

**ТОРГИ ЧИ ПЕРЕМОВИНИ? ТРАДИЦІЙНА МАТЕРІАЛЬНА  
КУЛЬТУРА МІЖ МОВЧАЗНИМИ НАРАЦІЯМИ І  
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MATERIAL CULTURE BETWEEN SILENT NARRATIONS  
AND DISCOURSES ON AUTHENTICITY****Gabriela BOANGIU**“C.S. Nicolăescu-Ploșor” Socio-Human Research Institute,  
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**Боанджіу Габрієла. Торги чи перемовини? Традиційна матеріальна культура між мовчазними нараціями і дискурсом автентичності.** Матеріальна культура – це концепція, яка розділяє, пробуджує мимовільні зв'язки, інтриги і, схоже, занадто легко імітує або іноді обмежує себе в сфері суспільних наук. Розглянута з точки зору епістемологічної відсутності залучення, здається, матеріальна культура вписується в кордони ошатного концептуального комфорту, “оплачуючи” так звану затверділу конкретність.

**Мета статті.** У дослідженні пропонується повернути поняття матеріальної культури в етнологічній науці, в умови його фактичної реконтекстуалізації, тобто її зв'язку з сучасністю, з аспектами як щоденне життя, “практикою споживання”, так і з символічним значенням або соціальною цінністю об'єктів, культурною ідентичністю. **Новизна дослідження.** Вперше розглянуто як фактична активізація концепції реконтекстуалізації матеріальної культури передбачає її від'єднання від свого досить конститутивного матеріалізму, але не його матеріальності. **Методи дослідження** полягають в етнографічному зіставленні чинників традиційної матеріальної культури із сучасними етнокультурними маркерами. **Висновки.** Таким чином, світ об'єктів позиціонується на кордоні між “реальним” і “уявним”, між побудовою і розшифровкою смислів, між присутністю себе і конфронтацією з іншим. Отже, формується теоретична плинність, яка не знищує «дисциплінарні ідентичності», а навпаки, відкриває діалоги між соціально-людськими науками, розширюючи, таким чином, рамки аналізу.

**Ключові слова:** матеріальна культура, автентичність, споживання, популярне мистецтво, артефакти традиційної культури.

**Introduction.** Material culture – a concept that divides, awakens involuntary connections, intrigues and seems to imitate or sometimes limit itself much too easily in the area of the social sciences. Regarded from the perspective of epistemic lack of involvement, seems to fit within the borders of the reified conceptualisation comfort, “paying” by a so-called solidified concreteness.

**Historiographical context of the study.** The study proposes the bringing back of the material culture concept within the ethnologic sciences, under the circumstances of its actual re-contextualisation, that is its relation with modernity, with aspects as the quotidian life, practices of consumption (see Daniel Miller, Don Slater), a symbolic value/social value of the objects, a cultural identity. The actual revitalisation of the concept proposes its detaching from its rather constitutive materialism, but not from its materiality. Thus, the world of objects is positioned at the border between “real” and imaginary, between constructing and deciphering meanings, between the presence of the self and the confrontation with the otherness. Consequently, there is shaped a theoretical fluidity that does not erase “disciplinary identities”, but, on the contrary, opens dialogues between the socio-human sciences, extending, in this way, the analysis frames.

The credit given to ethnography by the contemporary researchers ensures a permanent returning to the empiric, in the idea of avoiding rigid conceptualisations and formulations, returning constantly to particular situations, sometimes reproducing “the voice” of the interlocutor in the anthropological text, leaving more and more space to its repre-

sentations. The discourse of the author unravels the discourse of the “natives”, doubled by the silent narrations of the material culture, by the symbolic relations between people and the world of objects.

A particular object on which we are to consider is represented by the analysis of the “traditional art” objects, the producing and their consumption into the urban area, which are subscribed on a symbolical axis between “to bargain” and “to negotiate” the value, the authenticity. The metaphor of “bargaining” preserves the marks of the local aspect, of the rather occult interests, unexpressed directly, but accepted tacitly, which fascinates through “text”, through the local colour, through the sudden familiarisation that establishes between the performers; that of the “negotiation” implies the rationality, the construction (“negotiation” practices), interests formulated “contractually”, predictability, transparency – at least as rhetoric necessity. Thus, it is proposed an orientation of the ethnologic study towards the provocations of the present reality that gains consistency through opening, on one hand towards the disciplines connected to “presence” and through the necessity imprinted by its “moral” duty to connect/preserve/patrimonialize the past by “assuring” it viably in the future.

The attendance at CEU Summer University 2007, Budapest Hungary, for the course *Culture as Resource: Democracy in a Globalized World* offered the possibility of developing some fruitful dialogues with the coordinating professors, on my research project, as much as the completion of the initial bibliography, within the Central European University Library.

The re-evaluation and the re-valuation of the Romanian traditional culture involves the taking into consideration the permanent "dialogues" that are established between the urban and the rural regions, of the identity strategies that are activated within these environments, along with the new cultural discourses, spread within the space of the contemporary society, considered by certain researchers as a "consumption society"

The concept of "material culture" knows a revitalisation in the context of its connection with the studies of economic anthropology studies that refer to consumerism and the circulation of goods in the contemporary society. The dialogue between Daniel Miller and Don Slater, published in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, re-establishes the essential moments of these academic approaches, which are rather audacious<sup>1</sup>.

Don Slater, who is a well-known sociologist, also interested in inter-disciplinary studies, was underlining, within the previously mentioned study, that: "within sociology, the study of consumption had to fight its ground in order to valorize the object (...) we had to find our own way to material culture, as well as to the agency of social subjects and how that might be exercised in everyday life. Consumption was a good way of exploring these issues"<sup>2</sup>.

Daniel Miller fundamentals the material culture studies, reconnecting anthropology with its philosophical fundamentals, moreover underlining the necessity of doubling this endeavour with systematic empirical studies. In his work, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, he was mentioning "mass goods represent culture, not because they are merely there as the environment within which we operate, but because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society: our identities, our social affiliation, our lived everyday practices"<sup>3</sup>.

**The main body of the article.** The "recent" traditional artefacts are framed within this circuit of goods and/or merchandises that the studying subject of material culture, their analysis from this perspective opening new fruitful possibilities of interpretation.

It is obvious the connection between the world of objects and subconscious, although the concreteness of the objects can suggest the opposite of this affirmation, as Daniel Miller underlines "An analysis of the artefact must begin with its most obvious characteristic, which is that it exists as a physically concrete form independent of any individual's mental image of it. This factor may provide the key to understanding its power and significance in cultural construction. The importance of this physicality of the artefact derives from its ability thereby to act as a bridge, not only between the mental and physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and the unconscious"<sup>4</sup>. The silent narrations of the "rurban" material culture that are built at the level of the constructive "tangibility" of the artefacts also emerge under the influence of an ample range of associations and differentiations, more or less aware, sometimes bringing face to face only apparently contradictory images (modern-traditional, kitsch-authenticity, group identity-personalisation, "folkloric art"-

consumption goods etc.), because the imaginative-interpretative mechanisms are not sequential and interfere constantly. For example, the "recent" artefacts that candidates for the status of "old", without occulting this fact, accept their status of "new-old" objects through a standardization of the not-at-all subtle means of obsolescing. This permanent relating of the objects to longer periods of time is tightly connected to the aspects of building an identity, because "any object which can be said to have passed through the hands of the ancestors, and are often a pivot around which social identity is constructed"<sup>5</sup>.

Along the communist period, the ideological manipulation of the traditional culture was obvious, along with the image of the traditional craftsman considered, in the same time, both "artist" and "worker". Even today, the image of the "old-times fairs" populates the collective imaginary, although the changes, the relating to the "contemporary" traditional culture are obvious. The nowadays fairs offer the image of a "free economical market", in full process of "inflation", on addressing the "new-old" artefacts. The creation of the traditional artefacts has become a small family business, and the status of the craftsmen is this time placed between "artist" and "entrepreneur".

The distinction between "the bazaar type economy" and "the firm type sector", applied on a smaller scale, can help us to understand certain social practices that are activated in this social space. We are trying to emphasize that the entrepreneurial activity of the traditional craftsmen combines characteristics from the both types of economic activity. Certain characteristics of the "bazaar type economy" find connections in the economic activities that are restrictedly practiced by the contemporary "artisans": interpersonal relations, the negotiation of prices, and the differentiation between the products exhibited for sale tends, on one side, to become reduced (the homogeneity of the-similar-type products, the disappearance of the "unique items"), and, on the other side, to create space for the innovations. In this context, there emerges the question: is the economic value of the product somehow established/negotiated by the market, that is between the sellers ("firm type sector" characteristic), or bargained between the seller and the buyer – an issue concerning the quality of the artefacts, the creativity of the artisans, "the authenticity" of "the products" whose status oscillates between "traditional art" and "consumption goods"?

Thus, a question is aroused: who are the buyers? The identification of the "consumers" of "traditional art" and the analysis of their impulse of buying can unravel interesting information on their identity and particular social practices. Elites or marginal people? And who is to decide this? Everyone finds themselves amidst these silent narrations of the artefacts. Negotiation-bargain, choice or impulse of buying... The dialogue with the artisans seems to show few aspects of these stories told by the objects.

Some of the traditional craftsmen have adopted an "ethnographic" fragmentary discourse, others "reconstruct" artefacts studying archives, archaeological collections from museums as in the case of "Vădrasta pottery". All these are for "certifying" a discourse on "the authenticity" of the ob-

<sup>1</sup> Miller, Daniel și Don Slater, *Moments and movements in the study of consumer culture: A discussion between Daniel Miller and Don Slater*, „Journal of Consumer Culture”, Vol. 7, N.1/2007, p. 5–25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Daniel, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1987, P. 215.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

jects. And new questions emerge: is there a discourse on kitsch and its consumption? What identity mechanisms activate the buyers when they buy "traditional" artefacts, when they "acknowledge" and attribute value to these objects? Moreover, "the fair" is the space for "the bargains" ...and the value sometimes is "bargained, and other times "negotiated". Arjun Appadurai approaches again, in one of his works, the affirmations of Georg Simmel on "the economic value" of the goods/merchandises ("commodities") and the manner in which it can be defined. Value, for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgement made about them by subjects"<sup>6</sup> Appadurai also underlines that the essence on addressing the understanding of value, according to Simmel, is in an area in which "that subjectivity is only provisional and actually not very essential"<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the economic value is neither totally objective nor subjective, but "we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them"<sup>8</sup>.

Consequently, "what Simmel calls economic objects, in particular, exist in the space between pure desire and immediate enjoyment, with some distance between them and the person who desire them, which is a distance that can be overcome. This distance is overcome in and through economic exchange, in which the value of object is fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object, which is the focus of the desire of another"<sup>9</sup>. Appadurai underlines the affirmation that Simmel according to which economy as social form "consists not only in exchanging values but in the exchange of values"<sup>10</sup>.

The metaphor of "bargaining", respectively of "negotiation" of the value, "authenticity" of objects of "traditional art" is articulated through constant relating to the contemporary cultural context and to the redefining of these artefacts as goods involved in complex economic relations, into a specific economic and cultural circuit. Thus, Appadurai considers that the status of goods that travel on an economic circuit is rather related to a conceptual horizon than a temporal one: "the commodity candidacy of things is less a temporal than a conceptual feature, and it refers to the standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context. At first glance, this feature would appear best glossed as the *cultural* framework within which things are classified (...). Yet this gloss conceals a variety of complexities."<sup>11</sup>, considering in the same time that "a commodity is *any thing intended for exchange*"<sup>12</sup>. The well-known sociologist places in a viable comparison the exchange of goods in relation to the "barter" and the exchange of "gifts". Although the barter is based on an exchange that does not involve money, in the same time excluding any social, cultural, political or personal involvement, he notices a certain similarity between that and the exchange of goods that involve money, that is a focusing on the object, along with a relative interpersonal note, characteristic to both. Furthermore, he brings back once more the apparent opposition between the change of gifts and the

exchange of goods, underlining the limitations of such a much too strict differentiation, considered a too simplistic one. We are to present extensively his observations, because we consider them fundamental in arguing the relations specific to the circulation of artefacts specific to the Romanian "rurban" material culture. Therefore, although the gift seems associated to reciprocity, sociability, spontaneity, seemingly opposed to the prudent and the orientation towards profit, specific for the exchange of goods, there are certain similarities between these types of economic exchange. This strict differentiation cannot but make more barren and poor the perspective on both types of economic exchange. Appadurai proposes the overcoming and, implicitly, of the anthropological dualisms attached to them inevitably ("us-them", "materialism-religion", "the objectifying of persons-personification of things", "market-reciprocity" etc.), reintroducing in his argumentations the *cultural* dimension in the case of the societies considered much too often and much too easily dependent on the pure economic aspect, but also the *economic calculation* in case of small communities, also much too strict considered focused on solidarity as engine of the intra-community exchanges. Yet, these perceptions, although limited, have still generated consequences at the level of the common sense, and the social-symbolic space of the craftsmen's fair allows their temporary activation. The romanticisation of the small communities in which the economy of the gift is characteristic, reproduces a symbolic horizon of a "genuine community". The "bargaining" and the "negotiation" are met, are interconnected in this "reinvented" space, in which the rural-urban dialogues are re-established, in which the economic calculation is present, and it is slightly occulted by the "old-times" stories of the "recent" artefacts. This mixture of old and new, of "kitsch" and "authentic", of history and recovery, of personalisation and vanishing in a past considered significant, fixes a particular horizon – a space characterised by a specific sensoriality, as it is to be discovered on the way. Appadurai makes a distinction between: "(1) commodity phase of the social life of any thing", certain things being able to get out or in this status of goods/exchange commodities; "(2) commodity candidacy of any thing", any object can become exchange merchandise "(3) commodity context in which any thing can be exchanged"<sup>13</sup>.

Referring to the "aesthetical productions", the goods meant for the changes can be classified in four types:<sup>14</sup> "(1) commodities by *destination*, that is, objects intended by their producers principally for exchange; (2) commodities by *metamorphosis*, things intended for other uses that are placed into the commodity state; (3) a special, sharp case of commodities by metamorphosis are commodities by *diversion*, objects placed into a commodity state though originally specifically protected from it; (4) *ex-commodities*, things retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state"<sup>15</sup>. This status of "commodities in motion" can also be identified in the case of the traditional artefacts, either "recent" or "old".

<sup>6</sup> Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *The social life of things*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Simmel, Georg, *The Philosophy of Money*, 1978, Routledge, London, p. 73 *apud* Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Simmel, Georg, *The Philosophy of Money*, 1978, Routledge, London, p. 67 *apud* Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel, Georg, *The Philosophy of Money*, 1978, Routledge, London, p. 67 *apud* Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Appadurai, Arjun (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Graburn, N. H. (ed.), *Ethnic and tourists art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976 *apud* Appadurai, Arjun, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Appadurai, Arjun, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

The spaces that they cross and in which they circulate, vary from the quotidian dwelling or holiday space, the range of museums and traditional art fairs or antiquities, workmanship or souvenir shops. The notion of “rythmanalysis” formulated by Lefebvre<sup>16</sup> and then taken by Will Straw and other researchers, participants to the project “Culture of the Cities”, fundamentals this mobility of the traditional artefacts, underlining the tension between the public and the private space, their circulation from a public event to the private space of the “traditional art” consumers’ dwelling, in the case that we analyse.

The time that the artefacts inscribes in their presentation, places them on an axis between “social history of things” (the old traditional artefacts that tend to the status of antiquities) and “the cultural biography of things” (“recent” artefacts). The consumers’ identity, and the discourses on the “authenticity” of “traditional objects”, are articulated within this temporal context.

Consequently, there emerges a particular situation, that of “patrimonialization” as “postponed value”. What does it refer to? To the relatively facile acquisition, not very economically costly, of traditional artefacts, or the simple completion of a set of objects “inherited” from the parent’s house by a “non-collector” that arouse the image of an incipient collection, a “guessed” or intuited value of the objects, which incites for the preservation of the “treasure”, and, eventually, its extension for the “future generations”. The cases are not few and involve modifications of the quotidian dwelled space, or the “old parental house”, transformed into a “holiday house”. “Specialized knowledge” (Appadurai) is, therefore, a factor that influences the circulation of the objects, artefacts, in our case. The discrepancies in the knowledge that refer to the traditional art objects can create diverse situations, similar to those mentioned above. Between the technical knowledge of the producer or merchant and that of the consumer-connoisseur there are numerous differentiations, the more the cultural, social, temporal, special distance between them is bigger. Yet, there are connections and interactions between them, as Arjun Appadurai himself mentions: “it may not be accurate to regard knowledge at the production locus of a commodity as exclusively technical or empirical and knowledge at the consumption end as exclusively evaluative or ideological. Knowledge at both poles has technical, mythological, and evaluative components, and the two poles are susceptible to mutual and dialectical interaction”<sup>17</sup>.

In consequence, the specialised knowledge, either of the producer or the merchant, or the consumer, is articulated within the process of exchange and circulation of artefacts. The satisfactory negotiation of the price involves a connection between the aesthetical or practical requests of the consumer and the ability of the producer to “offer” the “searched” object. In these permanent movements between

“request” and “offer”, there appear different discourses on authenticity, “whenever there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movement of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture”<sup>18</sup>, underlines Appadurai. The negotiation of price actually hides the negotiation of authenticity<sup>19</sup>. Some of the recent artisans “have gained” a bookish “traditional-ethnographic culture”, which they insert in the discourses on the artefacts meant for the economic circuit, for this reason resorting to possible “certificates of guarantee”: diplomas, archive documents that attest the “similarity” with the new products etc. Thus, “to become” authentic is possible, and Baudrillard<sup>20</sup>, along with Walter Benjamin<sup>21</sup> underline the recent aspects of these discourses on “authenticity”. The certification of authenticity appears tightly connected to modernity, with the possibilities of mechanical reproduction, when the circulation of commodities is intensified, their access to it becoming more ample, and the context of acquisition is modified.

In the case of the traditional artefacts, the discourse of “authenticity” is built in a tight relation to the identity of the producers, as in the case of the “tourist art” (Grabum) it is about a special circuit of goods “in which the group identities of producers are tokens for the status policy of consumers. The “story” of the artefact becomes a constitutive element of it, a “certificate of authenticity” offered in the moment of acquisition, as an answer to a formulated or tacit request from the buyers that look for a “genuine conviviality”, encourage “bargaining” or experiment a fixation of the object in a space of the memory. The traditional craftsman Grigore Ciungulescu offers the “story” of the pitcher, whose clay retains within its pores the first liquid contained in it, “similar to the man who does not forget their native place, because it was there that they breathed for the first time”<sup>22</sup>. This aspect of combining technology with cosmology in the discourse of production is underlined by numerous anthropologists (Evens-Prichard, Stephen Gudeman etc.)<sup>23</sup>.

Different identity strategies become active in the public or private space, a particular aspect being represented by the possibilities of objectifying the people through objects. In this respect, the organisation of the dwelled space, the quotidian space and the process of attributing value to traditional art objects, in these spaces, can unravel subtle socio-cultural aspects. On the limitations of these “revelations” there are to be made completions further on.

The traditional artefacts fulfil both “discursive” and “identity-social” functions, working as signs. Thus, the regime of their consumption registers a high level of connection with the body, the person and the personality of the consumer. The sensoriality of the fair has been previously mentioned, and the sensorial assault, specific for this space, has been often acknowledged. The traditional artefacts bear it, brings it in the quotidian dwelled space too.

<sup>17</sup> Appadurai, Arjun, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Spooner, Brian, *Weavers and Dealers: the Authenticity of an oriental carpet*, Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 195–235.

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1981, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, Walter, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, “Illuminations”, Schocken, New York, 1936, p. 243 (“at the time of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be ‘authentic’. It became ‘authentic’ only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one”).

<sup>22</sup> Informer Grigore Ciungulescu, 79 years old, village of Oboga, Olt County, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Appadurai, Arjun, *op. cit.*, p. 42 („with all commodities, whether primary or not, technical knowledge is always deeply interpenetrated with cosmological, sociological, and ritual assumption that are likely to be widely spread. Evens-Prichard’s Azande potters, Taussig’s Colombian peasant producers, Nancy Munn’s Gawan canoe makers, Stephan Gudeman’s Panamian sugarcane producers, all combine technological and cosmological layers in their production discourse”).

The sensorial aspect of the dwelled space is underlined by Sarah Pink, in her latter work *The Future of Visual Anthropology – Engaging the Senses*, where she describes amply the sensorial experience and its implications – theoretical and methodological aspects that refer to the anthropological research, the inter-connectivity of senses and the problems of their anthropological representation, the centrality of "seeing" in the occidental anthropology, the new challenges of the society of consumption, along with a case study, her research project on the "sensory experience of home"<sup>24</sup>. Bringing back on foreground the "anthropology of experience", along with the implications of the anthropological implications that it implies, shows new manners for exploration the cultural interpretations, particularly the dwelling space and the problems that it triggers, especially the limits that need to be surmounted, and the viable use of the contemporary technological means.

**Conclusions.** The dwelling space brings a series of contradictions and possibilities for researching the identity of the "proprietor". Between public and private, between intimate space and "stage" or décor, the quotidian space "talks" on the contemporary identities, Daniel Miller underlying this thing in numerous works. The studying of the quotidian dwelling space, as means of "accessing" the identity, the contemporary socio-cultural representations, hide certain limitations on addressing the project. In this continuous balancing conscious-subconscious that the objects facilitate, there can occur "blind zones", between the strident assumed kitsch<sup>25</sup> and the "ideal-idealist" existence of some aesthetic non-discourses. Yet, the both extremes lead to a special situation, between excessive discursive construction and the absence of the discourse being noticed a logical circularity.

The declarative discursivity is annulled through artificialism, while in the lack of the rhetoric that refers to the quotidian space it is impossible to be discovered, because it can nonetheless be included in the "discourse" of the "non-discourse". How do we answer to this circularity? In other words, this time metaphorical ones, "Where do we run from home?". This well-known syntagma that belongs to Sorescu can offer the horizon of some open conclusions on addressing the possibilities and the limitations inherent for the quo-

tidian space and the mobility of the "rurban" artefacts: (1) "the madelainesation" of the identity or a portable "home" – the consumption of traditional material culture, "the creation" of memories or the keeping of memories through the symbolical sublimation of the identity through food, "the hunger" for memories and the crystallization of memory – the touristic photograph, are just few examples; (2) *adjacent spaces* or "collateral" spaces for consuming the "house", or "refuge" of the traditional artefacts – museums and the provocation of the new interactive museum discourses; (3) *the "non-discourse" discourse* – the searching for the identity space of some "objectifying" or "presentification".

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<sup>25</sup> Judy Attfield *Redefining the Politics of Design*, „Home Cultures”, Vol. 3, N. 3, 2006, P. 201–212.