

Beyond Object Lessons, or: Towards a Material Literacy of the Fluid

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A wooden cabinet. Simple in shape, the size of a shoe box. The dark mahogany is smooth, its surface gently shining. For now, the lid is closed. Curiosity is growing. What does it contain? Open it! The cabinet's secret is disclosed. In it is a collection of simple things. A piece of glass, a sponge, a key, a cube of wood and a thimble, a fragment of porcelain, a ball of cotton thread, chunks of copper ore and marble, silver wire, Indian rubber, a shred of fur, oil and quicksilver in tiny bottles. And the list goes on. Yet no mess at all. All the items are labelled and neatly stored in individual compartments. These cardboard cases occupy four removable trays stacked one above the other. In this way, the cabinet is filled right up to the lid. Inside the wooden receptacle, everything is well arranged; each sample has its allocated place. As the diverse specimens lie patiently side by side, they manifest a silent and well-sorted order of things. What we have found in this container are snippets of the world, albeit itemised and turned into objects.

This particular cabinet, however, is not the treasure chest of a hyper-pedantic collector. It is a so-called "Object Lesson Box" or "educational specimen box", as the online catalogue of the Victoria & Albert Museum states. The art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann has dedicated a number of essays to this subject. From these we learn that the cabinet was conceived and assembled in the context of the British progressive education movement of the 19th century. It is related to Elizabeth Mayo's popular book *Lessons on Objects*, which was first published in 1830. The box was equipped with its motley paraphernalia for pedagogical purposes, and for a while it was part of classroom practice in the UK.



Fig. 1) Snippets of the material world, a well-sorted order of things. The pedagogical concept of the "Object Lesson Box" and the accompanying publication *Lessons on Objects* (1830) were developed by Elizabeth and Charles Mayo in the context of the 19th century British progressive education movement.

To Ann-Sophie Lehmann, however, the “Object Lesson Box” is more than a historical relic of bygone schooldays. She regards it as a still valuable tool for teaching, an exemplary means to further a much needed “material literacy”. From her point of view, it enables concrete human-material interaction and allows for an empirical observation and sensual experience of the environment. Direct engagement with “the substances of which this world and the things within it are made of”, she argues, generates sensitivity to their physical properties, meanings, affordances, and possibilities. The cabinet and its various descendants could provide general knowledge about our material world, about objects and their materiality.

I think that Lehmann’s notion of material literacy is very useful. In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the world we live in, we surely need a better appreciation of materials. We have to find ways to become materially literate, if we want to develop a more sensitive and sustainable relationship to the environment. And we should search for pedagogic strategies and tools to think about and with materials, to inspire and transfer material knowledge – be it in the classroom or the art history seminar. So far, so good. There are, however, shortcomings of both Lehmann’s concept and the “Object Lesson Box”, which serves as her prime example. In a way, they correspond to the recent “material turn” in the humanities, which was primarily a shift towards the recognition of objects and things rather than towards the acknowledgment of actual materials. Characterised by a distinctive object orientation, the material turn mainly focused on the dry hardware of the material world, and thus taught us a lot about the social life, materiality, mobility, and agency of things. In this context, materials often fell victim to a kind of theoretical reification, i.e. they became stabilised and objectified. Borrowing a phrase from Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, we could refer to this particular intellectual commitment as an “epistemology of the concrete”. The discipline of art history is a telling example, insofar as the reappraisal of materiality commonly turned into some form of object studies, highlighting the thingness of artisanal and artistic artifacts. As two big conferences maintained recently, it is the “challenge of the object” and the “call to things” that art history must respond to. From this point of view, the world somehow appears as a gigantic “Object Lesson Box”.

It is important to know your way around objects and their materiality, certainly. However, there are countless material phenomena that do not fit into a wooden cabinet, and defy any form of containment. Looking into the “Object Lesson Box”, we primarily encounter dry and still things; the few liquids (i.e. oil, ink, and mercury) are locked away in corked flasks. A lot is missing: wind and fog, fluid foam and a rainbow, bonfire and smog, the pulsating movements of slime mould, heat emissions from a feverish body, species extinction and dune formation, turbulences in a river, global warming, and so forth. How could they ever be collected, stored in individual receptacles, and kept steady as object-like entities? Well, of course, at least some of them could be contained. You could certainly enclose fluids

in bottles or other vessels. But what would our reflections on and with such confined fluids lead to? We would end up with a comfortable lava-lamp philosophy, losing sight of volcanic eruptions and steaming lava flows. It would turn out to be a theoretical storm in a teacup, forgetting the hurricane that ravages the country. We would arrive at a fish-tank aesthetics, being oblivious to the Gulf Stream and the breaking of waves. It would result in some kind of snow-globe meteorology, ignoring the blizzard that obstructs traffic and freezes your nose. We would be prone to developing a petrol-can thinking, passing over the combustions inside your car's engine or the power of gasoline explosions. It would bring about a mercury-thermometer ecology, missing out on pollution and its toxic effects on humans and the environment. Whatever we may call it, reflections of this kind would conceive of the world as a sealed-off and tamed place.

However, we do not live in a blown up "Object Lesson Box". If that were the case, the material world would be little more than a museum of things or a storehouse of discrete items. In the worst case, it would become a necropolis of deadened objects. The world is not an enclosed "container in which objectified things" and substances exist in an orderly state of "over-yonder-ness" (Timothy Morton). Helpful as it might be as a starting point, we thus have to think beyond the "Object Lesson Box" – in both art history and in general. I do agree with Ann-Sophie Lehmann that we have to acquire a broader "knowledge about the material world and its objects". But what we need even more urgently today is knowledge about what Tim Ingold called the "world of materials" and its processes. Hence, we earthlings must also learn our lessons about material phenomena that are on the move rather than waiting patiently in the darkness of man-made cabinets. Beyond the "Object Lesson Box" – both as a thing and a metaphor – lies a world in flux, and the possibility of a material literacy of the fluid.

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Educational specimen box, ca. 1850, Mahogany, Victoria & Albert Museum (B.5:1 to 5-2009), Museum of Childhood, London, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O213531/educational-specimen-box-unknown/> (last accessed: May 4, 2020).