Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

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Appropriation and entanglement

In his famous 1986 article, Igor Kopytoff (1986, 67) remarked in a visionary way, breaking a path for current practice-oriented approaches to the study of intercultural encounters, ‘[W]hat is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use.’ If an individual starts to appropriate a thing, a complex process is triggered. This process of appropriation finds no end but results again and again in ever new creations of functions and meanings as well as physical transformations through human practices engaged with the thing (Hahn 2004, 220; Hahn 2005, 106–7; Hahn 2008).

In my earlier work (Stockhammer 2012), I proposed a methodology for the study of archaeological evidence according to my theoretical approach. I suggested a model of different states of human–thing entanglements which structure the process of appropriation and its non-material and material outcomes, as this distinction is of crucial importance for archaeologists, who rely almost exclusively on material evidence. Following my previous approach, the process of entanglement starts with the encounter of a human actor with a thing. In the first moment of encounter, humans do not trigger a change in the thing, but the thing changes humans. Merely, its material presence changes perceptions of social space and of movements, and forces humans to modify their social practices (cf. Gibson 1986; Knappett 2004). As an immediate consequence, the thing becomes an object through classification/objectivation (cf. Brown 2001, 3–5). Now, humans attribute functions and meanings to it, and classify it according to, and following, their ideas.
of the world. If they decide to incorporate, and therefore to appropriate, the thing, it becomes a personal good, part of social practices and, finally, a more or less important part of an individual life world (Hahn 2008). I define this moment as the state of relational entanglement. Relational entanglement is not a state of transformation of the thing in its materiality; the relationship to the thing changes as social practices and meanings are created anew. The process of entanglement does not have to end with the continuous emergence of new relational entanglements but can also trigger an act of creation. Only then does a basic transformation of the material thing in its materiality take place and material entanglement come into existence. Within this entanglement, the formerly differentiated categories are blended together to shape something new that one might also possibly term a new category, if this makes sense from an epistemological perspective. This material entanglement clearly arose from the formerly separated categories but cannot be separated into its origins. The shape of a material entanglement is significantly determined by the individual creativity of the human actor.

**Changeabilities and effectancy of things**

In order to understand the potential of things in these processes but also in general, a novel terminology is necessary. I want to introduce the terms changeability and effectancy in order to enable a better description and understanding of the potential of things. This potential also forms the basis for the potential of things to connect us/things with us/things in manifold complex ways. Moreover, I set out to overcome the long and rather fruitless discussion about whether things possess agency (cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Knappett 2005; Knappett and Malafouris 2008). Many of these attempts run the risk of anthropomorphising things in a radical act of re-evaluating them after they had been ignored by many cultural and social sciences for a long time.

In the following, I conceptualise the changeabilities of things (due to perception, time and practices, and the combination thereof), and their effectancy, which relies on these changeabilities (cf. Stockhammer 2015). These terms do justice to the dimension of time and make becoming and connecting inherent attributes of things, as they shift the focus from things as entities to things as entangled processes and to the manifold ties between these material processes, which Martin Saxer and Philipp Schorch call thing~ties. I demonstrate the basis for this potential and illustrate my lines of thought with short examples. It is my aim to
create a vocabulary that enables us to differentiate and better describe the dynamics of things and their interaction with humans, as well as the related connectivity, by acknowledging the permanent transformation of their substance (cf. Ingold’s materials; Ingold 2011; Ingold 2012), their being in, and shaping, our worlds (cf. Olsen 2015), their obstinacy and unnoticed existence (cf. Hahn 2013; Hahn 2017), and the complex interrelation and dependency between them and humans (cf. Hodder’s entanglement; Hodder 2011a; Hahn 2011b; Hahn 2012). However, my understanding of changeability and effectancy first requires a definition of the substance(s) and materialities of a thing.

Substance and materiality

Substance has been defined in many different ways but has not attracted much interest in material culture studies until recently, when its importance began to be increasingly emphasised (Olsen 2010). Several alternative terms were proposed, for example materials instead of substance (Ingold 2010; Ingold 2012), or material substance (Weismantel and Meskell 2014). I follow the definition of Hans Peter Hahn und Jens Soentgen (2011), who understand substance as the material a particular thing consists of. At first glance, substance seems to be without any shape. However, every substance has a micro structure which is most important for the possibilities of shaping other substances and being shaped at the same time. Substances can be raw materials (like water, stone, metals) or the result of human practices (like alloys or rubber; cf. Soentgen 2015). Therefore, substance is the physical and chemical quality of a thing or part of a thing. Substance is shaped into materiality by cultural practices (Thomas 2007, 15).

A thing can consist of different substances – a necklace made out of different pearls, a car, a house, etc. From an analytical perspective, a thing can be subdivided into its substances. The things that surround us enter our awareness from time to time in different ways and intensities. In the moment of perception, a thing is classified and becomes an object (cf. Brown 2001, 3–5). I define materiality as the physical presence of a thing within the material world, which is perceived by a human individual at a particular moment. Therefore, materiality is inseparably connected to perception, and especially our perception of things. The same is true for the intrinsic relationship between practice and perception. I follow the notion of Wahrnehmungshandeln (Frers 2009, 188; Hofmann 2016), which emphasises that practice and perception cannot
be separated, and that practice is always perception and vice versa. Thus, *Wahrnehmungshandeln* helps us to think human–thing entanglements as it emphasises the complexity of the connection between humans and things.

**The first changeability**

When we think about things or interact with them, we usually perceive them as stable and static. However, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1966; cf. also Olsen 2006) pointed out the dynamics of the perception of things, which is always in flow. Because our perception of things is permanently changing, the thing itself changes – even if just in our perception. I would like to call this phenomenon the first *changeability* (*Wandelbarkeit*) of the thing. This changeability is not related to a change of the physical or chemical constitution of a thing, but only refers to its perception, i.e. its perceived materiality, which happens in ever new ways during practices with the thing. The first changeability is, therefore, only a perspective change. It is only a virtual change of the thing. An important reason for the relevance of the first changeability is the character of the first perception of a thing: in this first moment of perception, we often do not see the thing in its particular existence, but we look *through* the thing and only perceive a general class or type of object, to which we automatically attribute the singular thing in this moment without much or any reflection. Therefore, the individual thing takes something like an intermediate position, in the sense of becoming a virtual object and remaining a material thing. The objectivation of the thing – its attribution to pre-existing mental categories – is the crucial first moment in the encounter with a thing (Strawson 1972; Miller 1985). The categorisation of the other or new is a classic human behaviour that happens permanently and more or less unconsciously. However, even if we start reflecting about things, do they still stay or become a category rather than an individual object? Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew put it in a nutshell: ‘Things are very good-to-think-*with* or *through*, but not so good-to-think-*about*. The more time you spend thinking *about* things the less of a thing and the more of an object or category they become’ (Malafouris and Renfrew 2010, 1).

The potential of the first changeability becomes evident in the standard archaeological practice of evaluating things: even if archaeologists possess more or less sophisticated systems of classification, they generally do not reflect on the particularity of a thing in the first moment of encounter, but just see the type or category to which they attribute the thing (for an
instructive example see Holtorf 2002, 57–8). This is due to the immediate perception of characteristic features, which is crucial for the classification of a thing. Our brain automatically completes the overall picture, before the eyes are able to perceive missing or contradictory features (see Smith and Muckli 2010; Scharinger, Bendixen, Herrmann et al. 2016).

All categories of objects are also adorned with a particular name, which often already communicates a particular function and/or meaning. If we name a vessel *cooking pot*, function and meaning are inseparably connected with the specific object in its designation. Through repetitive designation of a thing as *cooking pot*, this interpretation becomes so natural and self-understanding that we do not reflect any more about a possibly much broader range of further functions and meanings. It becomes part of our life world (Schütz and Luckmann 1979; Habermas 1981). By using function- and/or meaning-specific categories, we neglect the fact that functions and meanings are processes rather than states and only constituted through social practices. It is the moment of encounter with a new or foreign thing that forces us to give it a name, and this name influences our subsequent perception of the particular object until we decide to give it a new name. If we find out that an already classified thing does not fit in the respective category, we (the human perceiving the thing) are puzzled, sometimes even angry, and we are often reluctant to accept this change of perception. The thing irritates and affects us; it has an effect.

**Thing itinerancies**

The change of perception of a thing is closely associated with the routes a thing was brought along, i.e., its itinerancy. These routes have long been discussed within the framework of *object biographies* (e.g. Kopytoff 1986; Meskell 2004). This bio metaphor has recently been criticised for running the risk of again anthropomorphising the object, and *itinerary* has been suggested as an alternative in order not to introduce the notion of the living and dying of objects (Hahn and Weiss 2013; Hahn 2015; Jung 2015). *Itinerary* should solve the issue that things do not move on their own in most cases. Their ways are determined by humans at least most of the time. However, *itinerary* supposes that the mobility of things is deliberate and target-oriented. The complexity of these itineraries of a thing in its substances and materiality has not been sufficiently thought through in the literature on this topic. As a slightly modified alternative, I will use the term *itinerancy*, which better includes factors like chance for the mobility of things. Moreover, I suggest differentiating between
the itinerancy of the materiality and the itinerancy of the substance(s) of a thing. Both itinerancies are entangled and constitute the itinerancy of the object. However, these itinerancies can also be contradictory and thus lead to conflictive perceptions of a thing. Nevertheless, the itinerancy of the thing opens up its potential to connect different spaces, times and actors in complex entanglements.

The necessity of this analytical differentiation becomes most evident through an example, namely a wedding ring made of gold. There is no doubt that the materiality of the wedding ring has the potential to evoke positive memories, especially in the moment of conscious feeling and observing the object, at least as long as one is happy with one’s partner. The ring becomes a material manifestation of the partnership, which becomes material in the presence of the ring. The materiality of the ring creates the co-presence of the (potentially absent) partner, who is present as weight and evocation (see Latour 1996). What happens, however, if one finds out that the gold from which the ring was made was stolen from victims of World War II, whose dental gold was removed after their murder and sold on the market? Whereas the problematic history of this gold has been extensively studied (Strzelecki 1994; Häussermann 2009; Hahn 2014, 25–6), the impact of its potential changeability has not. If the bearer of the ring hears about this horrible history of the substance, a negative itinerancy of the substance gets into conflict with a positive itinerancy of the materiality. Will the wearer of the ring be able to forget the itinerancy of the substance and replace it with the positive associations of the itinerancy of the materiality? Or will (s)he remember the itinerancy of the substance as a bad omen in the case of a divorce? Both itinerancies are inseparably entangled within the object. Depending on the particular situation, the two entangled itinerancies unfold their effect by raising memories while one is feeling or observing the object. They continuously generate the perception and meaning of the object, as well as its value (Stockhammer 2016). Even a substance like gold, which is endowed with a ascribed particularly high value in all known societies of the past and present (Hahn 2015), can lose some of its value because of such an exceptional itinerancy.

The second changeability

During the itinerancy of a thing, its shape and substance can also change without any human interference (see Ingold 2011; Ingold 2012). I call this phenomenon the second changeability of the thing: with time, the substance(s) and features of a thing change, get lost or are added. Food
deteriorates and changes its quality: it becomes inedible, sometimes even poisonous, or acquires a unique taste or an alcoholic component. Ian Hodder pointed to the dependency between a mud brick wall and humans, who are continuously endangered by the permanent decay of the wall and the possible subsequent collapse of the building (2011a; 2011b; 2012). A great amount of care is necessary to delay or stop the permanent change of the thing. Functions and meanings can change along with the thing and its features. Some practices become impossible and others become possible only at this moment. Meanings and memories that are bound to a specific feature can get lost, for example if a particular smell, colour or shape is lost over time. The second changeability is no virtual changeability like the first one. Rather, here the thing changes in its materiality or substance, or both. It forces us to care for it; it has an effect and evokes practices and emotions. As all our world views are views on the world, inasmuch as our perception of the world shapes our thinking (Robertson 1992, 69–77; Maran 2012, 63), the second changeability also has the potential to shape and transform our world views. One may think of deteriorating cities like Venice or Havana, or the efforts to preserve what we perceive as cultural heritage from decay.

The third changeability

Already within the first and second changeabilities, the perception of an object and the practices with an object are closely interwoven. I have argued above that I follow the concept of Wahrnehmungshandeln, which emphasises the basic entanglement of practice and perception. This intrinsic dependency of practice and perception becomes most relevant in the context of the third changeability, which is based on these practices with the thing. I define the third changeability as the transformation of things in the course of human practices. Things become worn; they bear traces of their use, sometimes only very fine scratches, sometimes very obvious cracks, chips, holes or other markers of their use. Just like the second changeability, the third is not a perspective change of the object: the substances and their shape(s) change. Whereas the transforming power, the effectancy, of the second changeability is time, the relevant factor for the third is the human actor. These traces of use have the potential to become witnesses of past times and anchors of memory, which can serve as a basis for the creation of meanings and histories. A spot of red wine on the light-coloured carpet not only has the potential to become a permanent nuisance, it can also remind us of glittering parties. The holes in a
piece of clothing, torn into the fabric during heavy physical work, remind us of these past efforts and refresh our memories of the past when we feel the holes while wearing the garment. They connect our present with our past. At the same time, traces of use also call for our care and reaction: we polish scratches, mend holes or cracks and take care of things. Again, things have an effect on us, they possess an effectancy.

**Effectancy**

I have just defined three different changeabilities of things; the first is based on the continuously changing perception of the things in the framework of Wahrnehmungshandeln; the second is the change of things through time on the itinerancies of their substances and materiality without human interference; the third is the transformations of things which are due to human practices with them. All three changeabilities are entangled with each other, because the relevant factors for their transformation – perception, time and practice – constitute each other. All three changeabilities can force humans to act. They are the basis for the potential of things to connect us/things with us/things over space and time. They constitute a thing’s effectancy. Things have an effect on us and we do not have to associate their potential with any kind of intentionality. They do not act, in the sense of Max Weber (1962), in any kind of intentional way, which would be the prerequisite for endowing things with agency. Things rather enable and hinder human action. They structure human action in a physical and psychical dimension due to their changeabilities, because our action is always Wahrnehmungshandeln.

**Case study: Minoan conical cups from Tel Beth-Shemesh**

In order to show the potential of my approach, I will present a case study from the Eastern Mediterranean Late Bronze Age. Between the fifteenth and twelfth centuries BC, the societies of the Eastern Mediterranean came into contact with a hitherto unknown intensity and the exchange of goods and mobility of people reached a global scale (e.g. Feldman 2006; Leidwanger, Knappett, Arnaud et al. 2014). This exchange has been extensively studied in terms of widely distributed things, be they raw materials, works of art, transport vessels or feasting dishes. However, the focus has long been on the origin and distribution of these things. Most scholars have interpreted the appearance of objects of the same type
over a wide region as an indicator of a homogenisation that accompanies globalisation. Only recently have scholars focused on the transformative dynamics of the appropriation of things and ideas from afar in the Eastern Mediterranean Late Bronze Age (e.g. Voskos and Knapp 2008; Maran and Stockhammer 2012; Knapp and van Dommelen 2014). The following case study covers the first half of the fourteenth century BC, i.e. the time of the earliest, and still very rare, ceramic imports from the Aegean, which mostly came from Crete to the Southern Levant.

Similarly to all other early Aegean-type imports to the Levant, conical cups are rarely found at the Levant – recently, two such vessels were excavated at Tel Beth-Shemesh in present-day Israel (Figure 2.1). In the last few years, a nineteenth-century-BC palace (Level 9; LB IIA) that can be attributed to the queen Belit-labiat was excavated at the site (Bunimovitz, Lederman and Hatzaki 2013). The building was destroyed by fire, which resulted in the preservation of the non-organic furnishing of the palace on its floors. In one of the rooms, two Cretan conical cups were found close to each other. The vessels were most likely produced in or near the palace at Knossos on Crete in the early fourteenth century BC, which enabled us to determine the place of origin. The excavators therefore interpreted them as royal gifts from the ruler of Knossos to the queen of Tel Beth-Shemesh (Bunimovitz, Lederman and Hatzaki 2014). In the case of Tel Beth-Shemesh, we have an indication that early Aegean-type imports – most of them of Cretan origin – were appropriated by local elites and used along with their own feasting dishes. Before reaching Tel Beth-Shemesh, the cups had a complex itinerary, from their production in a pottery workshop near the palace of Knossos on Crete, their selection by local actors as gifts to be sent to distant lands, their transportation on a ship either along the coast of Asia Minor and Cyprus and then to the south, or from Crete straight over the Mediterranean Sea to the coast of Libya and from there to Tel Beth-Shemesh.

It remains unclear if or how much knowledge about Knossian practices with cups of this kind was also transmitted to the Southern Levant and transformed through translation. In the Aegean, we have indications that
drinkers sat in pairs opposite each other, consuming beverages from pairs of nearly identical drinking vessels (Stockhammer 2008, 297–307). Thus, for the Aegean gift-giver, it was common to send such a pair of vessels as a present. Belit-labiat kept the cups together as a pair as well. Drinking from cups, however, was not a common practice during feasting in the Levant. By examining the two cups closely, I was able to identify that on both cups the handle had probably been chipped away. In other words, the users of the cups had transformed them into bowls. This fits well with common drinking practices in Late Bronze Age Southern Levant, where drinking bowls were held in the palm of the hand (Yasur-Landau 2005, 172, 174; Yasur-Landau 2008, 356). Thus, the use of foreign drinking vessels and the idea of using a pair of almost identical vessels were appropriated by the users. The users manipulated vessels by transforming them from cups into bowls in order to fit them more closely into what they perceived as the correct embodied social act of drinking. Here we have reached a particular state of relational entanglement: the cups were transformed through manipulation, but nothing completely new was created. The cups are not material entanglements, because they are not the product of a creative process of combining the formerly foreign with the local (as, for example, the local production of a bowl or cup inspired by the Aegean style would be). Their materiality was transformed, whereas their substance was not: they were now perceived in a different way because of the different way of holding the bowls; their substance, however, the fired clay, was not altered. Rather, their potential arose from their effectancy, which arose from their changeabilities: during the process of appropriation, a human actor (of unknown status and background) had the thought that only the handle distinguished the cup from the more useful shape of the bowl. It was the flexibility of the perception of the thing, the first changeability, which was the prerequisite for its subsequent transformation. The removal of the handles also left traces of the former shape, and these traces could serve as a basis for narratives that kept in the memory the origin and itinerancy of the cups/bowls. They could surprise a new user who was accustomed to being given standard bowl shapes and (s)he could be stimulated to speculate or ask about the specific history of the thing. Here, the third changeability of the object could unfold its potential.

It is interesting to note that the destruction of the palace of Tel Beth-Shemesh took place several decades after the production, and probably the appropriation, of the cups by the queen. The itinerancy of the cups continued in the palace after their arrival. The Aegean-type sherds from the mud-brick walls of the palace are younger (ca 1380/60–1320/10 BC, ceramic phase LH IIIA2 in the Aegean) than the Minoan cups (ca
1430–1380/60 BC, ceramic phase LM IIIA1 in the Aegean). Before they were embedded in the walls of the palace, these LH IIIA2 vessels had to be transported to Tel Beth-Shemesh, and then used and broken, in order to get mixed with the clay used to mend the walls of the palace, which had deteriorated over time and required some repair (cf. the second changeability). Therefore, the Minoan cups were probably used for several decades. Moreover, they were still in use after 1380/60 BC, when the mass importation of Aegean-type pottery to the Levant started, which led to a severe devaluation of these vessels and a loss of interest among Southern Levantine elites in these later imports (Stockhammer forthcoming). In contrast to the overall mass of Aegean-type pottery, the two cups had not lost their particular value, probably because of their specific itinerancy and their already established use in drinking practices within the palace.

Epistemological potential

Having presented my case study, I want finally to raise the question of whether I could not equally have reached my archaeological interpretation without any of the concepts defined in the first part of my contribution. The value of every new concept or approach depends on its epistemological value, that is, the range and importance of additional insights that become possible only after the conceptual or the methodological innovation. It is indeed possible to get very similar insights without applying any of my terms or any of the related concepts and approaches of Ingold, Hahn, Olsen and Hodder. However, as I stated at the beginning, the lack of a sufficient vocabulary has resulted in ignorance of crucial aspects of the potential of things. It was my aim to create a vocabulary that enables us to differentiate and better describe the dynamics of things, their interaction with humans and their potential to connect. With the vocabulary presented here – the notion of the changeabilities of things (due to perception, time and practices, and the combination thereof) and the differentiation of the itinerancies of the materiality and the substance of things – I aim to supplement the existing approaches, which will enable us to refine our understanding and expand a diachronic perspective on things. Moreover, effectancy, as a novel term for the description of the overall potential of things and as an attempt to replace agency, helps us to avoid the anthropomorphisation of things and apply a thing-specific vocabulary which does better justice to them.

In everyday archaeology, the introduction of the changeabilities and their integration into the established protocols for the evaluation of
archaeological finds forces us, first, always to reflect on our own categorisation of the findings and the implications which we create by applying a specific term. The acknowledgement of the first changeability (referring to the changing perception of things) should be an incentive to avoid use-specific nomenclature like *cooking pot* or *hairpin*, and therefore the hasty attribution of a specific function or meaning to a thing (and thereby ignoring the third changeability and the related dynamics of functions and meanings, and their permanent (re-)creation in the framework of human practices). The realisation of the itinerancies of the materiality and the substance(s) as well as the second changeability, in the archaeological analysis, sharpens our focus on the inherent dynamics of a thing and its changes over time, which is crucial for its momentary perception and appropriation. The second changeability (referring to the transformation of things through time without human interference) emphasises that such processes of transformation are not only a post-depositional phenomenon, but of crucial relevance during a thing’s previous itinerancies. The third changeability (referring to traces of use on things as a consequence of human practices with things) aims to strengthen our interest in micro-remains in/on a thing, (micro-)traces of its former use, and modifications of the materiality or substance in the framework of past human practices. Even though the study of micro-remains, use-wear and related traces of human practices with things has recently attracted increasing interest in archaeology (e.g. van Gijn and Lammers-Keijsers 2010; Vieugué 2014), we are far from having established a standard protocol for their analysis, and they are still overseen or neglected most of the time.

To sum up, having in mind current theoretical models in material culture studies as well as the deficits of the current evaluation of finds in archaeology, the concepts presented above (changeabilities, effectancy, itinerancies, materiality, substance) have the potential to sharpen our theoretical reflections and our daily practice in archaeology, as well as our understanding of the connectivity between us/things and us/things over space and time.

Notes

1. This study is part of Philipp Stockhammer’s ERC Starting Grant project ‘FoodTransforms: transformations of food in the Eastern Mediterranean Late Bronze Age’ (ERC-2015-StG 678901-FoodTransforms), funded by the European Research Council.
2. We have to be aware that the differentiation between *substance* and *object* can be challenging, as, for example, a particular pearl of a necklace can be understood either as the *substance* of the object ‘necklace’ or as an object of its own: the necklace would then be an object among
objects with specific substances. The differentiation of *substance* and *object* is only possible from a heuristic perspective and should always be question-oriented (Strawson 1972).

3. It is difficult to translate *Wahrnehmungshandeln* into English, as there is no equivalent compound in which the first part (perception) determines the latter (practice, action) and vice versa.

4. We cannot exclude even more complex itineraries, for example that the cups were originally sent as gifts to a different member of the Eastern Mediterranean elite (e.g. in Egypt) and then travelled, through further gift giving, to Tel Beth-Shemesh.

References


