ANTH 554H: Materiality & Agency

Dr. Ruth Van Dyke
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Spring 2012, Tuesday 8:30 – 11:30 am
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Office: Science I, Room 110B
Office Hours: T Th 3-4 pm, or by appt.

Course Description
People make things, but do things also make people? How does the material world create our social realities? Can objects have agency? These questions are among those fueling the work of contemporary anthropologists, art historians, archaeologists and philosophers interested in materiality – the active and recursive role of materials in shaping social worlds. In this graduate seminar we will grapple with objects and agents, bundling and gathering, art and artifacts, gifts and commodities, subjectivities and meanings. We will read the work of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Tim Ingold, Lynn Meskell, Daniel Miller, Julian Thomas, and Web Keane, among others. The goal of the course is to attain familiarity with and a critical perspective on contemporary theoretical approaches to materiality.

Texts
The following books are required:

Additional required readings for the course will come from journal articles and book chapters. These can be found on the electronic reserve pages on Blackboard. If articles are missing or if you have any problems, please let me know so we can correct the situation.

Evaluation
Grades are based on your response papers, class participation, midterm essay, presentation, and research paper. Students taking the course for 4 credits are expected to complete all course assignments. Students taking the course for 3 credits must complete 4 response papers rather than 8, plus the research paper. Students taking the course for 2 credits do not need to do response papers but must do the research paper. Students taking the course for 1 credit will be evaluated solely on the basis of class participation.

Response papers: 40%
Participation: 25%
Presentation: 5%
Research Paper: 30%

Response Papers (40%)
You are asked to write a total of 8 response papers related to the assigned readings. The first 4 of these papers should be submitted before the midterm; the second 4 should be submitted after the midterm. Your response papers should draw together the readings for the week, pulling out what you see as one or two key themes treated in the assigned readings. I am looking for thoughtful synthesis and critical engagement with the ideas. The emphasis for these papers is on thinking critically and reflectively – you are not asked to summarize the readings. Writing the papers should help you organize your thoughts and prepare for class. Papers for each topic are due in class on the day of the discussion. Papers should be approximately 1200 words in length (about 2-3 double-spaced pages, with 1” margins and 11-12 point
fonts. Please use in-text citations and include a “references cited” section in all papers. Please use American Antiquity format.

**Participation (25%)**
All students are expected to attend all class meetings. All students are expected to have completed the readings prior to class meetings and come prepared to synthesize and discuss them in depth. This requires that you come prepared with something to stimulate and contribute to conversation (e.g., cross-cutting themes, questions, or critiques). Because this is a small seminar, it is vital that students come to class ready to participate in discussion. You will be evaluated on the quality of your contributions. If you are taking the course for one credit, this is the sole basis of your grade – therefore I expect you to be present and vocally engaged at every class meeting, including the course presentation day – failure to do so will cost you points.

**Presentation (5%)**
You are asked to give the class a conference-style talk on your research paper topic. Your talk is limited to 15 minutes in length. You should incorporate visual materials (e.g., MS Powerpoint, etc). Spoken talks are different from written papers – please do NOT read. Presentations will take place on the last day of class.

**Research Paper (30%)**
You are responsible for choosing a topic on which to write a 15-20 page research paper (exclusive of references). Your paper should be focused around a research issue related to materiality that interests you. It is to your benefit to choose a topic relatively early in the semester so that you can begin your research as soon as possible. Potential topics are subject to professorial approval. Please use American Antiquity citation format, 1” margins, and 11-12 point fonts. Further details and discussion of this assignment will be provided in class. The paper is due in my office by 5 pm on Tuesday, May 15.

**General grading detail for written assignments:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Excellent. Well-written, clearly communicated, demonstrates a clear understanding of material and shows critical and creative thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/B+/A-</td>
<td>Good to very good. Fulfilled the assignment, with a few minor improvements suggested. Shows understanding that goes beyond simple definitions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/C+/B-</td>
<td>Basically completed the assignment as required, but little more. General understanding demonstrated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D/C-</td>
<td>Content missing and limited demonstration of understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Missing significant content or did not follow guidelines. Major omissions and no understanding demonstrated.</td>
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Schedule & Reading List

Week 1: An Introduction

Week 2: Philosophical Underpinnings
- Descartes, Rene (1641) Meditation II: Of the Nature of the Human Mind; And That It Is More Easily Known Than The Body. E-book online at http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/meditation2.html

Week 3: Political Economy

Week 4: Structure, Practice, Dwelling
Week 5: Alfred Gell

Week 6: Actor-Network Theory

Week 7: Critiques and Comparisons

Week 8: Bundling and Enchainment

Week 9: Material Cultures, Material Minds

Week 10: Objects as Agents in Archaeology, I


**Week 11: Objects as Agents in Archaeology, II**


**Week 12: Museums and Collections**


**Week 13: Students’ Choice**

**Week 14: Presentations**