

Things

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We are born into a world of things: something that is undeniable. Things surround us, they give our life stability, accumulate over time but also change and diversify. Arguably, the most simple definition of creativity would be the process leading to the creation of new things, material and symbolic (including, nowadays, virtual; see the chapter on Digital). In most cases, creative processes leave a ‘visible’ mark in the world, they generate or change things around us, but they can also take the shape of utterances or processes (see also the chapter on Language). A dance performance can be a creative outcome despite the fact we would not commonly call it a ‘thing’ (although its recording might be considered one); same for a piece of writing (see also the chapter on World-making). Nonetheless, by and large, creativity involves a kind of *externalisation* or *materialisation* (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Individuals and their culture are connected to each other through things, in the constant dynamic between internalisation and externalisation, appropriation and transformation of the material world. But, of course, other people stand ‘between’ person and things (Vygotsky, 1997), those who make the things we use, who introduce them to us, who teach us or guide our action. It is virtually impossible – or, in any case, reductionist – to consider the relation between individuals and their material surroundings without taking into account the crucial part played by other people and by society at large (Harris, 2023; Pickering, 2023). In other words, without understanding how things become, through (inter)action, objects and, ultimately, artefacts.

Surprisingly for creativity research, however, things, objects, artefacts are rarely taken into consideration (Tanggaard, 2013). And this despite a pervasive focus on products in recent definitions of this phenomenon and in the methodologies used for evaluating creativity (e.g., the consensual definition and consensual assessment technique proposed by Amabile, 1996). In fact, the interest of most psychologists working in this area is placed on unpacking the ‘immaterial’ aspects of creative production: personality traits, cognitive processes, intelligence, motivation, forms of pathology, and so on. This largely disembodied, intra-psychological approach was challenged in recent decades by more and more studies focused on the social aspects of creativity (see the We-paradigm in Glăveanu, 2010), without really bringing materiality into the equation of creative production (for an exception, see the chapter on Body). The ‘new’ concern for communication and social recognition mainly remained at the level of language, representation and institutionalised forms of culture. And this despite a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that, at least for creators themselves, material objects and their properties play an important role (for findings from five different creative domains, see Glăveanu et al., 2013). Indeed, materials support, shape, react to, resist and generally lead creative action. They appear, at least from a phenomenological perspective, to be actors in their own right. How are we to understand this?

In this chapter, I propose and discuss a basic (but surely not uncontroversial) distinction between things, objects and artefacts. This typology is proposed not as a tool to classify material reality (because materiality goes beyond these simple categories which don't account, for example, for the body, microscopic structures below the level of our perception, and so on); rather, it is meant to capture the *relation* between us and materiality. In other words, this distinction refers to the nature of this relationship and suggests that we interact with material entities either *as* things, objects, or artefacts, depending on context. Importantly, the 'status' of the material entities we manipulate is not set in advance, but constructed during the interaction itself and thus open to change. Of course, the things around us can be considered and related to in a variety of other ways. For a scientist, a microscope is an instrument, for an economist it might be catalogued as a commodity, for an artist it can be an interesting example of 'found art', and so on (see also the chapter on Perspective). My interest in the distinction between things, objects and artefacts comes from its relevance for theorising creativity. As will become obvious shortly, these conceptual categories are meant to engage with key issues in this area, such as conventionality, affordances and the flexibility of action (Magnani, 2023).

The thing itself

The interrogation about materiality needs to start from the thing itself. At least, this is what philosopher Martin Heidegger thought in his essay 'The thing' (Heidegger, 1971). By focusing our attention on the '*thingness*' of a jug (see Figure 20.1), Heidegger was trying to get us to experience materiality before or in the absence of our usual cultural representations and scripts about what a jug is. Of course, one might wonder if this is ever possible, or if it is a useful exercise. When adopting a phenomenological approach we can, however, at least try to approximate what such an experience would be like. After all, during our first months of life we do encounter things in the world around us prior to language. But arguably, even then, things don't only exist outside us but are being introduced to us by others, positioned in front of or against us – in other words, for Heidegger, turned into objects. How do we relate to a jug then, as a thing?

Figure 20.1 A jug

Source: By freegr, source: pixabay; image in the public domain.

First, we perceive its physical properties. We see it, as Heidegger noted, as self-supporting. Gibson's (1966) theory of direct perception can be interesting in this regard since it postulates that the affordances of objects are immediately available to us for as long as we can perceive them. This theory has been rightly criticised (see the chapter on Affordance), especially since what objects afford or not is largely culturally conditioned. Direct perception might inform us that the jug is a solid object that can be filled, lifted, broken, and so on, but this information will not help us use it 'as a jug'. For Heidegger, it was the *void* inside a jug actually doing the holding, not its sides or bottom, although these are usually the ones we notice and represent when thinking about the jug. In other words, the thingness of a jug, should we ever be able to perceive it, would surprise us because it contradicts or resists common uses or ideas about what a jug is. Material entities as things are fundamentally open to any potential use and appropriation by culture while, at the same time, imposing their insurmountable constraints. The jug can be lifted, thrown, put upside down, glued to the wall, and so on; all these actions are 'afforded' by it but, if we are not

careful in handling it, the jug will break and this is an aspect of its material reality that is independent of our perception or will.

To relate to the material entities around as things, one can do an easy experiment: to close one's eyes and let the hands introduce them to the things in front. How does this feel? Can you bracket previous knowledge about what you are touching? What new features jump out? Anything surprising? Anything unusual? This exercise can be illuminating as to what we usually take for granted: the materiality of the world around us, a materiality that is 'there' in ways that pre-exist any symbolic forms of understanding or social conventions. And one of the aspects that can be striking about such (less mediated) experiences of materiality is how open materials becomes to new interpretations and new understanding. What we thought we knew about things changes and, with this change, materials reveal themselves differently to us, a difference that means a lot for creative thought and action (see also the chapter on Difference).

Objects and conventions

For Heidegger, a thing becomes an object when it is placed in front of us, either physically or as a mental representation; as such, it becomes defined by its '*over-againstness*' (see also the chapter on No). My own distinction between things and objects is much simpler. If things confront us with their materiality in a rather direct, unmediated manner, objects are things culturally presented to us. They are the '*what for*' of things, their main function or functions decided upon by their makers, validated by society, and inscribed into the physical appearance of the object (see also the chapter on Rules). The jug as an object is a vessel used to carry and pour liquid. Its shape (the void inside, as well as its walls and bottom) affords this perfectly. Many jugs have a handle that allows easy manipulation by human hands. The bottleneck of many jugs, such as the one in Figure 20.1, makes it easier not to spill liquid accidentally and also facilitates the act of pouring. These are all what Costall (1995) calls *canonical affordances*. Jugs afford holding and pouring water or other liquids; these affordances are reflected by their material properties and taught to children from early on. As such, we can rightfully conclude that, as socialised individuals, we live in a world of objects rather than simply of things.

This is what Richard Shweder (1990, p. 2) referred to as the intentional world, populated by intentional objects – things that are made, bred, fashioned, fabricated, invented, designed, constructed (see also Crilly, 2023). The things we have around us are not simply there but, as we tend to assume, are there for a purpose. This is how we learn to inquire into what something is for when its 'function' is not obvious to us. Our constant meaning-making processes invest reality with both significations and purpose (Valsiner, 2013). This makes us highly efficient in navigating our environment but, occasionally, the same inclination to manipulate things as objects can restrict our creativity. Conventional uses and canonical affordances are easily perceived and enacted in everyday life. We develop *expectations* about how things are and how they should be used, and this makes our action and the actions of others quite predictable. If a jug is on the dinner table, I will probably assume it has water in it, or else I can fill it up with water. But are objects always used so uncreatively? Certainly not. In fact, the very meaning of 'conventionality' is highly contextual and it depends not only on culture, person, but also situation. If the jug I referred to before is in a glass case in a museum, I won't assume it is filled with water and I will certainly not want to fill it up. This corresponds to the conventions associated with being a

museum visitor. Canonical uses are not set once and for all but are dynamic and changing, just as our (material) culture is. Moreover, objects themselves are never completely unambiguous and this requires, on our part, the capacity to improvise and, sometimes, deliberately go against the conventional.

An interesting exercise here, to make the experience of things as objects more palpable, would be to go against typical uses and social conventions when it comes to materiality (see also the chapter on Upcycling). How can we act with a jug in the most ‘un-jug’ way possible? For many, breaking the jug would reflect such an action as it goes against a series of implicit norms – do not destroy things that are of value, do not act aggressively, do not waste, etc. With no intention of advocating for destruction for the sake of destruction, let’s engage in simple thought experiments for the moment. How do we feel when we use objects the way they are not supposed to be used? Does it make a difference if other people are watching us or know about our transgressions? What if we do this in the name of creativity? Does this change how we – and others – perceive these actions? Does it invite transgressions (see also the chapter on No)? At the same time, does it make it obvious why understanding what objects are is indispensable for moving ‘with and against’ conventional meanings in creative work?

The openness of artefacts

The openness to a myriad of uses turns objects into artefacts. The jug, in its thingness, remains the same, and the conventional uses of filling and pouring are there to be perceived but, alongside them, we can notice the jug’s many other affordances. It can become a candle holder, accommodate an ant farm, turn into a lamp or a bird feeder, and so on. All these uses exploit the jug’s basic affordance of holding but in less canonical ways. They make the jug a *creative object*. Indeed, the notion of artefact has artistic and cultural overtones (one expects to find artefacts in museums) but this is not how I use it here. Everything can become an artefact if we relate to it as such – if we go beyond singular, conventional uses and see them as one possibility among many. In order to do this, however, we need to decentre our perspective of what things are and envision what they might be.

Isn’t every object already an artefact? Umberto Eco (1989, p. 21) famously argued that every work of art, for as ‘closed’ and ‘finished’ as it appears to be, is in fact an ‘open work’, available for (re)definition and (re)interpretation with each and every new ‘reading’ of it. We can extend his argument about works of art. *Any* object is, to some extent, experienced anew every time we use it; there are, for example, no two times when we use a jug in the very same way. Of course, the creative quality of these new uses varies. To use the object as an artefact means, however, to use it in a *reflective* manner (see also the chapter on Reflexivity). It means to envision other possibilities for action while perceiving or manipulating the object, even when this manipulation respects conventionality. The artefact is as open to our action as the thing is, with a significant difference: the thing invites immediate uses, based on physical, perceivable properties, while our interaction with an artefact is free from the here-and-now due to our capacity to symbolise and anticipate. In this sense, when we creatively manipulate material entities as things, the quality of being creative is necessarily attributed to our action and its products from the outside. We might be creative, but we are not aware of this because we are too immersed in the action and the thing itself. Artefact use requires detachment and engages our capacity to imagine (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015; see also the chapter on Fear).

The exercise for artefacts takes us back, actually, to the one for things. The invitation is, again, to try first to touch things around, with your eyes closed, and to be open to any new experience that arises. Then these experiences can be turned into new meanings. What uses are inspired by relating to things as things? How many of them go beyond the conventionality of the object? Are these surprising in any way? Are they meaningful? Can one consider the same material entity, at the same time, through the prism of all these different meanings and uses? What does this kind of relationship feel like? How does it transform not only thing / object but the perceiver him or herself in the process?

Materiality and creativity

To create ‘is to act in the world, or on the world, in a new and significant way’ (Mason, 2003, p. 7). It cannot be thought of outside of the relation between person and world, both social and material. And yet, creativity theory is virtually mute when it comes to the issue of materiality. The focus remains on the mind, forgetting that the mind itself extends into the world in order to think, to remember, to create (see also the chapter on Space). Objects are not just there for us to represent and manipulate symbolically; the materiality of the world sets practical constraints of which creators in any domain are well aware. At the same time, the things around us are fundamentally open to our action. We can, within the frame of existing physical constraints, use them for almost everything. But we don’t. Cultural conventions play a key part in this kind of ‘narrowing’ of possibility for what objects are (or, more specifically, what they are for). And yet it is precisely *culture* that can free our action and make it truly flexible. A thing can be acted on in many ways, but all ‘trapped’ within the here-and-now of perception and movement. An artefact is acted on, at one and the same time, physically and symbolically.

This observation is important from a developmental point of view. While children are born into a world of things, from their perspective, the adults around them actively guide them towards understanding and using them as objects. A jug might attract the child’s attention and curiosity but the mother will most probably show it to the child first, name it and then demonstrate how it can be held. Children then go on to use the cups, bottles and jars in their play sets in a similar manner. But, through symbolic play, these cups, bottles and jars can acquire, once more, an openness that goes beyond what they are as conventional objects: if needed, they can turn into spaceships, or boats, or houses. They become artefacts. This achievement is made possible through interaction with adults. As Vygotsky noted, ‘the path from the thing to the child and from the child to the thing lies through another person’ (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 532).

A serious engagement with the issue of materiality in research requires us to observe the dynamic relations between people (children and adults) and their environment, and to try to theorise them. I have argued here that we engage with material entities either as things, objects, or artefacts, and that this has great consequences for creativity. What I am not implying, however, is a strict separation between these categories, or a hierarchy between them. Artefacts might be both outcomes and springboards for creative action but they would not exist as such if we didn’t first learn to manipulate things as objects. Finally, we should not underestimate the role of things themselves for creativity (hence the title of the present chapter). When objects resist our action and surprise us, they often do so from their position as things. The ‘thingness’ of the material world often intervenes in creative action and, at times, it is precisely what gives it its creative turn. Relating to objects as

things deconstructs our perception of what they are or should be. In this sense, *the path from object to artefact in creative work might actually lie through the thing.*

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