“Objects and Things: Material Culture in Performance”

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Objects are typically thought of as inert—something we act upon. Likewise, puppets (more so in the US) have traditionally been seen as bad children’s birthday party entertainment and unworthy of serious academic study.

The emerging approaches of performing objects and material performance seek to change our perspective. Passive objects become things with agency. Not only do puppets perform, but any thing can take on a performative role or be viewed as participating in a performance.

This seminar will explore Proschan’s theory of “performing objects” and Posner, Orenstein and Bell’s approach to “material performance.” We will also see how these theories are based on Law and Latour’s “Actor-Network Theory,” which examines rhizomatic networks ranging from the electrical grid to colonial domination, and political scientist Jane Bennett’s idea that matter, such as stem cells, food, trash, is vibrant and has agency.

Finally, we will see how these approaches have inspired visual artists, such as Johanna Winters, to, as she describes, “bridge the genres of performance and visual art.”