

***Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History* by Edward S. Cooke, Jr.**

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possibility but a complex mix of both. There is a sense of urgency and restlessness in the book as it moves swiftly between media, and the past, present, and future, but there is also hope. Iheka's account is messy, and all the better for it.

I was drawn to Iheka's formulation of "imperfect media," ecomedia improvisations that "make do with available resources" (225). This echoes Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "poor theory" (a critical practice free of ornament, open to improvisation and making do), Hito Steyerl's "poor image" (a copy in motion, one whose quality is bad, its resolution substandard) and Julio Garcia Espinosa's "imperfect cinema" (cinema no longer interested in quality or technique, overcoming the barrier of the "cultured elite audience which has up to now conditioned artists' work"), which Iheka invokes.⁷ While gestures to imperfect media crop up through the book as artists and filmmakers experiment and build solidarities across local communities, the heft of Iheka's book is invested in the parsing out global networks. What *African Ecomedia* does best is to consider and contextualize images while also consider and contextualizing our gaze and its complicity in these networks of extraction and exploitation. One book can only do so much. Rather than suggesting that *African Ecomedia* should have recentered its focus on the local and letting "imperfect media" take center stage, I hope that the book lays a foundational first step towards others who do that and more. Iheka is, I believe, broadly aware of this and the politics of creating a model that positions the role of the arts in the environmental humanities as distinctly political and vexed. In his words, the book is "both an ethical invitation to behold the Other and a call for future studies of ecology and the ecology of images in Africa."

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NOTES

1. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (London: Routledge, 2015), 87.
2. Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 13.
3. Juanita Sundberg, "Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2013): 35.

4. Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

5. Krista A. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diaspora Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 232–33.

6. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010), 135.

7. Julio Garcia Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut* 20 (1979): 24–26; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" e-flux journal 19 (November 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

EDWARD S. COOKE, JR.
Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History
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For a long time I didn't know how to talk about a piece of furniture. Standing before a chest of drawers in an English museum, I remember asking a curator colleague, "So you look at what, in fact? What can you say about a wardrobe?" I studied art history in the 2000s in Western Europe, taking courses primarily in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Occasionally, these classes included the study of other mediums, for instance, scale models in architecture or painted *cassoni* from the Renaissance. I recall that one teacher at my university was interested in interiors and so I heard (briefly) about wallpaper; yet I had the impression that those classes were not quite as important, less serious (the teacher herself was not a tenured professor). Yet, as the anthropologist, folklorist, and emeritus professor at Indiana University Henry Glassie puts it, as quoted by Edward S. Cooke Jr. in *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History*, "No matter how important easel painting is in the late West, it is uncommon in world history. It would be more just, truer to reality, to begin with textiles and ceramics."¹

Global Objects proposes a methodology for studying material culture. Constructed around three main topics, the book covers a lot of material, from the production of artifacts to their consumption, in the broad sense of the term (including, for example, their assembly and display). The table of contents is arranged in three alliterative acts, "Making," "Movement," and "Meaning." Over the course of seven chapters and a conclusion, Cooke offers a number of angles for organizing our study of objects. To do so, he touches on the following questions: What is an object made of (chapter 1)? How is it constructed (chapters 2 and 3)? What does it do, what purpose does it serve (chapters 4 and 5)? Finally, what are its sensory, visual, and tactile properties (chapters 6 and 7)? Even if the structural arrangement of parts and chapters suggests these issues are separate, Cooke explains throughout just how much these questions overlap. The meaning of an object depends concurrently on the place where it is created and used, the function it

is given, and the physical, tactile properties it has. The artifact forms a whole that is autonomous and oriented towards the world that produces and employs it. It is both a tool and a subject that transforms the context into which it fits. As Cooke writes, “Objects are ultimately a negotiated form of communication, the interface of various material conversations between the maker and the external world of purchaser, user, and viewer” (235).

Broadly speaking, the book puts forward a theory of the object. That theory is expansive and grounded in concrete examples that are featured throughout the volume. As the author stresses, “Objects are messy, so we need to develop a different interpretive strategy that builds a bottom-up understanding rather than projects a top-down interpretation” (10). The approach laid out is solidly linked to theories that have been developed in the social sciences (anthropology and sociology in particular) in Europe and the United States over the last forty years. The theoretical passages of *Global Objects* also highlight the work of thinkers who have been especially important for Cooke and his argument. These include the foundational scholarship of Alfred Gell (208),² which Cooke draws upon to foreground the object’s agency, that is, its capacity to play an active role in social interactions. The visual and material appearance of a plate, for instance, plays a part in determining how it will be handled (210). On the same line, Cooke also cites James J. Gibson and his concept of affordances to underscore the degree to which the physical properties of an object (form, surface, color) determine its use.³ A British ceramic teapot is structurally made to be taken by the handle. A liquid can be drunk from the opposite part. But it can also have different uses, and even exist as a collectible piece in a living room (146). Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT) highlights the way nonhumans and humans interact in a complex world, inviting us to rethink micro-interactions beyond a binary of passive objects and all-powerful subjects (156). Cooke also taps into the work of the English anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, who studies the object inasmuch as it is “entangled,” that is, existing in tension between “worlds” (e.g., Pacific Islanders and European colonizers). An ewer in porcelain made for export in Jingdezhen (China) in

the sixteenth century shows a Portuguese coat of arms and silver parts added later in Iran (181). The object is created by its maker, but crucially it is also actualized by its different uses over time.⁴

The ongoing use of historic objects forms one of the most interesting parts of *Global Objects*. Cooke studies in particular the range of ways porcelain and terracotta works have been repaired. There is the venerable Japanese technique of *kintsugi* (“golden joinery”), which does not hide but deliberately underlines the repaired breaks by using lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Metal additions have been grafted on pieces to complete and embellish missing extremities (190–95). The way different surfaces are worked, aged, or transformed also reminds us that the object is continually updated and made part of the present by varied actors—whether the object’s makers, owners, or a whole network of intermediaries. These actors modify the object to adapt it to different uses over the centuries (226–227). This attention to repairs is part of an absorbing social history of objects and how they are mended and recycled. It is a story that sheds light on a recent development in art history, which is studying more and more frequently practices linked to the vulnerability of objects—and their resilience. Indeed, concepts like destruction, disappearance, lack or loss, the very notion of care, along with the practices involved in what is called preventive conservation, have been renewing the discipline for at least a decade now, notably by broadening its corpus (to include pieces that are broken, destroyed, lost, and so on) and its methods.⁵ How should we speak about what is missing, absent? Or interpret these gestures towards repair, which have occasionally left written traces in the record—if not as Cooke does, by looking at the works themselves as sources and witnesses whose story must be heard?

Cooke is writing within a history of techniques and uses that has drawn on pragmatic philosophy such as it was worked out and articulated in the mid-twentieth century by thinkers like Michael Polanyi.⁶ The idea of a “tacit knowledge” on the maker’s part (a knowledge embedded in the act that is not necessarily verbalized) comes up repeatedly in *Global Objects*. The author insists on the importance of an “embodied thought,”

present in the very gestures of the maker. *Manus et materia*—we return to the alliteration of Cooke’s three acts of making, movement, meaning—the hand and matter think and act. The material world is forged in a way that is flexible, instinctive, and creative, transforming the visual and sensory world in turn. The theoretical framework of *Global Objects* is built upon a reading—important and fascinating—of a certain number of key authors who often come from the same cultural sphere (Western Europe and North America). That is the case of the authors mentioned thus far, as well as other writers who figure in Cooke’s bibliography, like the historian of science Pamela Smith, or the specialists of Native American arts Ruth Phillips and Aldona Jonaitis. However, a greater variety of authors could have been mobilized.

The extensive in-depth end notes are a significant and welcome addition to the text. For example, Cooke cites Marcel Mauss’s famous essay on the gift in the text, he also refers to the work of Pika Ghosh in a note (281).⁷ This allows the author to present the classic theories in the field of the social sciences while updating the bibliography, notably by including in the footnotes women and people of color. Now and then it could also perhaps enrich the book’s argument by even more directly including other epistemologies and approaches to the physical world that question even more frankly the binary of objects and subjects, considering artifacts as living beings, performative agents, or phenomena that are meant to disappear one day. For instance, Cooke choose the word “object” for its “neutrality” (13). Etymologically, the word *ob-ject* stems from “thrown against.” It encompasses a certain passivity and subordination. However, for many Indigenous scholars, artifacts are living subjects. The Indigenous artist Rosanna Raymond, for instance, spent a residency at the old ethnographic museum in Dahlem, Germany. She recalls how a curator stopped using the word “object” to describe the Māori *taonga* after her conversation with her.⁸

Moreover, the book raises a central question for studies that wish to adopt a global purview. As Cooke announces from the outset, *Global Objects* is largely constructed from the secondary literature, which the author has gone over and put in

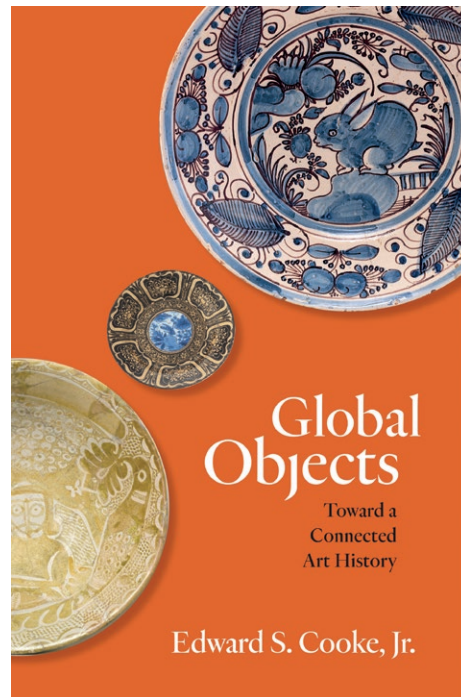
perspective in his own study, “I have also relied on scholars who have published in English even though their fieldwork is based on intense local study and command of languages” (16). And indeed, languages are and remain a serious barrier for many of us who do not always have the resources required. Can one forge a global narrative while consulting only sources and studies written or translated in English? How is one to write a broad inclusive history while respecting the multiplicity and complexity of different cultural and linguistic contexts?

These questions are all the more sensitive in that the proposed methodology professes a certain exemplarity, “While the time period and origins of objects contained in this volume are not totally comprehensive, its methodology can and should be applied to objects from many places and periods” (16). The urge to offer a theoretical approach that is beyond the canonic chronologies and geographies is one of the qualities of the book. It furnishes Cooke with the title of his study. The object is the outcome of this connected history, but also its vehicle. These embodied networks can be unpacked and brought to light by researchers with a sharp eye and the acumen to attend to what is in front of them. The idea of a “global object” enables us to consider simultaneously very different artifacts by focusing on their form, use, or material—earthenware, for instance. Cooke thus mentions on one and the same page an “Iroquois cooking pot,” “African or Southwest American water jars,” and “Incan urpus” (153). This approach, however, also raises its own questions. Just how far can one develop a study that applies to material culture as a whole (universal, one without distinctions), especially when the methodological tools are so thoroughly homogeneous and linked to a cultural and temporal bubble? To what extent can one disregard historical and cultural specificities?

Cooke also refers to the concept of “hybridity” (10) to characterize many of the human productions brought up in his book. This concept, however, was widely criticized in the 2000s for being vague while overlooking the political issues bound up with the production and use of objects. According to the English archaeologist John Huthnyk, for example, “Syncretism and Hybridity are academic conceptual tools providing an alibi for

lack of attention to politics.”⁹ In this regard then, the hybridity of material culture is an obvious given that can be unpacked in detail in order to grasp its reasons and complexity. Cooke recognizes this in a footnote (294), but does not seem to work these opposing perspectives directly into his text. How then is one to describe the hybridity of things while anchoring it in a precise political and social context?

The interest in making and materials is one of the major contributions of this publication. Likewise the emphasis on objects’



agency is a source of stimulating viewpoints. Occasionally, however, these choices result in veiling, concealing, or otherwise obscuring the identity of the producer(s) of the objects under discussion. This continuous vagueness as to the makers (often unidentified or sometimes only known through the identity of the manufactures in question) is linked to the type of objects studied in the book, which are not always documented in the same fashion. Sometimes Cooke notes that the person who makes is the “preindustrial maker” (96). At times, the author notes when the maker is a woman, e.g., “Indigenous potters, who were women” (4) and “female embroiderer” (8). This type of clarification indirectly suggests a world that is entirely male (or “neuter,” devoid of gender identity?) The example illustrates a tendency that can be seen in the studies devoted to the history of

techniques and materials; those studies risk a kind of disinterest in the political and social context, offering general, unspecific analyses. The objects and their makers seem to exist in a space that is on the fringe of contemporary conflicts and disconnected from gender inequalities, the exploitation of nature, socio-political contexts.

Nevertheless, Cooke deftly stresses that these questions, as he sees it, are indeed embodied in a micropolitics of objects. The use of certain varnishes in imitation of Asian lacquerware, for instance, or painted or printed textiles known as *indiennes* in Europe, reflect the policy of commercial expansion that connects eighteenth-century Europe, Asia, Africa, and America (cotton cloth, for instance, was imported from Asia, printed in Europe, and used as trade goods in the trafficking of enslaved peoples). However, in Cooke’s book, slavery, for instance, appears briefly in the acknowledgment, in the conclusion (261), and in the footnotes, but doesn’t really emerge in the core of the text.

The book is richly illustrated and evidences the breadth of the author’s knowledge. *Global Objects* offers a magnificent overview of some of the world’s most extensive collections. Because of the multitude of featured examples, the objects are sometimes treated a bit rapidly and summarily to illustrate a certain number of themes. Cooke jumps from one example to the next, so in just one paragraph the author moves from saris from Bengal to needlework in the United States (190), without offering detailed contextual specificities, in order to address the links between material culture and memory. The selection of objects likewise raises questions. The author’s chosen case studies come predominantly from major collections in the United States. It is a choice that the author justifies by pointing to a straightforward reason, i.e., the possibility of obtaining high-quality images of the original objects (“Many are part of prominent, internationally recognized museum collections: this facilitated the acquisition of good photography” [16].) Through convenience, even exhaustion, there are legions of us who select images that are available online; these often function, too, as the material for research itself. Imperceptibly then a certain number of collections, like those of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, for instance, become central subjects of our studies and eventually guide the making of our corpora. This policy of turning to the digital is shrewd and favors studying certain collections in particular. But is this neutral? What are the criteria then that underpin the corpus on which a book is based?

One of the great successes of Cooke's *Global Objects* is that it is an analysis based on a significant number of case studies, a corpus of considerable scale. The attention paid to the objects themselves and the important place they occupy in the whole of Cooke's study, both visually and in terms of the narrative, make *Global Objects* a solid and handsome contribution to the history of art. The book offers keys for interpretation that are theoretical and more importantly grounded in concrete examples, offering a balance between theories and cases. The narrative goes beyond the hierarchies of the discipline, which would normally favor one kind of artifact over another. It is without a doubt especially useful to students, to whom the book is dedicated, moreover. As the author amply demonstrates, each object is a world unto itself, forged at the crossroads of other spaces, geographies, and humans. Each thing then sediments out techniques, materials, and iconographic traditions which are themselves the outcome of a range of traditions. An object is global because it is the product of a network of exchanges, as if imprinted like an engram, a memory trace, in its form, technique and materials.

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NOTES

1. Henry Glassie, *The Potter's Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 18, quoted in Edward S. Cooke Jr., *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 9.
2. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory of Art* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1998).
3. J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 1979), 146.
4. Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

5. See for instance: Kader Attia, "Open your Eyes: The Reparation in Africa and in the Occident," *Third Text*, 31, no. 1 (2018): 16–31; Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *The Delusions of Care* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2020); Colin Sterling and Jamie Larkin, eds., "Repair," *Museum and Social Issues* 15, no. 1–2 (2021).

6. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

7. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), originally published in 1925. Pika Gosh, "From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households," in *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal*, ed. Darielle Mason (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, 31–57).

8. Rosanna Raymond, *Conser.VĀ.tion/Acti.VĀ.tion: Museums, the Body and Indigenous Moana Art Practices* (Master's thesis, School of Art and Design Auckland University of Technology), 67–68.

9. John Huthnyk, "Hybridity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005): 92.