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# **It's Personal: Subjectivity in Design History**

Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei

## **Introduction: Subjectivity and the Academy**

Academic enquiry proceeds collectively as the people working in a particular field or discipline each contribute parts to the total body of knowledge. An ideal upheld in academic contexts is that each researcher should design and carry out replicable research. While this model is admittedly more prevalent in the sciences and in that work in the social sciences which does not make extensive use of qualitative research, it is also a distant aim in arts and humanities research, which includes design studies, design cultures and design history. As a legacy from the academization of the humanities in the nineteenth Century, knowledge production has been modeled on the sciences, privileging objectivity over subjectivity, even though the arts and wider humanities deal in the realm of the subjective for which qualitative analysis is suitable and revealing.

The authority of the academic, based on rational, objective enquiry, has been critically explored by a number of scholars, particularly sociologists, from C. Wright Mills' promotion of the "sociological imagination" (1959), to Talcott Parsons' work on the extra socialization undergone by students in higher education, and of the power of the medical professional, based on an exchange of professional advice and client trust (Parsons 1970; 1977). Michel Foucault examined "power-knowledge" and "pastoral power" which involves care, guidance, leadership in the exercise of government whether of a nation or "techniques of the self" (Eide and Knight 1999: 540; Foucault in Kritzman 1990: 62; Foucault 1979). Pierre Bourdieu understood power as residing in several forms of capital, and included educational capital in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1986 [1979]).

As scholars we are trained in objectivity. We know we cannot achieve it, but we aim for it and uphold ideals of objectivity nevertheless. We are trained to put aside subjective responses in our analyses, and yet personal interests, values and experiences continue to inform the work of design historians, from our choice of subject matter and theoretical frameworks to our methodological approaches and conclusions. This situation persists even while postmodern theorists have argued against the utopian ideal of history as an objective science. While the theoretical positions against objectivity are convincing and influential, the training and practice of academic research remain largely unchanged.

Post-structuralist ideas about the function of meaning developed by continental philosophers, anthropologists and linguists have variously informed research and writing in the arts and humanities. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz refused the scientific methods dominant in the social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s, and instead borrowed from the Saussurian structuralist anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss a concept of culture as a series of texts, available for interpretation by cultural anthropologists. Geertz's approach incorporated the post-structuralist refusal of master narratives and perception of cultural meanings as a complex series of networks in a method termed "symbolic anthropology" (Geertz, 1977 (1973); 1974 (1971); 1988). Geertz's influence on the practice of academic research and writing outside of anthropology primarily resides in his argument for subjective interpretation and literariness, called "thick description", which bears comparison with Hayden White's views about history as fiction, discussed below. Following Geertz, James Clifford and George Marcus have characterized ethnographic writing as being "determined in at least six ways":

- (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieux); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one

writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at time contested); (6) historically (all of the above conventions and constraints are changing). These determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethnographic fictions (Clifford 1986:6).

In *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), Clifford charted “a pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority” since the mid- twentieth century, with reference to Geertz, Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze and Mikhail Bakhtin's “heteroglossia” (Clifford 1988: 23). In understanding social science disciplines through their connections with history and literature, and suggesting each of these as “serious fictions”, Clifford’s contribution has been to promote self-consciousness in ethnographic writing.

The subjective turn in the social sciences—from Arlie Russell Hochschild’s seminal work on the commodification of affect, looking at the work of flight attendants, for example (Hochschild 1983; 1994) to a broader sociology of the emotions—has done much to shift academic attention to new fields of human experience (i.e. writing about subjective experiences) but it has been less conclusive in allowing for subjectivity in the methodology and practice of research. Subjectivity has received occasional treatment in the broader realm of history, as we discuss further below, but remains little explored in design history—a field where, we will argue, the role of subjectivity is particularly important. A few initial forays have been made, examined below. Our aim with this special issue is to contribute to a far-reaching debate on the role of subjectivity in design history writing and its potential challenges and benefits in design history and beyond.

## **Subjectivity and History: Historiography**

Historians have perhaps been less ready than some social scientists to allow the breakdown of authority, authenticity and truth in favor of subjectivity, playfulness and fiction characteristic of post-structuralist, and later, postmodernist theory. However, since before philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979: 8) declared the end of the master narratives as a key feature of what he identified as the postmodern condition, historians, like ethnographers, have tried to devise strategies for writing history that acknowledge and accommodate the necessarily partial—in both meanings of the word—nature of their endeavors. Significant responses to these challenges in the field of cultural history include the tradition of microhistory as pioneered by, for example, Carlo Ginzburg in the 1970s (1976; 2012) and the close attention to the literary and rhetorical qualities of history writing advocated by scholars like Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra. In various ways, White and LaCapra argued that there can be no such thing as “objective” history while refusing the charge of utter relativism with which more epistemologically conservative historians have associated their work.

In applying the ideas of the post-structuralists to the non-fiction diet of history, White's 1973 study *Metahistory* contended that history writing is creative, fictive even and that histories may be understood in terms of literary genre as comic, tragic, ironic or romantic (White 1973; 1979; 1987).<sup>1</sup> More recently, he has extended his criticism of the prevalent desire to neatly separate fact and fiction in the discipline of history to a more general level: “No other discipline is more informed by the illusion that ‘facts’ are found in the research rather than constructed by modes of representation and techniques of discoursivization than is history. No other discipline is more oblivious to the ‘fictionality’ of what it takes to be its ‘data’” (White 1999: 322). White also recognized the doubly constructed nature of sources: “Historical discourse thus features a double representation: of the object of its interest and of

the historians thought about this object.” (White 2000: 392). White’s influence has been felt in arguments surrounding the relation between history and postmodernism, and history and cultural studies (Johnson 2001) and his influence as an essential corrective to previously habitual modes of writing history is exemplified in the journal *Rethinking History*, founded in 1997 to question “several key precepts in modernist history thinking, starting with the idea that the historian objectively discovers the facts of the past and presents them dispassionately as history for others to judge.” It rethinks “the subject–object dichotomy, and also the relationships between form and content and objectivity and relativism” and is predicated on the methodological position that “In challenging the status of history as truth, the ‘potentialities of representation’ come to the fore” (Munslow 2003).

Acknowledging the fictional aspects of history writing does not mean that historiography *is* fiction. In the words of Lloyd Kramer: “The fictive, imaginary dimension in all accounts of events does not mean that the events did not actually happen, but it does mean that any attempt to *describe* events ... must rely on various forms of imagination” (Kramer 1989: 101). In historiography, the fictional is of course intimately linked to the subjective. Both have traditionally been distinctly pejorative terms in the historical profession for the same reason: they are considered to represent the opposite of the conventional virtue of revealing “objective facts”. A rich analysis of the “objectivity question” in history writing has been provided by Peter Novick in *That Noble Dream* (1988), where he demonstrates how American historians since the late nineteenth century have discussed and defended the idea and ideal of objectivity—a narrative in which “that noble dream” only slowly, partially and reluctantly has been decommissioned. But fictionality and subjectivity cannot be wished away, and therefore it would seem obvious that a self-reflexive and critical appraisal of the role of subjectivity in historiography is a necessary foundation for a *more rational* approach.

For LaCapra, historiography and human experience alike transcend the simple binary opposition between the objective and the subjective: “extreme documentary objectivism and relativistic subjectivism do not constitute genuine alternatives. They are mutually supportive parts of the same larger complex” (LaCapra 1987: 137). Frank Ankersmit has gone one step further, arguing that “instead of fearing subjectivity as the historian’s mortal sin, we should welcome subjectivity as an indispensable contribution to our knowledge of the past” (Ankersmit 2001: 100). Ankersmit grounds this argument in an elaborate deduction of how the historian’s political and ethical values are not derived from an “objective”, unmediated truth, but quite the reverse: they are part of what we conventionally speak of as “truth”: rationally and rigorously argued, in well-founded historical writing.

When subjectivity has been subjected to the historiographical gaze, it has been less in the sense we approach it here; rather it has been understood as an interest in the subject positions of historical actors and how these can be identified and activated in the writing of history. This is what LaCapra terms “the experiential turn”. But the otherwise laudable desire to describe the experience of others also harbors the dangers of “projective identification and ventriloquism” (LaCapra 2004: 3-4). At the end of the day, no amount of knowledge and empathy allows the historian full, unmediated access to the experiences of historical subjects. Albeit a less central element of “the experimental turn”, LaCapra does not neglect our understanding of subjectivity. This becomes evident in passages commenting on how personal experience influences theoretical standpoints: “No doubt there is a significant dialogic or openly dialectical relation between my theoretical views and my experience and subject position” (LaCapra 2004: 16). But the personal experience of historians is present also in other aspects of our work. LaCapra points out how thorny this issue is by asking a series of “difficult questions: Should the historian make explicit his or her own subject positions to the extent that they are pertinent to research and argument? [...] Could one make

a stronger case for auto-ethnography than for a more narrowly individual, at times narcissistic, autobiography? [...] To what extent can one determine what precisely in the work of the historian is to be related to his or her own experience?”(LaCapra 2004: 60-1). The questions are useful, and indeed difficult, but unfortunately LaCapra does not provide much in the way of definite answers. His work has nevertheless proved useful to design historians, such as Linda Sandino who has worked extensively on the value of oral history in design history (Sandino 2006: 179-80).

LaCapra’s warning against the dangers of “projective identification and ventriloquism” is a sanguine reminder of the limits of “the experiential turn” and, ultimately, of historical knowledge. However, it can be seen to rest on that very ideal he is qualifying: the utopia of objectivism. Susan Crane has argued that the personal can be the basis for a shared understanding of the past without resorting to putting words in the mouth of historical actors: “The historian is not presuming to feel what someone else may have felt; she is feeling for herself, through herself, in response to the past, and from that authentic premise comes historical understanding” (Crane 2006: 452). Historical consciousness can only be developed in, and by, the subject, so the oft-rehearsed dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity is false. The two are not opposites, but mutually constructive. One consequence of this is, according to Crane, that historians “are keenly aware that when talking about history, they are always also talking about themselves” (Crane 2006: 442). However, they are not always as aware of this as they should be.

Perhaps more than any historian today, Carolyn Steedman has consistently and compellingly drawn on personal experience in her scholarship, from childhood memories and her own family’s class conditions through generations in *Landscape for a Good Woman* to meditations on her own relation to archival research and its potential maladies in *Dust: the Archive and Cultural History* (Steedman 1986; 2001). Some readers might regard her work



as *too* private: she does not shy away from the intimate, including the more problematic, potentially embarrassing, and even potentially traumatic, aspects of and episodes in family history. But this immense, unexpected, vulnerability is also what makes her writing so compelling and convincing. Affect might be personal, but it is also universally human and a powerful part of historical consciousness. Anthropologist Ruth Behar therefore champions this vulnerability in scholarship: “I say that anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore (Behar 1996: 177). Similarly, Sheila Fitzpatrick claims that “There’s not much point in writing history if there is not something you really want to say, and the things one really wants to say tend to be subjective and emotional. The question is how best to say them, with what mixture of direct (emotional) and indirect (analytical) expression” (Fitzpatrick 2010: 195). That subjectivity is a communal experience is only an apparent paradox. Steedman’s work exemplifies the power of recognition and empathy that the writer’s personal experience may wield in historical narratives: “It is for the potentialities of that community offered by historical consciousness I suppose, that I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography” (Steedman 1992: 50).

How credibility in historical scholarship is in fact a product of subjectivism rather than of objectivism—as epistemologically conservative historians would have it—has been eloquently expressed by David Lowenthal in his seminal text *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985): “Unless history displays conviction, interest, and involvement, it will not be understood or attended to. That is why subjective interpretation, while limiting knowledge, is also essential to communication. Indeed, the better a narrative exemplifies an historian’s point of view the more credible his account” (Lowenthal 1985: 218).

If the historian’s subjectivity is not acknowledged, historical narratives can easily become instruments of power and control in a Gramscian sense of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971). History is written by the victors. The allure of this axiom extends not just to

sanctioned, academic history of geopolitical developments, but also to the small-scale, private and popular accounts of the past, as is made patently clear in Carl Frode Tiller's novel *Innsirkling 2*:

When I think back on the 1980s, it strikes me that it is not my 1980s I'm recalling, but the 1980s as it is presented on the Internet, on film, TV, radio and newspapers now in 2006. When I was about to start writing this letter, for instance, I started thinking about Sky Channel, Pat Sharp, MTV, I thought of Ball sweaters and duvet jackets with leather shoulder patches, of Toto and Alphaville [...], of pastel colors and mullet hairdos [...] But the unpleasant sensation that this was not my 1980s just intensified. As if mum could afford to buy Levis or Lacoste or Busnel or Matinique for me back then when it was popular. Not to mention video games or cable TV or those electronic games people were playing in the schoolyard [...] This was the 1980s of the privileged and popular middle-class children who came home to set dinner tables every day [...] The teacher's pets we went to school with have grown up [...] and all the spoiled and successful thirty-somethings across the country have taken up all the significant posts and positions, and on TV show after TV show, radio show after radio show, and in newspaper interview after newspaper interview they talk as if they represent both you and me and everyone else. And in the end we believe that they do, don't we. [...] So I will promise you one thing. This letter will not be a rehash of the 1980s we were presented with at the reunion. [...] I will write about me and you and Bendik, and I will write about my gypsy family and your hillbilly family, and this history, our history (Tiller 2010: 178-180)

Tiller—a historian by training—is here acutely aware of the reductive potential and repressive power inherent in history's inevitable subjectivity, but at the same time he deftly demonstrates its flip side: conscious subjectivity can be emancipatory and empowering in the writing hands of the disenfranchised. Tiller's character seizes the (albeit limited) opportunity of turning *his story* into *history*.

### **Subject/Object: Subjectivity and Design History**

Recognition of the fact that design historians are people with subjective responses is still not the accepted norm in design history writing. And yet, design history particularly has so much to gain from an engagement with subjectivity in various ways, as this special issue shows. We can better examine the place of subjectivity in design history by artificially separating our three interrelated groups: (1) subjectivity as the subject of study, writing about subjective experiences; (2) writing about oneself; and (3) subjectivity as a method, an extension of the qualitative.

The first of these, writing about subjective experiences, valorizes those experiences as worthy of scholarly attention. Subjectivity as a subject of study is seen for example in work across the social sciences and humanities on the emotions and the senses (for example, Howes and Classen 2014). The senses have been a rich seam of enquiry for design history, from Sorcha O'Brien and Anna Moran's edited book *Love Objects* (2014) and Kate Smith's history of the sensorial experience of shopping in eighteenth century London (Smith 2012). The subjective experience of pleasure, in the form of leisure activities have been examined in Jo Turney's studies of cross stich and knitting and Nicholas Oddy's work on cycling and collecting (Turney 2004; Oddy 2007). Studies of both amateur practice and the processes of professionalization may inform design historical understanding of the value and suppression or subjectivity in design history (Beegan and Atkinson 2008; Lees-Maffei 2008). Design

historians have examined the home as a site of work and leisure using, for example, Amanda Vickery's engaging, personal and even gossipy accounts of how women, such as Elizabeth Shackleton, have felt about their homes, their possessions and their lives, based on diaries among other documentary and archival sources (Vickery 1998; 2009). There is much potential for future design historical examination of areas of human experience associated with subjective responses.

Secondly, a group of writings about the self promotes the personal as significant. Carolyn Steedman's work, discussed above, is exemplary. Also of interest here is the work of historian of material culture, Leora Auslander; see, for example, *Taste and Power* (Auslander 1996). In design history, Anne Massey has made extensive use of her own family history in her study of the design history of Hollywood films by tracing their impact on the lives on four generations of working-class British women (Massey 2000). Personal experience can play a prominent part in analyzing the socio-cultural meaning of things, as Judy Attfield argued: "It is precisely when the 'feel' (subjectivity) is ignored in the study of objects that the dynamic process of the object/subject relation is reduced to generalised static symbolism" (Attfield 2000: 147). More recently, Kjetil Fallan has explored the potential of personal experience as "a way of exploring how designed objects are mediators, not only of inscribed (symbolic) meaning, but also of collective and personal memories" (Fallan 2013: 67). Fiona Hackney has also broached the convergence of autobiography and design history (Hackney 2013). Writing about oneself entails not only the understanding that the personal matters, but also a rigorous subjectivity necessary to make the personal significant for others. This necessitates an engagement with identity politics that also informs academic writing about things other than the self, of course. Identity politics tie work about the self to a wider political project, for example, feminism. Feminist cultural history has examined that which has been "hidden from history" in feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham's phrase (1973).

Carol Hanisch's 1969 rallying cry that "the personal is political"<sup>2</sup> as well as work in cultural studies demonstrating that everyday life repays analysis (Highmore 2002A; 2002B) have produced a firm historiographic bedrock upon which future work can build. A recent example of how the two first categories of subjectivity—writing about subjective experiences and writing about oneself—can be combined in the realm of identity politics can be found in Jane Hatrick's self-reflexive examination of her work with the personal archive of fashion designer Norman Hartnell:

If the sexuality of the designer has been suppressed in design literature then knowledge about the sexuality of the author who writes the designer's sexuality back into design literature is totally absent, although might be assumed. As a female academic who identifies as queer, my approach to Hartnell's archive and possessions looked to reclaim Hartnell's sexual subjectivity (Hatrick 2014: 82).

Hatrick relates that during her research she was criticized of allowing herself "to become too personally involved with the story of Hartnell's sexuality and his relationship with his colleague and close friend" and advised to focus instead on the designer's work, but justifies her personal approach by arguing that it prompts an "emotional response" to the archival material that is "equally important" precisely because personal identity is politically significant (Hatrick 2014: 82).

The third way in which subjectivity informs design history is methodological. From the significance of reverie in the process of writing history, to recognition of the value of design history motivated by deep personal conviction—a politics of the personal—the methods used in the practice of design history are conditioned by, and condition, understanding of subjectivity. Design historical work on and through subjectivity poses

questions, as well as providing some more-or-less partial, provisional answers, about how acknowledging one's subjectivity determines what to research, the way in which research is conducted, and the writing about that research. The value to design historical scholarship of drawing on actual personal (user) experience with the artefacts we scrutinize has occasionally been commented on. In the words of John Walker, "goods should be *used* as well as scrutinized" (Walker 1989: 5). In his history of Swedish design, Lasse Brunnström heeds Walker's call in his discussion of the 1955 Gense Focus cutlery, pointing to the fact that he himself has used this product daily since it was launched as adding weight to his analysis (Brunnström 2010: 216-221). An adverse experience and a lesson learned is provided by Jeffrey Meikle's retrospective acknowledgment of his failure to engage first hand with the artefacts he was writing about in his first major work in the field had, in one case, led him to reproduce a specific design myth (Meikle 1998; 2012). The significance of such personal experience with artefacts extends way beyond the connoisseurial and anecdotal. Joseph Corn has argued that the actual handling of artefacts has "shaped our historical questions and interpretations" and that the lack of attention to this form of experience constitutes a historiographical problem (Corn 1996: 49). Recognition of the need to incorporate personal qualities like intuition methodologically can lead to creative advantages (Bastick 2003).

Across these three overarching groups of design historical inquiry, the relationship between subject and object is key. In the words of Dennis Doordan: "Design history's insight into the eloquence of things is one of its most distinctive contributions to history as a general field of intellectual endeavor" (Doordan 1995:78). But object-knowledge is not objective knowledge: objects become meaningful in their encounters with subjects. Rather than implying a fully-fledged relativism in which meaning is entirely in the eyes of the beholder and any given artefact could mean anything to any given person, the meaning of things is *relational*: it is formed and transformed in the discursive space between object and subject.

## **Things That Speak**

One methodology which engages subjectivity in design history is the proposition that things, artefacts, can speak. Most—if not all—scholars in the field of design history readily agree that material matters. Many recognize that designed artefacts, images and spaces have a mediating function, in informing consumption practices and ideas about design, as well as the fact that the channels of mediation are themselves designed (Lees-Maffei 2009). However, the eloquence of artefacts is more of a contested issue. Both in researching design, and in communicating what we know, design historians engage in a translation of words into objects and back again as we understand the history of objects through textual and numerical sources such as diaries and inventories, as we infer three-dimensional products from images in paper-based catalogues, and then translate design back into the words of our books, articles, talks, presentations and lectures (Lees-Maffei 2011). Design historians and design commentators alike explain the eloquence of objects in their writing and talks. However, for some design historians, it is not enough simply to speak for objects; we must recognize, in addition, that objects themselves *speak*. Lorraine Datson's book *Things That Talk* (2004) spans interpretations from the merely metaphorical to the largely literal. Most historians, however “take a stand somewhere in between, seeing artefacts as both inarticulate and loquacious, both compliant and defiant. Making things talk—to historians and to historical actors—thus becomes a matter of coaxing, translation, negotiation and networking” (Fallan 2010: 47). But how far can we go in our translations of “thing talk”? Where is the border between imaginative interpretation and sheer flight of fancy? When do objects stop being ontological entities and become “straw men” for subjects?

Commonsensical logic ties the ability to speak directly to the possession of agency. However, the less commonsensical notion of non-human agency as developed in Actor-

Network Theory (ANT) may be useful in this context (e.g. Latour 1987; 2005). ANT disconnects agency from intentionality, making it possible to speak of things as actors chiefly in the sense that their tasks have been delegated to them by other (normally human) actors (Fallan 2008: 92). Still, wilful and speaking artefacts figure in ANT literature—a device not universally applauded. Tim Dant has critiqued ANT for failing to “study closely the interaction or the lived relationships between human beings and material objects” (Dant 2005: 81). Dant’s qualification is a reminder of the relational character of the meaning of things, and a call to acknowledge the agency of artefacts without lapsing into what Margaret Jacob labelled “self-indulging pantheism” (Jacob 1999: 106). But Jacob’s aversion to letting things talk conceals a false opposite concerning the nature of facts versus that of artefacts: as Hayden White reminds us, historical “facts do not speak for themselves [...] the historian speaks for them” (White 1976: 26). As design historians we habitually represent, or speak on behalf of historical events, so it is hard to deny that we can also speak on behalf of historical artefacts. That their answers are not autonomous and impartial should not detract from their truth and value. According to Latour, meaning and action are relational, and “there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence” (Latour 2005: 72).

Alfred Gell proposed a more pragmatic and potentially less controversial way of seeing artefacts as actors: things can be considered to have agency simply because we humans often treat them as if they do (Gell 1998: 7). After all, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, personification is “perhaps the most obvious ontological metaphor [...] allow[ing] us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 34).<sup>3</sup> Gell’s argument can be used not only to sidestep accusations of “pantheism”, but also to provide a “license to play”. Acknowledging that make-believe differs from reality does not mean



fictional elements and imaginative interpretations cannot enhance the value of a historical narrative. This becomes particularly poignant, writes Megan Doolittle, when conventional historical sources and methods fall short: “In the absence of historical records [...] fiction and the imagination become central tools not only in locating the meanings associated with them, but [in] their very presence as material objects” (Doolittle 2011: 249). Such strategies are by no means unprecedented. Following the post-structuralist modern “death of the author” (Barthes [1967] 1977) and the “literary turn”, experimental fictional dialogues surfaced variously in the humanities and social sciences with mixed success.<sup>4</sup> These experiments were prompted by a desire to embrace multivocality, subjectivity and poetics within meaningful, reliable narratives. These conversations have rarely included the voices of artefacts although, in principle, putting words into the mouths of human characters (historic or fictitious) is no different from letting things talk. White’s provocative argument that “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation” and that “we are no longer compelled ... to believe ... that fiction is the antithesis of fact” invite the accommodation of fiction, imagination and subjectivity in design history research and writing alike (White 1976: 23, 27).

However, to the extent that harnessing subjectivity in furthering the understanding of objects is informed by personal, lived experience, it can serve to check theories of human-object relations. Vivian Sobchack, an amputee with a prosthetic leg, has offered a subjective—and, therefore, in this context, forceful—objection to treatments of the “prosthetic” in cultural theory: “the primary context in which ‘the prosthetic’ functions literally rather than figuratively has been left behind—as has the experience and agency of those who, like myself, actually use prostheses without feeling ‘posthuman’ and who, moreover, are often startled to read of all the hidden powers their prostheses apparently exercise both in the world and in the imaginations of cultural theorists” (Sobchack 2009:

281). Personal experience, therefore, can function as a sobering corrective in enticing the eloquence of things.

### **Gendered Subjectivities in Design History**

We make clear above that our identification of three interrelated ways in which design history can engage with subjectivity involves an artificial separation of overlapping and coexistent approaches. One area which provides a rich case study of the way in which these groupings intersect is that of gendered subjectivities.<sup>5</sup> Just as Raphael Samuel noted a distinction between memory, a subjective experience, and history, which is viewed as rational (Samuel 2012) so these phenomena have been gendered. Stereotypically, women are the memory-keepers at home; they compile the photograph albums (whether digital or analogue); they are the principal assemblers of scrapbooks for the preservation of locks of hair, cinema tickets, tiny socks and thousands of other remnants of courtship, childhood, life and death (Tucker et al 2006). Conversely, men have statistically been predominant in professional history (e.g. Lunbeck 2005).

To return to our first category—subjectivity as the subject of study, writing about subjective experiences—consider the home as a prime site for the construction, maintenance and exercise of gendered subjectivity through familial learning. Home is where we first piece together our (gendered) identities and the—albeit contested, complex and relative—privacy of the home means that there we are largely unobserved, except by family, friends and others we consciously admit into that otherwise closed space. Personal development in this context clearly involves a range of potential identities engaging ethnicities, and sexualities as well as gender. To write about home necessarily involves writing about subjective experiences, including gendered ones.

Our second category is writing about oneself. In a landmark essay “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” Sherri B. Ortner (1972) observes that “woman’s dominant psychic modes of relating would incline her to enter into relationships with the world that culture might see as being more ‘like nature,’ immanent and embedded in things as given, rather than, like culture, transcending and transforming things through the super-imposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values.” Ortner argues against this polarization and in favor of women’s increased cultural engagement. Writing about and through oneself has been politicised in gender terms by French feminists who have promoted an essentialist understanding of women’s cultural production. Helene Cixous (1976[1975]) argued that women should write their bodies in *L’écriture féminine*. Cultural production is, in this context, not gender neutral, rather it is essentialist and celebrates women’s experience. In introducing Julia Kristeva’s experimental non-linear writing, and her essay “Women’s Time”, Alice Jardine has pointed out that: “History is linked to the cogito, to the paternal function, representation, meaning, denotation, sign, syntax, narration, and so forth. At the forefront of this rethinking is a rejection of what seem to be the strongest pillars of that history: anthropomorphism, humanism, and truth.” (Jardine 1981: 8). Returning to the Anglo-American feminist tradition, we can recall Sheila Rowbotham’s identification of women’s experiences—domesticity prominent among them—as having been “hidden from history” within a feminist framework in which, as we have noted, the “personal is political” (Hanisch 1970 [1969]). Alongside historians of gender, such as Steedman and Vickery, feminist design historians Pat Kirkham, Judy Attfield and Cheryl Buckley, have shown how subjectivity is a useful tool in the construction of histories of design and gender alike. This work exemplifies the fact that academic enquiry, as a shared endeavor, can be harnessed to the project of exploring personal and subjective issues.

Thirdly, we identified work on the methodology of subjectivity. What people actually do *behind closed doors* (to use the title of Amanda Vickery's 2010 book on Georgian home life), is extremely difficult to capture reliably, and this difficulty is exacerbated when home lives of the past are the subject of enquiry. The hidden, disregarded and personal aspects of home life respectively, and specifically the intersection of gender and design in the home, require sensitive methodology. While Vickery has turned to diaries and other archival sources to examine home life of the past, Lees-Maffei (2013) has used homemaking, home decoration and etiquette books in combination for their treatments of the social and material home. Her study of domesticity is not personal in the sense of being autobiographical, or even directly informed by her own experiences at home, but rather it is motivated by feminist politics and the judgment that "the personal is political" is a rich *modus operandi* for the practice of design history.

As well as asking, with Linda Nochlin (1971), why there have been no great women artists we might ask, following Cheryl Buckley, about the implications of gender in careers of design historians (Buckley 1989; 1999). This emphasis on structural explanations of the socio-economic facts of women's experiences for women's professional suppression which extends back to modernist novelist Virginia Woolf's landmark lecture, then essay, "A Room of One's Own" and beyond of course. Woolf's ideas informed the Anglo-American feminist tradition for generations; she drew attention to the determining function of both the criteria by which value is judged, and the identities of the judges in forming those criteria and the ways in which they are applied. Notwithstanding the axiomatically gendered position Woolf, and feminist thinkers since, have taken, in seeking to understand the academic value of subjectivity it is instructive, too, to pay attention to the importance of reverie in Woolf's work. The "Room of One's Own" is a place for uninterrupted, quiet, reflection and mediation

and if this is not gender neutral, then certainly an experience shared by all wherever they may be on the gender spectrum.

### **Personal Matter(s): Introducing the Articles**

The articles which follow derive from a program of research in the Theorizing Visual Art and Design (TVAD) research group at the University of Hertfordshire led by Grace Lees-Maffei. In 2012-13 Kjetil Fallan was TVAD's Visiting Researcher and in May of that academic year we staged a symposium supported by the Design History Society on the topic of subjectivity in design history. Nicholas Oddy spoke on the "Uneasy Alliance" of collectors and historians; academic historians should, he argued, be more willing to engage with experiential knowledge, as did Jo Turney in a talk which set her development as a design historian using ethnographic techniques and oral history, against the Neoliberalism that celebrates and perpetuates self-expression through piecemeal narratives such as social media. Regina L. Blaszczyk who reflected on her empirical and archival research on the color industry in the US, which aimed to codify and predict subjective responses in order to increase sales for designed goods ranging from fashion and home furnishings to domestic appliances and cars. Pauline Garvey brought together the commodification of affect (Hochschild 1983; 1994) and considerations of subjectivity in what we research and write about, and subjectivity in the ways in which we think and write about what it is that we are researching, for her anthropological ethnographic fieldwork on "sensuous domestic arrangements" and the emotions they provoke as unsettling the boundaries between private and public. Responding to the symposium papers, Jonathan Morris identified four subjectivities at work in design history: that of the researcher; the collector; the users and the discipline. All are represented in the work included in this special issue, some of which was

developed from presentations first made at the symposium and some of which was originated for this publication.

The papers in this special issue demonstrate the design historical value of the various approaches to subjectivity delineated in this introduction, beginning with the subjective experience of the designer. Nicolas P. Maffei (Norwich University of the Arts, UK) here posits subjectivity as an essential lens for historical biography in his examination of Norman Bel Geddes as a “Pioneer of Subjective Design”. Bel Geddes was one of the first generation of American industrial designers with a personality-driven approach. Geddes, in addition, explored the interior world of the spiritual and psychoanalytical self. Maffei sees Geddes as having cast the mold for personality-driven, visionary design ever since, seen in, for example Karim Rashid and Stefan Sagmeister.

Next, Kerry William Purcell (University of Hertfordshire, UK) explores the subjectivities of the design historian, developed from an articulation of the author’s autobiographical intellectual history. Promoting the role of testimony within the research community, Purcell proposes a candidly reflexive design criticism that dismantles carefully constructed professional personae in order to locate our “unconscious fascinations and obsessions” at the very heart of design analysis by asking how they have shaped the way we approach the objects of design history today.

In the third article, Mads Nygaard Folkmann and Hans-Christian Jensen (University of Southern Denmark) provide a case study of the about subjective uses of history. Their article “Subjectivity in Self-Historicization” analyses the furniture range “Camping”, designed by Jesper K. Thomsen and launched by the retailer Normann Copenhagen in 2009. Thomsen and Normann Copenhagen eloquently chose to utilise the subjective freedom enjoyed by non-historians when historicizing “Camping” in a “New Danish Modern” collection. Normann Copenhagen’s skilful strategic use of historical references nationalizes

and traditionalizes a fundamentally global design which has as much in common with Dutch Droog Design as it does with the heritage of Danish design. This article offers suggestive conclusions about the ways in which design culture supports subjectivity via mediation and the articulation of symbolic meaning.

Writing about students' subjective experiences, but also about her own, Annabella Pollen (University of Brighton, UK) counters a situation in which design students are required to place themselves at the center of the creative process in their practice-based studio courses, and yet are denied this position in the historical and theoretical elements within their design studio programs (their design history courses). The third person register fostered in academic writing has been negatively compared with the centrality of "I" in studio practice. This article shares empirical research into design students' *positive* appraisals of the historical and critical elements of their university studies. Rather than enforcing objectivity and detachment, design history courses are understood by students as active and creative, "developing their attitudes and challenging their certainties" and producing work which "can say as much about their person and their position as can their studio practice". Pollen's account of design students' subjective experiences of design history learning is simultaneously an account of her own personal experiences of design history teaching.

Lastly, we present an article about subjective knowledge as method. Based on their personal experiences of researching topics with a deep subjective resonance and which are intimately linked to subjective understandings of historical material, Paul Hazell (University of Worcester, UK) and Kjetil Fallan (University of Oslo, Norway) argue for a greater appreciation of "The Value of Unsanctioned Knowledge in Design Historical Scholarship". Examining the many ways non-historians, or at least non-professional historians, such as enthusiasts and collectors contribute to the field's knowledge production, Hazell and Fallan

identify a wide range of ways in which the research methods of design historians can draw on and incorporate the distinctly subjective perspective offered by “The Enthusiast’s Eye”.

### **Conclusion: Design History and Rigorous Subjectivity**

This introduction has provided an historiographic review of some work which can inform an understanding of subjectivity and design history, beginning with ideas about objectivity and authority in academia, and subjectivity in history writing, then looking at subjectivity and design history more specifically, before highlighting two methodological aspects of a design history which recognizes subjectivity: the eloquence of objects and the gendered subjectivities. As we have noted, a critical appraisal of the role of subjectivity will produce a *more rational* approach. Through reflecting on some of the facets of the interfaces between academia, history and design history with subjectivity, introduced above, and explored in the following articles, we seek to propose a rigorous subjectivity, meaning a form of scholarship which recognizes and engages subjectivity, and benefits from that engagement. This approach has been explored in the formal assessment in academic contexts of artwork and design, for example through doctorates in practice-based research and through research projects conducted in universities. A negotiation of the objectivity and authority assumed of academic work, with recognition of subjectivity as a subject of study, as constitutive of the research practitioner and as something to be accommodated methodologically, will enrich design history and her sisters, design studies and design cultures. In writing of “Research and the Self”, Morwenna Griffiths has noted, as we do here, that “Since all research is affected by the selves (relationships, circumstances, perspectives and reactions) of the researcher, making these as clear as possible to the audience is one way of exercising academic virtue and removing bias” (Griffiths 2011: 184). In asking how this might be done in the context of practice-based research, Griffiths suggests reflective practice and reflexivity. We hope that



this special issue will provide instructively reflexive reflections upon which to base a design history of subjectivity in future work.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A good overview of White's contribution is a special issue of *History and Theory* 37(2) (May 1998), especially: Vann 1998; Ankersmit 1998; Domanska, 1998; Partner, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> According to Humm (1995: 204), this phrase was first seen in print in Carol Hanisch's 1970 [1969] text "The Personal is Political". It was published in Firestone and Koedt 1970: n.p. and reprinted in Agel 1971: 152-7.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Tilley has suggested that not only do we think and speak of objects in a metaphorical manner, but that objects themselves form "a powerful metaphorical medium through which people may reflect on their world in a way simply not possible with words alone." (Tilley 1999: 103).

<sup>4</sup> As Bjørnar Olsen has cautioned, recalling the heyday of experimental writing in post-structural archaeology: "The devices applied to infusing dialogue and multivocality into the text often boiled down to adding a section with dialogue or conversation in an otherwise quite conventional narrative (often featuring the author and one or more opponents as participants ...) Even if encountering such a dialogue in scientific texts may have provoked some reflections, it may be read as another way of controlling reader's responses (producing both questions and answers), and thus actually reinstalling the author at the center of discourse." (Olsen 2010: 54).

<sup>5</sup> Feminist theorists have contributed significantly to understanding of the importance of subjectivity in academic work across the arts, humanities and sciences. For a recent review of feminist subjectivities in science, see Schnabel (2014) in which she compares feminist postcolonial science studies, new feminist materialisms, and queer ecologies as each challenging the 'marginalizing exceptionalisms, hierarchies, and binaries' of Western modernity.