

Review: Cummings, Neil and Lewandowska, Marysia (2000) *The Value of Things* August Birkhäuser

Guy Julier 2001

In their Foreword to *The Value of Things*, artists Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska state that the book is their, 'representation of the forces through which we all learn to structure an exchange of values with one another'. Their central concern in this is with the collection and mediation of objects through both the department store and the museum and to draw attention to their similarities. More specifically, the book interprets and analyses the historical development and contemporary activities of Selfridges and the British Museum. A combination of extensive archival research, documentary photography and 'behind the scenes' observation of these locations has led to a book that is simultaneously design history, cultural critique and art object.

Cummings and Lewandowska are no strangers to this kind of project. They have worked with several organisations that also possess documented collections of objects such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the London Underground Lost Property Office and more recently, the Tate Modern and the Bank of England. They have published a string of Search Engine requests that run through the pages of David Redhead's *Products of Our Time*. The Design Council Archive at Brighton University has also been subject to their attentions through their 'Document' project. *The Value of Things* is, however, their first full-scale book to supplant, rather than complement, the exhibition as the site of artistic outcome.

The exploitation of museums and retail outlets as the basis of artistic investigation has, of late, become increasingly modish. One might also cite Martha Fleming's work at London's Science Museum, Hans Haacke and others at the Victoria & Albert Museum or the Mongrel collective 'Uncomfortable Proximity'

web project in relation to the Tate Modern. Likewise, the heart of London's retail activity, Oxford Street, has provided the setting for commentaries on consumerism by Sam Taylor-Wood at Selfridges, Michael Landy in a disused Oxford Street store and Ab Rogers at Top Shop respectively. In these instances the artists enter into a parasitical relationship with an institution, simultaneously inhabiting it and critiquing it to varying degrees. This also allows them to acknowledge and draw attention to the apparatus by which even their own work is given value and becomes commodified. The ways that museums or the retail outlets collect, classify, display, explain and compare artefacts are not inconsistent with those of the 'artworld', it is intimated. Cummings and Lewandowska, as do other artists, therefore adopt a reflexive strategy as 'knowing artists' to investigate the convergence of these three domains.

Interestingly, for all the talk of convergences between the department store and the museum, the actual style of this book is polyvocal. Rather than present a straightforward linear narrative, the artists allow for the juxtaposition of distinct layers of commentary through the use of several different typefaces and sizes, text boxes and photo-essays. Thus, for example, in the final section of the book we read a description of the use of branding as being the only system of differentiating otherwise identical objects these days. This is stretched across the bottom part of nine pages in an 18pt Sans Serif type. Above this commentary a text set in a 10pt Roman type presents a history of curatorial practices at the British Museum. This ends in a discussion of the shift toward mediating museum as leisure and entertainment through audio-visual guides, walking tours, touch-sensitive data screens

and video loops. Meanwhile, spread across these pages documentary photos that give glimpses of various facets of the museum. Texts and images therefore combine to reinforce this notion of 'dematerialisation' of retail and museum display, where 'reading' their texts (through browsing brand labels or captions, wandering through the store or museum layout and so on) takes precedence over the objects themselves. Many other pages also contain short vignettes of straightforward information that broadly relate to the section's subject matter but are not intended as either captions or footnotes.

This multi-layering would be highly demanding of any art director (in this case Stephen Coates). Many post-deconstruction/Cranbrook Academy design-related books of the last decade saw multi-layering as an excuse for illegible layout and incoherent messages, rendering the book pointless. In the case of *The Value of Things* there is the risk that this juxtapositioning of layers becomes jarring. However in both content and presentation there is, on the whole, sufficient balance driven between the gap that is left between different text and image fields and their coherence. The trick in this is to avoid tautology between them so that different voices don't merely reproduce each other. Instead, the reader is invited to make the connections between separate considerations. This may be hard work but it is also rewarding. It is publication strategy that was perhaps instigated by John Berger and Jean Mohr in *Ways of Seeing* and has been carried by them through to their most recent *At the Edge of the World*. Cummings and Lewandowska take this approach to an even greater level of complexity, though.

Overall the book is arranged into a clear, chronological sequence. Chapters 1 and 2 feature a history of the British Museum in the wider context of early museology, followed by a history of Selfridges set against changes in shopping. The authors keenly identify the roles of both the museum and the store in their attempts to make the whole material world understandable through classification and display. Discussion of individual pieces -- such as the Portland vase -- appears in

separated page spreads, but their chief concern is with the idea of collections, conjunctions, profusions and assemblages of objects in their plurality. This represents an important turn. There is sometimes a tendency both in visual culture and material culture studies to isolate artefacts away from their conditions of production, mediation and circulation to settle on rather dry, abstracted image or object analysis. The supposed 'biography of a thing' notion often runs the risk of overly ascribing autonomy to the object so that its meaning is assumed to be intrinsic rather than circumstantial. Instead, Cummings and Lewandowska are interested in 'the value of things' as the production of a complex web of events, knowledges and relationships. Thus, for example, the historical formation of display methods in museums and stores are dissected, shifting attitudes toward and tensions rising from singularity and massification are analysed, and various marketing strategies are discussed.

Subsequently, the scope of the book broadens into more discursive territory. Chapter 3 explores shopping where Cummings and Lewandowska make insightful observations about the relationships between the increasing importance given to the strategic display of goods, the role of credit and the supply chain. Their overall message is that the, 'emphasis on flows of information, people, goods and capital has shifted retail attention away from the traditional fetishisation of a particular object or image, towards thinking about the process of value manipulation itself.' Thus in tracing the wharps and whefts of interactions between producers and consumers, the authors acknowledge not just the multiple sites of these processes, but also introduce the question of time into the equation. How, for instance, does credit influence the consumer's notion of longevity of an item? Or how does it effect retail forecasting? Chapter 4 returns to the museum where these days a combination of the 'retailisation' of the post-Thatcherite culture industries and information and communication technologies have taken effect. These conspire to challenge the notion of a museum's primary function as being

concentrated around objects and the unseen scholarship behind them, they argue.

There is prominent use of photography in the book. Again, several styles are adopted, ranging from documentary shots to parodies of 'designer' trade photos. It is highly refreshing to find a book that so effectively exploits visual languages both to represent the seen and to build discursive narratives. Current discussion in ethnography about the use of the visual (as, for example, discussed in Sarah Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography*) may be enriched by a close reading of this publication.

This book may irritate some readers. In the first instance, the convergence of museums and retail thesis is already well discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Nigel Whitely in *The Authority of the Consumer*, 1994). But the authors do not rely solely on this idea to provide a neat teleological narrative for the reader to follow. There is more to it than that. Moreover, the form of *The Value of Things*, with its complex presentation structure and the mix of informative, discursive and sometimes poetic language, makes it a challenging but potentially alienating read. The authors meet the multi-dimensional complexity of the subject with a multi-dimensional form of presentation of their arguments. This allows them to slip from detailed artefactual analysis to the big ideas. *The Value of Things* is both coolly analytical and passionately charged while avoiding the trap of an hysterical rant about branding and commodification. It should prove a useful text for those of us who are interested in understanding the -- sometimes frightening -- role of design in contemporary promotional culture.