

Benjamin's Objects (CAA, Los Angeles, 25-28 Feb 09)

Robin Schuldenfrei

The following Design Studies Forum-Sponsored Special Session has been added to the CAA Annual Conference in Los Angeles.

It does not appear in the printed version of the 2009 Call for Participation.

BENJAMIN'S OBJECTS

Design Studies Forum-Sponsored Special Session

College Art Association

Los Angeles, February 25-28, 2009

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

The objects found in Walter Benjamin's writing constitute a significant part of his material and intellectual world. Benjamin's careful textual descriptions of objects gird his broader critical insight into the status of objects and their significance. In reflecting upon his childhood, objects became a means through which to access a bygone era; taking possession of things was posited as a way to divest them of their commodity character. Activities such as collecting, assembling the archive, or unpacking the library were necessarily material-filled. In a seemingly straightforward manner, Benjamin celebrates the material qualities of objects such as letters, books, or old toys, but he also less directly employs objects to address subjects such as kitsch, modern life, and capitalism. In Benjamin's formulation, antimacassars, cases and containers, in their use, allowed the dweller to leave traces; it is notably through objects that the dweller imprints himself upon the interior.

This session proposes a reappraisal of Benjamin's objects, with considerations of what objecthood meant to Benjamin and how the particular set of objects highlighted in his writing can be understood both within his body of work and the broader period in which he wrote. Benjamin's theory can also be used to inform the examination of objects in other areas of design history. This panel invites investigations of objects as a means of soliciting critical insight into Benjamin's larger questions, such as those surrounding the aura, habits, taste, the bourgeoisie, or authenticity. Seeking not just to excavate and explicate previously underexamined Benjaminian objects, this session asks how we might interrogate them as discursive entities or agents. Papers might address the myriad

relationships between art and objects, object-laden activities (collecting, for example), or between subjects and objects. How might objects mediate between the concrete realm of the commodity and the dream world, both equally populated with things in Benjamin's work? How might objects give insight, according to Benjamin, into broader categories of knowledge? How do the perceptions or representations of things relate to their general existence or to a specific time and place? How might objects be seen in relation to the work of art or the production of images? And finally, how might the material culture of Benjamin give insight into the material of culture?

Please submit an abstract not to exceed 500 words with a c.v. via email to Robin Schuldenfrei (schul@uic.edu) by Friday, May 23, 2008.

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Reference:

CFP: Benjamin's Objects (CAA, Los Angeles, 25-28 Feb 09). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 19, 2008 (accessed Jul 4, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/30398>>.