



ASSEMBLE 2010: AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Session: Consumer Trends

Speaker: Daniel Miller, Professor of Material Culture Studies,
University College London

Chair: Emily Campbell, Director of Design, RSA

EMILY CAMPBELL: Thanks Gerri [Morris] for a fascinating insight into the figures. And I know it's not really the theme of this session, but, as you describe the consumer of craft, the profile is so well defined. As you said, [and] it's unsurprising in a way, [it is] the university educated woman with a professional or academic interest in culture. And it makes me wonder whether actually [there is more] scope for the growing of the doers of craft than the consumers of craft. I don't know. I think I stray into the subject of other sessions. But that's what it made me think. And the art-craft-design-luxury diagram is sensational.

Our next speaker - from the market to the academy - our next speaker is Dr Daniel Miller, who is a professor of Material Culture at University College London, and he is speaking to us on video about materials behaviour and taking us into sustainability.

DANIEL MILLER: OK, good morning. My name is Danny Miller, and first an apology for the fact that I am actually not present with you today. I'm actually at this point of time going to be in the Romania visiting a student in a remote village, and I couldn't be, at exactly the same time, at the Crafts Council [conference], which is a pity for me because I would very much liked to have met you; maybe one day be able to do so.

I think the reason I've been asked to come here is because I come from the discipline of anthropology, but you may not realise that within anthropology there is a kind of sub-discipline which we call Material Culture studies, and that

is specifically concerned with trying to understand the general relationship between people and the things around them in the world. Now because it comes from anthropology, traditionally those were studies of things like canoe prows and long yams in places like New Guinea and Amazonia et cetera, or in villages in India. But today, most of us will also work in places like New York and Oslo, and we feel, you know, everybody is equally entitled to be burnt by some anthropologist trying to investigate them. And I have carried out work in a number of different areas, including several projects in London. And my base actually is at University College London where we have one of these centres for the study of Material Culture.

Now to give an example of this, one of the studies that came out a couple of years ago in a book called *The Comfort of Things*, was based on eighteen months taking effectively a random street in south London, [which had a] very mixed population, and over that period trying to get to know as many people who lived on that street as possible. And we ended up with about 100 households. And the idea was to find out about their relationship with the things that they possessed in those houses.

Now when you do that kind of work, you find as soon as you tell somebody that that's what you're studying, you get to hear the kind of assumptions that people have about our general relationship to things. So, for example, people will tell you, or you will read in the newspapers, how these days, compared to the people in India or New Guinea who have, you know, good, authentic, proper relationships with things, that now we're all dreadfully superficial in our relationship to things, and very shallow. Or you'll be told that these days we're all desperately materialistic. And what's meant by that is that we should have good relationships with each other, with people, but we have become in a consumer society so devoted to the things around us, shopping and so forth, that we've kind of lost it when it comes to actually deep relationships with other people.

Now, my job as I see it is to recognise that those ideas exist, but simply to actually go without prejudice into people's homes and study the relationships that we actually do find, that relate to pretty much everybody, not any special group of people, just whoever happens to be living in a place like London. And

having done that for eighteen months you can start to maybe speak with a bit of authority about these kinds of assumptions, about our relationship with things. And what I tended to find is, certainly with regard to, for example, the idea of materialism, that this actually is, to be honest, nonsense. That you tend to find people who are not able to develop good relationships with other people. They may for example be lonely, or they may be lacking in self-confidence - there are many reasons - elderly men are often a good example. But those kinds of people also tend not to develop deep relationships with things around them. Whereas, people who actually do manage to develop quite strong, sustained relationships with particular bodies of things, and can be making them as you would in a craft, [although] it can be things of many other varieties, also tend to be the people who actually manage to sustain deep and for them satisfying relationships with people. So actually the two things go together, similarly with this idea of us being sort of shallow and superficial. I mean, yes, there are many things around us and some of our relationships with some of those things are inevitably going to be superficial and shallow. But I think that the reason people obviously get into crafts in many cases is precisely because they're afraid of being just like that, and instead they want to develop a relationship which can sustain, with skill, and with devotion, and commitment to a particular artisan or form that they start to develop over time.

Now, you could recognise that there's kind of an analogy between that and, say, being a good cook, or being a good musician, or being good at sports, but in my work I'm open to people developing these relationships with practically anything out there...Let me give you a couple of examples. I found a family that was completely devoted to Christmas. They spent almost the whole year trying to collect special things, from, let's say, special shops in Alsace, in the [inaudible (please clarify)] or somewhere, that were beautiful Christmas objects. And they spent weeks and weeks preparing Christmas in their home. And on the basis of that, of course you have all the social life that comes with Christmas. But very different from that, there was a young woman who had a very intense relationship with tattooing - she had a whole series of tattoos - and to understand those you had to understand how she understood memory to operate, because they were the way she fixed memories, and particularly memories of relationships. Now, somebody else who's interested in tattooing might be completely different, but that's what was significant for her.

Now of course, I'm not saying everybody has deep relationships with everything. There are other people who just have tokenistic Christmas, because their family makes them do it, and they'd really much rather be on holiday in Spain. Or there's somebody who's got a tattoo because, you know, they just got really drunk once and, you know, they regretted it the next day. But if you're open, I think, you will find that most people do develop these deep relations.

Now given that as the background, if you then come to me and say, "well, what way have people's relationships to objects changed recently?" let's say, because of recession, or because of some current affair, then I'd say well actually, from my perspective, these are much deeper, longer-term relationships, and they are not going to change very quickly. It may be something that's happened over two or three decades, like the rise of digital technologies, where that changes, for example, the difference between technology and consumption – [which is it] when somebody constructs a website or an iPod play list? [And this] may be the deep significant relationship that young people have today. Now that might represent a change. But the idea that some other event in the world is going to radically affect these things - I think it's unlikely. I think these things come over decades.

Now that matters of course, and it's the note I really want to end on, because one of the reasons we discuss these things, both in this format and in other forums, is because we're worried about the environment and sustainability, and the sense that the overproduction and over-consumption of goods is problematic for the planet. But what I would say is that we need to separate this into two things. It's not that actually consumption is somehow inevitably bad for people. People find ways of actually drawing on particular elements within that, equivalent to crafts, and which are meaningful. The problem is really one of science; basically there are things that are damaging and destructive to this planet, and my feeling would be [that it] should be the scientists saying that certain things should not exist. If a car over a certain size is damaging, don't make 'em. If goods with certain chemicals are damaging, don't allow people to have them. And it should be that way round I think, which is also much more egalitarian. Nobody should be allowed to have these things, and they shouldn't

be possessed, rather than sort of confusing that with some kind of big moralistic idea that consumption is inevitably, as it were, creating superficiality and shallowness. Because what I've tried to suggest is really an analogy with craft; that it is much better to respect and engage openly with people's relationship with things, and to understand that what one person does through their devotion to craft, another person might be doing through dress or some completely other, unexpected area. If you're open to that, there are very few people in this world who are actually simply irredeemably superficial or shallow.

Further information about Daniel Miller's work, including a list of his publications and research areas, can be found on the UCL website: www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/d_miller.

For more discussions on Material Culture follow the Material World Blog, co-edited by Daniel Miller: www.materialworldblog.com



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