in the identification of others, thus foregrounding the connection of your body to other bodies, living and dead. The web of spatial and temporal connections revealed by a DNA match radiate outward from the sample, but as we make sense of the results, these connections are drawn back into the embodied self, changing one's sense of identity.⁸ For many laypeople participating in genetic testing, the swab is the only materialisation of their DNA that they get to see firsthand, and it is certainly the most tangible and readily apprehended. The swab is more relatable than the microscopic world of the cell, or the readout of a DNA test, peaks on a graph, which are abstracted into a genetic code and then interpreted by experts.

The cheap mass-produced nature of the swab gives DNA technology some of its paradoxical tensions as a field of citizen science. The laboratory analysis, and subsequent interpretation and matching, are dependent on specialist knowledge and prohibitively expensive analytical equipment, located in highly controlled environments.⁹ Yet

8. For a wide-ranging discussion on the imaginary of DNA see Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Landee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004). Some fascinating analyses of the role of genetics in human rights investigations across generations have emerged in relation to ongoing work in Argentina. See for example Ari Gandsman (2009), "Do You Know Who You Are? Radical Existential Doubt and Scientific Certainty in the Search for the Kidnapped Children of the Disappeared in Argentina," *Ethos* 37(4), pp. 441–465. For an exploration of self, personhood, partibility and kinship in relation to developments in biotechnology, see Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

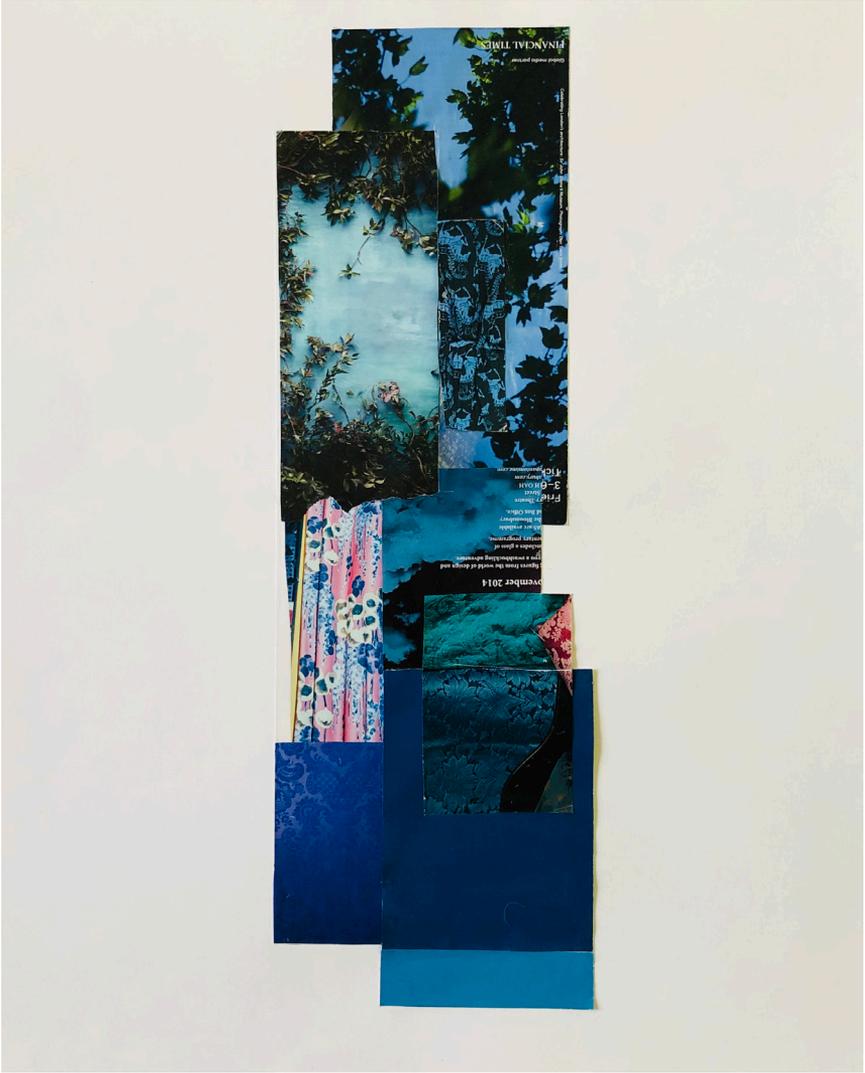
9. For a rigorous examination of the role of technology and power relations underpinning global human rights investigations, see Lindsay A. Smith (2017) "The Missing, the Martyred and the Disappeared: Global Networks, Tech-

there is a very low barrier to entry into this technology, as this chain of complex actions can be set in motion with just a cotton-tipped swab. The swabs are cheap and easy to procure when compared to other forensic tools. This means it is possible to rapidly accumulate large numbers of DNA samples from living donors, drawing a large number of relatives and supporters into networks around the dead.

The sample on a swab can be preserved and held in stasis for relatively long periods, even before it is processed. This makes the swab an interesting tool of political leverage. Even if those relatives and activists engaged in citizen forensics do not have the resources to process the sample in a laboratory, the inherent potentiality of the sample is powerful. The swab requires further analysis and so represents an incomplete action. It is a site of political tension, waiting for the money, expertise, and collective will, to resolve it. This can be strategically useful to compel state authorities or NGOs to commit their resources to analysing the samples. The taking of a swab initiates a chain of operations with its own momentum. This kind of material agency is subtle, and builds over time, mobilising our technocratic expectations of the state.

Genetics as a tool of human identification profoundly alters our accepted chronologies around death, memory, and the transmission of loss between generations. Fundamental to this is the transmission of DNA between generations, meaning that someone may be a viable source of DNA for a relative who died one hundred years ago, or a relative who died yesterday. For those who donate a DNA sample, and match with a long-dead relative, this collapse in time between death and identification, between skeletonised remains and living bodies, frequently induces a sense of vertigo. With these collapsed chronologies, it is no longer possible for state authorities to wait for past abuses to fade from living memory, in order for the missing or dead to be consigned to history. Campaigns to recover and identify the dead can potentially now operate with much greater historical range and sustain their political momentum for many generations. Even in the absence of more conventional sources on the past such as testimony, memory, or archive, the swab expands into these spaces.

nical Intensification and the End of Human Rights Genetics," *Social Studies of Science* 47(3), pp. 398–416.



THE ASSEMBLAGE OF WORTHLESS SCRAPS INTO COMPOSITIONS

Leah Durner

Independent visual artist, New York

Extravagance

is the term I use for a constellation of concerns—including largesse, beauty, joy, color, wandering, materiality, incarnated consciousness, and wild being—that comprises my ongoing artistic and theoretical project.

I arrived at *extravagance* as particularly apt through its etymology: from the Latin *extra*, “outside of” + *vagari*, “wander, roam” and for its discredited association. *Extravagance* itself embraces the “interdisciplinary” in a fluid way.

Left: Leah Durner, *Untitled (Financial Times)*, 2020, collage made with cut up *World of Interiors* and *Financial Times How to Spend It* magazines and Color-aid paper, sheet size: 24 x19 in 60.96 x 48.26 cm image size: 21 x 6.25 in 53.34 x 15.875 cm Incorporating images from the *Financial Times How to Spend It* issue on the Frieze art fair in London, this collage also references the commodification of fresh air and open space as luxuries.

My primary practice is as a painter working in poured enamel based in psychedelia and process art. I pull color choices for my poured enamels from the urban and mediated environment of my New York home, including from fashion, graffitied trucks, construction sites, street signs, magazine covers, modernist design, etc.

The constant production and distribution of material objects—created across time and with greater or lesser degrees of skill, of quality of raw and developed material, and of aesthetic sensibility—is evidenced all around us in New York and London, two cities that engage me here—as a citizen of New York and a friend of London. Drawing and painting on paper, including on found and ephemeral substrates, has been an ongoing practice parallel to and feeding my primary painterly practice. (In July 2019, I did the installation *Leah Durner works on gallery ephemera*¹—consisting of paintings on gallery announcement cards and brochures—in conjunction with the ISRF Workshop *Economics & the Plastic Arts* held at Goldsmiths University of London.²) Paper is a material manufactured in many ways—from the artisanal handmade to heavy industrial production—in an extensive variety of colors, thicknesses, qualities and finishes.

Material and financial realities are very much at play in the making of objects. In December 2019, a friend proposed a series of work sessions together in her very small apartment in Greenwich Village. Here a design problem presented itself: small space, transportability of supplies, and limited time were the parameters.

I elected to bring copies of the London-based magazine *World of Interiors* (known for its sumptuous photographs), the *Financial Times Weekend* magazine (tellingly named *How to Spend It*), fashion magazines and catalogues, and Color-aid paper to use as source material for a new group of collages.

Using my painter's eye to view these printed images as abstract forms, I select color and pattern from these sources where the original material objects—be they decorative objects, textiles, building elements, clothing, etc.—are photographed then printed on paper

1. See <https://vimeo.com/423086212>.

2. See <https://www.isrf.org/events/other-events/>.



Leah Durner, *Untitled (Chinese Gold)*, 2020, collage made from cut up World of Interiors magazine and Christie's brochure for *Masterpieces of Chinese Gold and Silver* auction sheet size: 24 x 19 in 60.96 x 48.26 cm. image size: 13 x 7 in 33.02 x 17.78 cm

This collage includes images of hand-made objects including a Chinese gold chape (the metal point of a scabbard), hand-painted folk furniture, hand-knit sweaters, and jacquard loom cards and cloth. Loom cards (invented 1803) enabled weavers to create complex and regular jacquard cloth and were precursors to computer programming punch cards.

and bound into a magazine, which I then cut apart and reassemble to make a new object—the collage. Detached from their identified forms and associations, I use these selected scraps to build abstract compositions that still retain traces of their underlying imagistic references. A magazine is a material object, a painting is a material object, a collage is a material object.

Arranging these patterns and colors abstractly retrains my vision in the living world—as I walk down the street in in the densely-packed visual field of New York, I read the world around me as abstract color and form. This all becomes very “trippy”—objects can lose their identity—and relates back to psychedelia (from the Greek *psyche*, “mind” + *delos*, “manifest”), which is an aspect of my larger artistic practice. In fact, for those of us with eyesight, our vision has been trained to identify colors, shapes, and patterns as objects and to give them meaning—it is a cognitive and not merely a retinal process to “recognize” what we are seeing. In addition to the shifting of visual engagement and the ambiguous identifiability of what is represented, the fluctuation of financial value—from the value of the original properties and material objects photographed, to the value of the magazine, to the value of the cut-up scraps, to the value of the collages in the art market—underlies the collages.

The collages address the scintillation of luxury and poverty, abstraction and representation, the material and the mediated, the ephemeral and the permanent, the grand and the humble that radiates through my work and thought on *extravagance*.

Right: Leah Durner, *Untitled (for Victor Hugo)*, 2019, collage made with cut up *World of Interiors* magazine, sheet size: 24 x 19 in 60.96 x 48.26 cm image size: 22 x 8.75 in 55.88 x 22.225 cm.

Art and interiors can also contain political meaning that is not immediately apparent. The red and pink images are of textiles and objects from Victor Hugo’s self-decorated house in Guernsey, where he lived from 1855-1870, exiled from France due to his opposition to Napoleon III. Hugo decorated his home over a period of six years collecting textiles and repurposing materials from second hand shops to create an environmental narrative. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/travel/victor-hugo-on-the-island-of-guernsey.html>.





Leah Durner, *Untitled (for Pauline)*, 2020, collage made of cut up *World of Interiors* magazine and Color-aid paper, sheet size: 24 x 19 in 60.96x 48.26 cm. image size: 17 x 8.25 in 43.18 x 20.95 cm

Image of blue and white striped fabric lower left is from Pauline de Rothschild's self-decorated Paris apartment. Pauline was a fashion designer for Hattie Carnegie and later was married to Baron Philippe de Rothschild of the famous banking family. Pauline was an aesthete renowned for her erudite taste in fashion and interior design. Pauline also oversaw the redecoration of the Rothschild's Chateau de Mouton, London *pied-a-terre* and other properties.

Some notes on the source material for the collages

WORLD OF INTERIORS—Particularly important as source material for my collages is *World of Interiors (Wol)*, the London-based interiors magazine launched in 1981 and edited by Min Hogg³ from its inception until 2000. Celebrated for its deeply considered and imaginative editorial approach, *Wol* sets forth the historical, landscape/place, economic, and familial/personal situation of each interior while also maintaining a sense of humor and lightness. (Family, cultural, economic and political history are written in the interior spaces we occupy.) The aesthetic of *Wol* is distinctly sumptuous and so provides a rich source of visual material. It covers interiors across national and economic borders giving equal weight to “great” houses and palaces, shelters built of sticks and mud, studios, and writing sheds—all created with imagination where rich and poor, amateur and professional designer are given equal respect and attention.

Related to the idea of collage in art (and reflected in the pages of *Wol*) is that of the transformation of interior spaces over time through the accretion/attrition of objects and furniture, through both decay and through renovations that, especially with historic houses, may uncover previously hidden walls, floors, rooms, and objects. In addition to the additive/subtractive actions of human beings, the actions of weather, animals, and plants on an architectural structure are also part of its history.

FINANCIAL TIMES—The *Financial Times*, another London-based periodical printed on its distinguishing salmon pink paper, specializes in international business and economic news—news that is inseparable from the political realities of the transnational global elite and its influence on government policies. *FT Weekend* includes the magazine *How to Spend It*, which focuses on leisure and the consumption of travel, houses, fashion, art, tech, food, jewelry, cars, boats, beauty treatments, etc.

COLOR AID—Color-aid was first manufactured in the United States in 1948 for use by photographers, comprising individual, richly painted matte sheets of 212 colors (later expanded to 314) based on the color chart. Shortly after its introduction, Joseph Albers began using Color-aid for the exercises in his famous color theory classes at Yale University,⁴ which led to the publication of his landmark work of pedagogy, *Interaction of Color* (1963).

3. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/obituaries/min-hogg-dead.html>.
4. See <https://albersfoundation.org/teaching/josef-albers/introduction/>.

GIFTS FROM ARMS FAIRS

Dr. Jill Gibbon

ISRF Early Career Fellow 2017–18

At the far end of the DLR line, below Canary Wharf where the latest stock prices flicker around electronic screens on the South Colonnade, lies the ExCel centre. A concrete, windowless edifice, it is designed to act as a fortress when necessary.¹ It is owned by the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre, a private development and management company based in the United Arab Emirates. Every two years, it is filled with weapons—tanks, missiles, bombs, armed drones, military bulldozers, helicopters, grenades, guns, bullets, and the euphemistically named ‘less lethal weaponry’: tear gas, rubber bullets, and protective clothing for the security services administering it. This is DSEI, the Defence Security Exhibition International, the world’s largest arms fair. It was established in 1998, and now hosts over 1,600 exhibitors and 36,000 visitors from 50 countries.² But, despite its scale, the event is exclusive. It is closed to the general public and surrounded by police and security guards. Guests include repressive regimes and countries involved in aggressive wars. Hostesses welcome clients with drinks, snacks, and gifts—stress balls in the shape of bombs and grenades, rubber tanks and military vehicles, a facsimile armament shell, jellied fighter jets, sweets and pens stamped with arms company names, condoms promising ‘the ultimate protection’, and toffees with the slogan ‘welcome to hell’.

I have collected gifts from DSEI and similar arms fairs for over ten years. They horrify and intrigue me. They give a visceral jolt. They

1. A. Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (London: Penguin, 2009), 13.

2. See DSEI, *Welcome to Defence and Security Equipment International* (2020), accessible at <https://www.dsei.co.uk/welcome>.

beguile with humour, seduce with sugar, and flatter with the promise of sexual liaisons and career prowess. They give a snapshot of the culture of an arms fair—its hospitality, alliances, camaraderie, and casual commodification of weaponry.

In the introduction to *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* Andrew Tan suggests there is surprisingly little research into the arms industry. He attributes this to a shift to post-positivist approaches in security studies and argues that ‘a more positivist analysis’ is needed to ‘provide a better description of the current phenomenon that is the arms trade’.³ But perhaps the opposite is the case. Perhaps, the arms trade is under-researched because it slips out of view of academic methods, both positivist and post-positivist. *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* contains invaluable analysis of the arms industry, but whether this fully describes the ‘current phenomenon that is the arms trade’ is another matter.⁴

The arms trade defies reason. At the end of the Cold War, there was a widespread expectation that military production would convert to civilian purposes as part of a ‘peace dividend’.⁵ Instead, arms companies merged into multinationals, expanded beyond national boundaries, and focussed on international sales. Yet, governments continued to give the arms industry an unusual degree of support in comparison to other sectors, despite the international emphasis of production and sales. The UK government pays for weapons research and development, brokers deals, lobbies clients, and subsidises exports.⁶ This makes little strategic or economic sense. When the UK goes to war it is sometimes fighting the same weapons it has helped to develop and sell. In the 2011 Libyan conflict, the UK, France, Colonel Gaddafi, and the Libyan rebels were all using missiles manufactured by the European multinational MBDA. Tony Blair helped to broker a deal between MBDA

3. A.T.H. Tan (ed.), *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2010), 6.

4. Ibid.

5. E. Sköns, ‘The US Defence Industry After the Cold War’, in: A.T.H. Tan (ed.), *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2010): 235-249, 237.

6. S. Perlo-Freeman, *Special Treatment: UK Government Support for the Arms Industry and Trade* (Stockholm: SIPRI and CAAT, 2016), 4, 28.



Image by the author

and Gaddafi in 2007.⁷ Meanwhile, the arms industry creates relatively few jobs in comparison to the subsidies it receives.⁸

Sam Perlo-Freeman links government support of the arms industry to the 'military industrial complex', a network of arms manufacturers, politicians and the military with a vested interest in weapons production.⁹ These networks are sensuous rather than reasoned. They are felt as the seductions and threats of power, bonds of loyalty, a desire for profit and status. They are acknowledged with a handshake, authorised with a suit, sealed with a drink and gift. These practices are aesthetic in the Greek sense of *aesthesis*: felt, sensed and enacted.

My research is influenced by Dada, an art movement that emerged in opposition to WW1. Dada artists rejected the idea that art should be detached from society and used aesthetic methods to strip back the polite veneer of the culture that had justified the war. As the Dada poet Hugo Ball wrote, 'It can probably be said that for us art is not an end in itself—more pure naïveté is necessary for that—but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we are living in'.¹⁰ Dada was a diverse movement, but characterised by an emphasis on performance, satire, and absurdity. George Grosz walked through Berlin dressed as Dada Death with a formal coat, cane, and skull mask; Hugo Ball recited poetry while wearing exaggerated outfits and waving flags. The use of performance implied that politics is played out through the body, gestures, and props as much through words, while the element of absurdity suggests politics is far from logical.

I visit DSEI and similar arms fairs by dressing up as an arms trader with a suit, heels, and fake pearls; then wander up and down the aisles gazing at weapons. Separated from the defence needs of any one

7. CAAT, *BAE and Libya* (2010), accessible at <https://www.caat.org.uk/resources/companies/bae-systems/countries/libya>.

8. P. Holden, *Indefensible: Seven Myths That Sustain the Global Arms Trade* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 84–89; Perlo-Freeman, *Special Treatment*, 7–13.

9. S. Perlo-Freeman, 'The United Kingdom Arms Industry in a Globalized World', in: A.T.H. Tan (ed.), *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2010): 250–265, 261.

10. H. Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58.



Image by the author



Image by the author

country, missiles and tanks are treated as commodities, part of the stock prices that flicker across the South Colonnade screens. Marx argued when an object becomes a commodity, its use value is eclipsed by exchange value, and it becomes a focus for fantasies. He described this in relation to a table: 'But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was.'¹¹

At DSEI, weapons are presented as transcendent. A Brimstone missile is suspended under changing coloured lights in front of a photograph of the London skyline. The promotional literature describes it as 'the most accurate precision strike missile on the market. When you have to hit a target, stay within budget and don't have time to waste, Brimstone is your answer.'¹² The Brimstone missile is currently being used by Saudi Arabia in airstrikes on Yemen. Yet, here, it is presented as the key to business efficiency. A gas mask manufacturer hands out condoms with the slogan 'the ultimate protection'. On a neighbouring stand, 'Team UK' offers advice on export licenses with 'government and industry working together' and 'international co-operation and partnerships'. Nearby, a recruitment company promises new jobs and contacts in the industry. Weapons are presented as facilitating success, virility, collaboration, and career progression.

As I walk past, I am offered a bomb-shaped stress ball. It does not look like a contemporary bomb. A black sphere with a string fuse, it is a symbol for a bomb, a sign. Camus suggested, 'The society of merchants can be defined as a society in which things disappear in favour of signs'.¹³ We know from Saussure that signs have shifting meanings.¹⁴ Soft and pliable, the stress ball embodies the shifting meanings of bombs in an arms fair. It is, first and foremost, a gift,

11. K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, transl. S. Moore & E. Aveling (1867), accessible at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Vol-1.pdf>, 47.

12. MBDA *Brimstone: Air to Ground Missile* (2017), accessible at <https://mbdainc.com/services/brimstone/2017>.

13. A. Camus, *Create Dangerously* (Milton Keynes: Penguin, 2018), 7.

14. F. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

an object of exchange. The round shape evokes cartoon bombs, and shared cultural jokes and memories. Its secondary function as a stress ball flatters the recipient that they have a high-pressured career. The bomb shape is simply a vessel for these allusions and fantasies.

The stress ball epitomises the industry's disavowal of the material impact of weapons on lives, homes, and communities when used. Yet, I accept it with a smile. A gift demands a polite response. Lewis Hyde suggests, 'gifts tend to be an economy of small groups, of extended families, small villages, close-knit communities, brotherhoods and, of course, of tribes.'¹⁵ The stress ball confirms my membership of the industry. Security cameras scan the crowd for adverse reactions. Whatever misgivings lurk beneath the surface, no one shows them, including me.

In the centre of DSEI, the BAE Systems subsidiary Bofors holds an extravagant promotion. A video screen is linked live to a weapons testing facility in Sweden. There is a countdown, then an armoured vehicle explodes in a spectacle of light and flames. A banner over the stand says, 'hell for your product, heaven for your investment'. The test centre promises to give weapons 'hell' to insure their success as products. Here, weapons are significant primarily as 'your investment'. Around the stand, hostesses hand out toffees with the slogan 'welcome to hell'. The typeface evokes the stenciled lettering used on boxes of explosives.

Outside DSEI, the toffees take another meaning. Walter Benjamin suggested that advertisements, viewed slightly out of context, give a more accurate picture of capitalism than criticism. 'What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.'¹⁶ Viewed in a puddle, an advertisement shows the tawdry lights of capitalism without the seductive detail of its promises. Encountered without the promotional video, the Bofors sweets offers the hell of war as a confection.

15. L. Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2007), xxi.

16. W. Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 86.

LISTENING TO OBJECTS

Hermeneutic Encounters with the Other

Dr. Jeffrey Murer

ISRF Flexi Grant Recipient 2019

At first, I could not discern what I was seeing: thousands of small metal disks piled on top of one another, covering the floor of the stark hall of unadorned, brutalist concrete. At the other end from where I was standing, two people, an older couple, walked delicately across the metal pieces, nonetheless causing a horrible crashing sound. The sound disturbed me; but when I recognised that the disks were small abstract cut-outs of human faces, I burst into tears. In that moment I could hear the faces screaming, and I was transported on a wave of sorrow and loss. I do not suspect that everyone, or even



A close up of Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves), Menashe Kadishman (Israel, 1932-2015). Image by the author.

most people, have the same emotional reaction when they encounter Menashe Kadishman's 1997 installation sculpture *Shalekhet* (Hebrew for fallen leaves) in Berlin's Jewish Museum, but for me the encounter was demonstrative of the interplay between objects, the meaning and significance that we give them, and the space or environment in which we encounter them. The same object in a different space may have a different meaning, or at least one's understanding of the significance of an object may change when it is juxtaposed in space or time or with other objects.

I was struck by my own experiences of this when I visited a number of museums and monuments with colleagues while in Berlin last August as part of the ISRF small research group residency programme. The differences in presentation were particularly stark in a comparison between the Jewish Museum's attention to experience that was enhanced by the materialities of the space—textures of concrete, the sounds of metal, the smells of foliage—and the primacy of material objects in the DDR Museum where there was an emphasis on a direct engagement with objects themselves. In these encounters we can explore how the spaces of the museums can invite us to think differently about our interactions with material objects, become more aware of our senses, reflect upon our reactions in the moment, and to contemplate our assumptions, prejudices, and projections that inform those reactions. In the best of museum spaces, we are challenged to interrogate our assumptions of the order of the world, the placement of things within it. We can think of the museum space as a space of rupture, one that interrupts our everyday relationships with ourselves and with the material world around us. Moving objects into and out of museum spaces can change our understanding of those objects.

In 1980 the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys created a new piece which was a reflection on contemporary German life, but also the history and path that brought Germany to that point in the then present. *Wirtschaftswerte* (Economic Values) was a multipiece installation that included iron shelves, such as those found in a workshop or warehouse, filed with everyday items and food stuffs purchased in what was at that time the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. Beuys intended that the installation appear in a contemporary gallery space or museum, with white walls and bright



Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves) in one of Daniel Libeskind's "voids" in the Jewish Museum, Berlin. Image by the author.

light. On the walls behind the shelves Beuys had paintings hung from the mid-nineteenth century, with their dates loosely corresponding to the life of Karl Marx (1818-1883), presented in gold leaf frames as an expression of bourgeois tastes and providing an opulent contrast to the simple packaging of the objects on the shelves. Importantly, the objects on the shelves were allowed to deteriorate over time, with the food stuffs dissolving or becoming desiccated, and the packaging fading and yellowing. Beuys said of the condition of the objects, "my sculpture is not fixed or finished; processes continue in them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change."¹ As the piece continues to be exhibited, its deterioration becomes immediately apparent, as was the case when it was shown at the Tate in London in 2005.

1. Joseph Beuys, *Actions, Vitrines, Environments*, Tate Catalogue 2005. Accessible online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/joseph-beuys-actions-vitrines-environments/joseph-beuys-actions-10>.

When first created, *Wirtschaftswerte* was a reflection on the Cold War; after all, these were products made in the anti-Capitalist DDR. Beuys also wanted to make a statement about the human need for art and ideas, and to not make a fetish of things, on which both the East and certainly the West appeared fixated at the time. Beuys said, "We do not need all that we are meant to buy today to satisfy profit-based private capitalism".² That remains true today, perhaps even more so.

Here we can see, on the one hand, the significance of what Arjun Appadurai calls the "social life of things"³: objects have context and contingency, and their significance is made socially. Appadurai saw the social life of things as part of a life cycle of their significance, most directly in terms of commodification and valuation. A material object has different value and social meaning at different times, to different people, in different contexts. Some objects of similar type have different value from one another due to some biographical aspect: this comb was on the Titanic, or this sequin came from a cape worn by Sir Elton John. "The commodity situation in the social life of any thing [is] defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature."⁴ So the items on Beuys' shelves have a number of different social lives and valuations: as consumer items in the former DDR whose value is reckoned in terms of their official exchange value; as items that could be used for simple barter exchanges or on the black market and their value determined by two people in a particular social moment, with particular material desires; as items simply from 1980 in 2020; as found objects; as part of a Beuys art installation, which has been in a number of museums, including the Tate. But are we to understand the significance of a thing only through its value?

We must also be aware that there are other ways to understand these objects. Any object, but perhaps most readily seen with an art object or text, has a meaning that the viewer brings to the piece that may not have been intended by the artist or author creator. Further, in a self-reflexive, hermeneutical practice we must also be open to reading the

2. Ibid.

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

4. Ibid., p. 13.

object or the text, and not immediately superimposing our pre-existing judgements and prejudices on the objects. We can imagine then that multiple perspectives and positionalities inform our encounter with any object: The position of the creator and her intention for the piece, both conscious and unconscious. The object itself, and our position, the position of the receiver or the audience, again at both a conscious and an unconscious level. Recognising the simultaneity of these perspectives, and being aware of how they interact and inform one another is what Hans-Georg Gadamer described as the process of “fusing of horizons”, which requires an extensive openness with ourselves, and to ourselves, as well as to the other:

In reading a text, in wishing to understand it, what we always expect is that it will inform us of something. A consciousness formed by the authentic hermeneutical attitude will be receptive to the origins and entirely foreign features of that which comes to it from outside of its own horizons. Yet this receptivity is not acquired with an objectivist “neutrality”. It is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets. The hermeneutical attitude supposes only that we self-consciously designate our opinions and prejudices and qualify them as such, and in so doing strip them of their extreme character. In keeping to this attitude we grant to the text—to the other—the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being, and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions.⁵

If we return to Beuys’ collection of everyday objects from the DDR, there is now a whole museum of such objects on the bank of the River Spree across from the Berlin Cathedral. The DDR Museum, which describes itself as the “interactive museum of East German life”, has a collection of over 300,000 artefacts; 11,000 of which are registered on its accessible on-line database.⁶ In the on-line database items are photographed but are not accompanied with any information other

5. Gadamer, H.G., “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in Rain-bow, P. and W. Sullivan (eds.) *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 151-152.

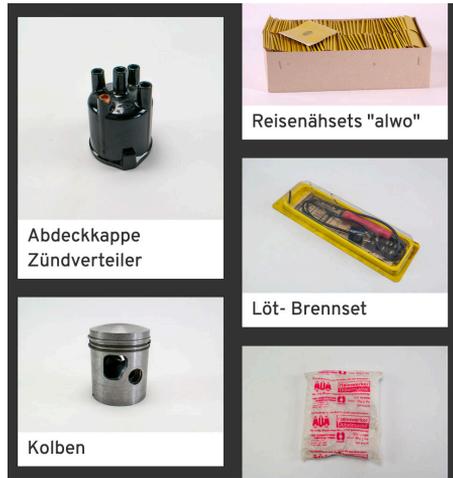
6. www.ddr-museum.de/en/objects.

than a simple title and organised in sub collections, such as the "ignition distributor cover cap" (*Abdeckkappe Zündverteiler*) in the "Home improvement accessories and tools" collection (*Heimwerkerzubehör und Werkzeug*). Even in the museum exhibition space where items are organised thematically, there is little indication of how or for what purpose items were used.

This is a difficult balance for a museum space: providing a context from which the object came, providing the biography of that object and how it came to be in the museum collection, and explaining its use and its significance. And yet its significance is fluid. Like Duchamps' urinal, does an everyday object gain significance because it has been moved into the museum space? This was Beuys' view for *Wirtschaftswerte*. In the DDR Museum, on the other hand, the whole museum is trying to capture a sense of the quotidian. Everyday items were collected together and placed in display cabinets. However, in another part of the museum whole rooms of a typical worker's flat were reconstructed and filed with everyday items. Upon entering these rooms, I said to a companion that this seems more like a museum of 1983 than necessarily a museum of the DDR, as the room could just as easily have been a reproduction of a Council flat in Glasgow or Birmingham. There were also some inclusions that seemed to dramatically misrepresent

The DDR Museum Object database

The screenshot shows the website interface for the DDR Museum Object database. At the top left is the logo 'DDR museum'. To the right is a search bar with the text 'Search for' and a 'Home' button. Below the search bar is a 'Collection Topic' dropdown menu. A text block below the menu reads: 'Browse through the 11,000 objects registered on our online database drawn from a collection of over 300,000 artefacts. We are working on the translation of the database. Until we have finished, all information will be in German.' At the bottom, there is a grid of four categories, each with a representative image and a blue label: 'Bekleidung und Schuhe' (Clothing and Shoes), 'Bilder' (Images), 'Briefe, Briefmarken und P...' (Letters, Postcards, and P...), and 'Broschüren und Flyer' (Brochures and Flyers).



life in the DDR. For example, there is a display of a typewriters on which children gleefully banged on the keys, enjoying the clang of the metal block hitting the cylinder on which the paper would be rolled. The weight, the sound, the effort it takes to press the keys are all so very different from the light, plastic keyboards of our laptops or the virtual keyboards of our iPhones. "How primitive!" one can imagine a visitor saying. But this is a confusing display, as the typewriters are in the same exhibition space as the reconstruction of an East Berlin flat's living room. Typewriters were powerful machines of communication of course, and they were highly monitored, for according to the British Library all typewriters in East Germany were numbered and registered with the state security services, the infamous Stasi.⁷ Jens Reich, a well-respected and accomplished molecular biologist, who became an outspoken dissident, remembers that one had to apply for a typewriter and wait "for months or even years to get one."⁸ They were far from being the ubiquitous household item the display suggests.

7. https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2018/03/the-lives-of-typewriters-and-large-data-sets-cataloguing-the-will-self-archive.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+english-and-drama+%28English+and+Drama%29.

8. Reich, Jens, "Reflections on Becoming an East German Dissident, on Losing the Wall and a Country," in Prins, G. (ed.), *Spring in Winter: The 1989 Revolutions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 94.



Reconstruction of child's bedroom from early 1980s at the DDR Museum, Berlin. Image by the author.

The absence of any presentation of context in many ways erases the meaning and significance of the object as a thing in a previous time and space. Not knowing the significance of the typewriter as a machine that could be used for potentially subversive communication changes the meaning of the exhibit. Yet how might we listen to these objects for themselves, beyond the messages of the curator—or, perhaps, to the messages both from the curator and from the items themselves? How do we also listen to our reactions to these things? As Gadamer writes, the meaning of a thing is not immovably and obstinately fixed, but rather “understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing”. He continues emphatically: “*understanding occurs in interpreting*”.⁹ Objects do not have only one meaning or one quality, but rather they have multiple qualities simultaneously, and those qualities themselves are in flux. The understanding of an object may change over time both because the object changes and because those engaging it change.

9. Gadamer, H. G., *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004 [1975]), p. 90 (emphasis in original).



Collection of soaps and washing-up liquids from East Germany, DDR Museum Berlin. Image by the author.

Therefore, to understand the meaning of an object in the past can potentially change how we understand that object in the present. The typewriter is not only heavy metal, but it is also potentially a weapon of resistance or subversion by virtue of its importance in the production and circulation of *samizdat*.¹⁰ It also represents state power as a tool of the bureaucrats who used typewriters to regulate life in East Germany. It also represents the paranoid extremes to which the state was willing to go in order to regulate the behaviours of the people: taking the trouble to record the strike pattern of every typewriter and register it in case a typewriter needed to be identified as the source of anti-regime writing. How might we understand our own response to a thing in a museum if we know more about how it was used in the past, in a range of contexts from the past?

Being open to Gadamer's understanding and interpretation requires a mode of reflexive engagement. He wrote that if we listen to the other, expecting to learn something, both about the other and about ourselves, we can be changed by the encounter with the other. Perhaps this is easily understood when discussing a text or a work of art. If we approach the work of art, expecting it to teach us something, we not only can learn from the piece itself, but also if we listen to ourselves, the piece may change us. "A person trying to understand a text is rather prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be sensitive to the other ... from the beginning."¹¹ But hearing the other's voice might mean hearing what we might not want to hear. "Every encounter with others means the 'suspension' of one's own prejudices...but this requires a readiness to recognise the other as potentially right and let him prevail against me".¹² This brings me back to the Jewish Museum.

When Daniel Libeskind designed the additions for what was then planned as the Jewish Department to the Berlin Museum, later to become the Jewish Museum, he included a succession of voids that cut through the building itself. He said that these empty spaces in

10. *Samizdat* refers to the clandestine producing, copying, and distributing of literatures and news banned by the state in the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

11. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 271.

12. Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," p. 108.

the museum are meant to evoke “that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history: Humanity in ashes”.¹³ The voids are the absence of objects; they are spaces which cannot be filled, for they represent the experience of loss. “The voids address the physical emptiness that resulted from the expulsion, destruction, and annihilation of Jewish life in the Shoah”.¹⁴ When visitors come to the museum, they must encounter these spaces of absence, and contemplate them. How might we hear the silences, feel the void, taste the emptiness that is left when people die? This is the challenge to represent the Holocaust: what can represent such loss? Such destruction? Libeskind’s design is an interesting one, and a demanding one.

Rather than focus on objects in their materiality as the DDR Museum can be seen to do, the Jewish Museum asks its visitors to think about their experience of moving through the tactile and sensory space of the museum. Upon entering the exhibition space of the museum, visitors are presented with different three “axes” by which to navigate their movement through the museum: the Axis of Exile, the Axis of the Holocaust, and the Axis of Continuity, although all three axes are never visible simultaneously. The Axis of Exile opens to “The Garden of Exile,” a space outside of the museum, comprised of forty-nine concrete stelae, topped with Russian olive bushes to symbolise hope, but which are out of reach. Between the stelae the ground is uneven, designed to give visitors a sense of “unsteadiness and disorientation”, as Libeskind wanted this spatial experience to “recall the lack of orientation and instability felt by the émigrés forced out of Germany”. The Axis of the Holocaust ends with what Libeskind calls the “Voided Void” or the Holocaust Tower: a twenty-four metre, unheated, concrete silo, into which light from outdoors only comes through a single, tiny slit near the ceiling of this huge empty space. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer, with sounds outside of the tower muted and muffled, the space gives one a feel of oppression and can engender profound anxiety.

The pathways along the Axes of Exile and of the Holocaust are themselves undulating and uneven. As one approaches the heavy

13. <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/libeskind-building>

14. <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/libeskind-building>

metal door that seals shut the Holocaust Tower, the ceiling and the floor angle to meet one another, creating a cramped accessway that suggests claustrophobia even before entering the tower. These cramped and uneven routes are contrasted with the third avenue, the Axis of Continuity, which rises out of the lower level of the museum along a steep staircase, filled with natural light from large windows at the top of the staircase, and offers a route of escape, both for the visitor and for “the city to move on from its heinous past”, as Libeskind explained in 1990.¹⁵ Climbing eight-two steps, visitors reach the permanent exhibition space of the museum, where there is no door that separates the permanent collection from the Axis of Continuity, as there is between the Axis of Exile and the Garden, or the Axis of the Holocaust and the Tower, inviting the visitor to further explore this engagement with German Jewish life.

This is a museum of encounters, with objects, with architecture, and with ourselves. Following Gadamer’s invitation to allow the encounter with the unfamiliar to change us, we can think about our relationships with loss, and those whom we have lost. In this Gadamerian encounter, we might also, then, think of the losses of others. To imagine their pain, just as we examine our pain. Libeskind asks us to think about what we are projecting into the void from our own experiences, and then challenges us to think of the losses of others that cannot be present and can only be acknowledged as an absence. What are the prejudices I might carry into such an encounter? This for Gadamer, as we see in the quotes above, is one of the most important steps in facilitating a fusing of horizons: that we become aware of our prejudices and attempt to not let them inhibit us for hearing the other. We move between analysing our conscience and our unconsciousness. Moving between these within ourselves, we can prepare to meet the other outside of ourselves. This is similar to encounters in psychoanalysis.

In the Object Relations School of psychoanalysis there is a constant interplay between the inner psychic world, and the outer material world. Each shapes the other; there is a “recycling almost, of perception and feeling between the outer and inner worlds, so that

15. Andenmatten, Stephen, Caitlin Walsh, and James Wisniewski, *The Jewish Museum Berlin: Rensselaer Case Studies* (New York: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2011), p.78.



A few of the 49 stelae in the Garden of Exile, topped with Russian Olive bushes. Image by the author.

both are experienced in light of the other."¹⁶ We perceive the material; the objects do not stand for themselves in a static and perpetual way. Rather, our perceptions are shaped by our experiences, and those experiences inform our perceptions. We then remember and internalise these encounters with objects and experiences to inform encounters anew. We carry within us a multitude of memories and experiences of objects: part objects that represent aspects of the people in our lives in both the present and the past; memory objects as the images, sounds, and experiences of events that influenced our lives; and phantasy objects as representations of our desires and longings, both real and otherwise. How we engage these inner objects and experiences can show us the way forward in our relations with external objects and with other people. Can we be receptive to what they are saying to us, even if they are saying things we do not want to hear? To be open to change is to be open to the other, and to be prepared that the self might and can change as a result. To listen to the other, we must not speak over them, or to dismiss them if they are unfamiliar, for they are an encounter with the other. And in the end, it is these encounters that shape who we are. We are made by our engagements and experiences to which we are open and to which we listen.

16. Klein, M. (1959) "Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy" in *Envy Gratitude and other Works*, quoted in Gomez, L. *An Introduction to Object Relations* (London: Free Association Books), p.35.

BUSTING 'CHURCHILL'

Populist Statesmanship in the Shadow of Churchill

Dr. Lars Cornelissen

ISRF Academic Editor

(Disclaimer: this article was written well before statues in general and statues of Churchill in particular became the object of heated debate both in Britain and elsewhere.)

One of the key markers of today's political landscape is the advent of a specific type of statesman. I say 'statesman'—and not 'statesperson'—because masculinity is one of the defining characteristics of this genre of politician. I am thinking, of course, of leaders like Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and, of more immediate relevance to my present purposes, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Aside from a certain performance of masculinity, these leaders resemble each other in a number of ways: each is known for spouting nativistic, bellicose rhetoric; for uncritically celebrating the capitalist economy; for attempting to consolidate their own power through constitutional reform; and for paying little heed to the veracity of their claims—for, in a word, being the torch bearers of the populist far right. Let us not forget that, barring Bolsonaro, they all preside over countries that are embroiled in bitter territorial disputes and that are in possession of nuclear arms.

It is easy—and indeed commonplace—to characterise the resurgence of this style of leadership as a product of some mythological 'white working class,' imagined as a bullish, racist, and sadistic demographic that wants nothing more than a strong leader to guide it in times of economic, cultural, and libidinal insecurity. This is myth rather than diagnosis, of course, and naturalises the liberal elite's anxieties about both working class politics and the figureheads of contemporary

BUSTING 'CHURCHILL'



George W. Bush accepts a loan of the Churchill bust from British ambassador Sir Christopher Meyer in 2001. Image in public domain.

right-wing populism. Dominant representations of leaders, as well as those of the electorates that voted for them, are not given but constructed, the composite product of a complex cultural and political machinery. The task of critical analysis, of course, is to trace the ways in which these images come to be.

I want to shed a light here on one particular way in which several of these 'strong men' seek to establish a certain imagery of themselves as strong-willed, no-nonsense statesmen: by casting themselves as inheritors of Winston Churchill's legacy. More particularly, I want to highlight the role fulfilled in this effort by a number of Churchill busts, which came to be emblematic signifiers of this attempt at self-interpellation and of the forms of contestation it tends to attract.

By making a fuss over these Churchill busts, figures like Trump, Johnson, and Netanyahu sought to portray themselves as politicians and public figures as having the 'Churchill factor,' as Johnson would say. Busts, as a subspecies of sculpture, are especially powerful symbols in the realm of political meaning as they can signify a wealth of powerful associations, an entire world of ideas. Sculpture, as WJT Mitchell writes, is "the most dangerous of the arts" because it "reifies mortal men into immortal idols", causing them to exert a pull on the imagination in a way that a written text or even a simple image never could.¹

1. WJT Mitchell, "What Sculptures Want: Placing Antony Gormley," in: John Hutinchson (ed.), *Antony Gormley* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 168.

So how did a handful of Churchill busts become embroiled in the messy world of political identity-making?

The first of these busts caused a series of mild uproars throughout the early 2010s, when rumour had it that President Obama had removed it from the Oval Office. The bust in question was made by Jacob Epstein in 1947 and was on loan from the British Embassy, which had temporarily gifted it to the White House during the George W. Bush administration. The rumour of its removal incited the ire of many a right-wing commentator, who saw in it a confirmation of their belief that Obama was secretly a socialist with an anti-imperialist agenda. In truth, the bust had been removed simply because the pre-agreed loan period had come to an end, as the White House later clarified in a press release.

In 2016, several years after the rumour had been thoroughly debunked, Boris Johnson (then still Mayor of London) referenced the episode in an article for *The Sun*. The piece seemed largely intended to discredit Obama, who was visiting the UK in the run-up to the Brexit referendum to offer his support to the Remain campaign. To Johnson, the bust incident confirmed "the part-Kenyan president's ancestral dislike of the British Empire," which in his eyes also explained Obama's hostility to Brexit.

In January 2017, newly elected President Donald Trump 'restored' the bust to the Oval Office, making good on a promise he had made to Nigel Farage several months earlier. The decision to restore the bust was patently a power play, as it symbolised not only his eagerness to make common cause with Britain's extreme right but also his break with the preceding administration. This is certainly how it was received on this side of the Atlantic, as *The Telegraph* gleefully reported on the episode with a number of articles. For good measure, most of these also regurgitated the myths about Obama's 'removal' of the bust.

In all of these cases the Churchill bust served as a floating signifier that could readily be attached to a number of political agendas. Symbolising at one point Obama's covert socialism, at another his dislike of the British Empire, and at another still Trump's reliability as an ally to post-Brexit Britain, the bust's journeys and misadventures could be made to

BUSTING 'CHURCHILL'

fit any story. The bust came to stand in, synecdochally as it were, for an entire chain of signifiers: Churchill's legacy, anti-socialism, a clean Brexit, and indeed the trans-Atlantic alliance of the English-speaking world.

As these events were unfolding, another likeness of Britain's most revered PM made headlines when, in 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu was offered a bust of Churchill upon delivering his third address to the US Congress—a gift chosen because Netanyahu and Churchill are the only people to have addressed Congress at three separate occasions. This will have thrilled Netanyahu, who is a known admirer of Churchill and is often compared to the latter by his supporters. When the right-wing Israeli Kol Chai radio reported on the episode, it seized the opportunity not only to draw a less-than-subtle comparison between the two men, stating that what unites them is their opposition to Nazism, but also to lambast Obama for removing the Epstein bust from the Oval Office.

In both of these cases, Churchill busts became the central subjects in broader political struggles, symbolising a global network of alliances

Donald Trump meets Angela Merkel in the Oval Office, with the Churchill bust standing in the background. Image in public domain.



and historical commonalities and becoming a shorthand for right-wing tropes and anti-Obama sloganeering. At heart, however, each of these episodes revolves around the question of statesmanship. For the right-wing media giving the story this spin or that, a leader's attitude to a statuette of Churchill is indicative of their deeper qualities or failings as a leader. The fact that the bust in question is of Churchill is key here: in the imaginary of the English-speaking world, one's fitness as a statesman is directly proportionate to how much one's character and bearing is thought to resemble Churchill's.

As Johnson himself puts in *The Churchill Factor*: "these days it is probably fair to say that thrusting young Tories—and especially males—will regard Winston Churchill as a sort of divinity."² This brings to mind WJT Mitchell's claim, quoted earlier, that sculptures are uniquely capable of deifying individual people, literally solidifying their legacy for posterity. And since no one figure looms larger over 20th-century European history than Churchill, to establish a parallel between oneself and 'the Bulldog,' or indeed to suggest that someone else (like Obama) is soiling his legacy, is a straightforward tactic. It is to place oneself on the right side of history, to summon the spectre of WWII morality, which is cast in black-and-white and knows only Good Guys and Bad Guys.

Clearly, then, a seemingly mundane object like a lump of bronze can become a powerful symbolic tool in the hands of the media, pundits, and aspiring right-wing strongmen. The misadventures of these Churchill statuettes show that busts, like all material objects, can take on a (secret) life of their own—for good or for ill.

2. Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (London: Penguin, 2014, eBook), ch. 3.

This issue features:
Marina Álamo Bryan
Lars Cornelissen
Leah Durner
Zuzanna Dziuban
Jill Gibbon
Claire Moon
Jeffrey Murer
Layla Renshaw