7 Objects of desire

Sexwork and its objects

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Introduction

The ‘Objects of Desire Collective’ is made up of artists, anthropologists and sexworkers who take the lead in curating the collective’s activities. The collective formed in 2015 around a shared concern for the form and content of public discourse and the emergent legal regulation of sexwork in both the UK and later in Germany. The collective felt that there was a distinct lack of objective understanding in these public discourses as to what sexwork actually is.

In the summers of 2016 and 2019, the collective curated shows in London and Berlin, respectively, comprised of a collection of objects given to or used by sexworkers in their work. The aim was to foreground narratives of sexwork as work through an explication of the forms of labour relations involved in sexwork via object biographies. The shows formed a critical interjection into such discourses and acted as a catalyst to public discussion and community building around the issues. This chapter works through how the exhibition was influenced by, and contributes to, material culture approaches to anthropology and ethnography. It relates particularly to the issues discussed in chapters by Drazin, in terms of object biographies, and Schacter, in terms of curation, as well as other chapters with regard to the conception of studying objects in anthropology.

The collective take as their starting point the critiques levelled at Durkheimian approaches to material culture (see Carroll et al. and Küchler, this volume), namely that objects need to be considered as more than substitutes for persons or as a repository for social relations to be collected and read as symbolic of various cultural groups. Rather, we recognise them as dynamically involved in the ongoing formation of social relations and power relations. Influenced by Mauss’s discussion of the gift (Mauss 2002[1925]), we asked what is happening when a client gives a sexworker a gift? How the worker deals with the gift, uses, stores, interacts with it, is indicative of how they manage the relation not only to their client but to such things as labour, home, themselves and others. This work of managing and moving the objects in relation to its imbrication in a network of relations is part of the labour of sexwork.

The collective used object biographies as a starting point for the exhibitions. We interviewed around twenty workers in London and over forty in Berlin. With each interview, we asked the interviewee to bring an object to lend to the exhibitions. Interviews were usually semi-structured and lengthy, over an hour, often more. The narration of particular moments of an object's role in the mediation of a relation, as described by the interviewee, would accompany the objects in the exhibition, usually by a small text, video or a sound recording. In this sense our approach to the collection, display, and curation echoes that outlined by Schacter (this volume) in that we foreground the contexts in which the object was involved at specific moments that led to it being considered important for collection. Our roles, as ethnographers and curators go beyond the object into 'collaborating not simply collecting, enabling not simply exhibiting' (Schacter, this volume), and we approach curation as a 'highly charged opportunity to think and do otherwise' (Bouquet 2000: 228).

Schacter draws attention to the ways in which curation develops openness, prompts questions, and interrogates sites of knowledge production but, further, we purposefully emphasise the political aspects of our work with the target of asserting how sexwork is work through ethnographical detail drawn from object-orientated methods. Through specifically presenting objects alongside their narratives we focus on a specific moment in the life of the object, one in which it is involved in the labour of sexwork, to assert precisely how sexwork is work. We select a particular moment of its movement and mediation in social relations and, in taking this moment seriously, we consider each object as more than a signifier of social relations but as specifically active in particular moments of mediation. We are also influenced by approaches to objects that attend to their material qualities (see Witmore 2009) – such as smell or stickiness – and the forms of interaction they enable, or demand, in understanding their role in the labour of sexwork. To illustrate our approach, we describe our use of some objects from the shows, but first we outline the socio-political context in which the shows emerged and consider the role of anthropological collaboration in gathering politically targeted ethnographic detail.

The context of the shows

The exhibitions were curated in direct response to particularly fervent conversations around the regulation of sexwork across Europe. In the spring of 2016, the UK government reviewed prostitution laws while in Germany a new law regulating sexwork took effect on 1 July 2017.

In both the UK and Germany there was a range of public voices calling for different approaches to the regulation of sexwork. Some called for heavy regulation whereby sexworkers register on state databases and have to adhere to a range of very specific work conditions, such as sanctioned places of work and heavy surveillance (as in the Netherlands). Others called for implementation

of the so-called ‘Nordic Model’ whereby buying sex is illegal, and laws and enforcement focus on the buyer – a model that assumes that sexwork is a form of gendered violence against women (see Bernstein 2007, 2010). The UK government review recommended more of a decriminalisation approach to soliciting and brothel keeping. This approach, while not perfect, was hailed as a ‘radical moment’ for sexworkers in the UK and was welcomed by many sexworker organisations (Eastham 2016). In Germany, the law, which has been promoted as ‘The Prostitute’s Protection Act,’ was drafted without consulting sexworkers or their organizations. It enforces mandatory registration and identification of sexworkers and stipulates that they must carry a government-issued ‘Prostitute’s ID,’ for which they must undergo a mental health examination in order to obtain. The law has come under fierce criticism from sexworkers, public health and legal organisations, and human-rights groups. They point to the collection of personal data, increased powers of surveillance, and the threat to privacy as issues that fundamentally impinge on the rights of sexworkers, thereby increasing vulnerability within some areas of sexwork. There was great uncertainty in the sexworker community about how these laws will be implemented. Our interviews in Germany were conducted in the year following the enactment of the law and we inquired about the law’s effect on the daily lives of workers in Berlin. The exhibitions served as public interjections into discussion around sexwork in these contexts.

For all the public discussion on the ethics of sexwork, there was a noticeable lack of first-hand accounts of the everyday practice, particularly labour and workplace relations, of being a sexworker (Banyard 2016; Editorial 2016). The mainstream media frequently featured articles and opinions from people with strong views on what sexwork was, is, and should be, regardless of their expertise on the issue. For example, Hollywood ‘A list’ actors Meryl Streep, Kate Winslet, Emma Thompson and others actively took a position opposing decriminalisation of sexwork as advocated by international human rights advocacy group Amnesty International (Mandle 2015). In Germany, sexworkers anecdotally told us that many people had been registering their ‘hooker name’ as Alice Schwarzer as a form of ironic protest. Schwarzer is a prominent ‘feminist writer’ who views prostitution as violence against women and is an advocate of the Nordic model for Germany yet seemed to have little engagement with the sexworker communities, who were making clear their positions in support of decriminalisation and against the Nordic model (Khomami 2016; Freis-Bryce 2016).

Debates often polarised into positions that perceived sexworkers as either ‘empowered,’ or as ‘victims’ in need of saving (Burton 2016; Bindel 2016; Banyard 2016). Both positions take sexworkers as a homogenous group to be talked *about*, rather than a group of people involved in a wide-ranging and varied industry to talk *with*. As such, sexworkers had become objectified not only in terms the typically conceived objectified body or as a sexual object, but also as ‘the sexworker’ as a moralised object to be regulated, saved, or protected.

The collective formed around the need to refocus discussion on labour rights and conditions, which started with a campaign to ensure that sexwork is understood as work. This involved challenging and breaking down the objectification of sexworkers as a homogenous group to be managed. The collective's name, 'Objects of Desire,' is a purposeful play on the idea of what the object is in our shows. We draw attention not only to how objects such as jam, incense, and books are involved in social relations, but also to how the sexworker had become objectified in public discourse. One obvious issue when trying to explain in detail how sexwork is work is that not only do you have to overcome assumptions of what sexwork is but, further, many sexworkers would not wish to be talking heads or public figures in discussing the issues. Objects enabled a discussion on the empirical detail of the labour of sexwork and allowed the foregrounding of personal stories. In this sense, we also think we are speaking back to recent discussions in material culture.

Danial Miller states, 'the concepts of subject and object are failures to notice [the] process of objectification' (2005b: 37–38). While we consider the process of objectification, we also consider subjectification, that is, the process of reasserting the subjective qualities of a person or people in a discourse. This argument has been taken up by Severin Fowles who, in his call for closer attention to the processes of subjectification, has claimed that, within the 'material turn,' objects have become 'quasi-human subjects' (2016: 9) enabling anthropologists to obviate the colonial critique levied at their analysis of a subject-centred social world. Through substitution of persons for objects, Fowles argues, anthropologists were able to maintain a form of authority to write culture. However, whereas Fowles asserts that a focus on objects led to the obviation of the critique of power imbalances in practices of representation, we foreground objects in order to reassert the subject through the elicited object narratives.

A focus on objects allowed subjects to be made present via the stories of how persons and objects intra-act (following Barad 2003, 2007; see also Buchli, this volume) to mutually constitute each other through the negotiation of social relations. Our approach works to de-objectify those who have become bracketed as a homogeneous and unspecific group of 'sexworkers.' While Fowles might argue that the study of the object evades letting the subject speak, we focus on objects to allow stories to be told, thereby drawing attention to the ongoing processes of managing the ways in which objects and subjects are constituted, and the labour that this involves. It was a focus on the processes through which objects and subjects become objects and subjects that allowed us to interject into the representational economy surrounding sexwork and sexworkers. Attention to process is key, as Buchli (2002a: 19) writes,

looking at what happens before and after the artefact is more significant than the artefact itself; that is, the terms of materiality rather than material culture itself and the differential ability of individuals to participate in these processes is more important.

Both shows were designed after gathering the ethnographic material. We would consider what themes emerged from the interviews and how we could best communicate a narrative of sexwork as work through curating the shows.

Upon entering the London show, the visitor would come across 'Eve's Mound,' a giant pile of gifts given to Eve by one client, who would show up at appointments with bags full of gifts that included tea, his ex-girlfriend's clothes, Tupperware, sandwich bags, and more. The sheer physicality of the objects, their bulky and enduring presence, means the social relations they carry have to be dealt with long after the client has gone. The objects needed to be received, recognised, stored, and later talked about or related to. The objects were more than a representational presence of the client, they demanded engagement and, through their very presence, a continuation of a labour relation.

Objects, or gifts, also make demands as outlined by the description of receiving a book where the worker was expected to read the gift in her own time:

[Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels*] was given to me by a client who is a biologist and lover of Richard Dawkins. His views on the superiority of Western science were tough to swallow, [...] I would get drunk, accuse him of being trapped in a cage of post-enlightenment rationality, and say I didn't believe in evolution. I took it too far though, when I told him I didn't read this book he gave me because it's total SHIT! He got offended by that.

Books hold an imminent potential for something else, the communication of information; and knowledge of information can be used to test if the worker has engaged with the book. However, to read a book requires a large amount of time that the worker is not paid for. As such, books and asking opinions about the book constitute a way in which the client can transcend the boundary of the business relation and test the limits of the 'girlfriend experience,' posing a problem of authenticity for the worker. The book does more than represent client-worker relations, but works to force a production of them. These relations required careful management as books can challenge the space-time boundaries of what labour is and where it occurs.

Both exhibitions contained many domestic items, cleaning products, towels, bed sheets but also bric-a-brac, or 'klimbim' items, as they are known in Germany. Domestic items and their management give insights into the management of boundaries. Workers spoke of how, while they could usher a client out the door, their gifts often would remain. Lisa felt uncomfortable receiving an expensive scarf. She wondered what might be expected of her in return. She 'pushed back' against the feeling she should reciprocate, but felt that she failed to provide the authentic girlfriend experience. This posed a challenge to the transactional nature of the work, to the boundary of worker/

client. Lisa felt that gifts ‘threaten,’ through their ability to carry conditions of debt. The power of the gift (see Mauss 2002[1925]) had to be managed. When Lisa’s boyfriend wore the scarf on his head as a joke, she explained that it had ‘lost some of its mystique.’ Just as the scarf was placed on the head, objects can be physically moved to manage their potency.

Sometimes the potent associations of a gift are brought forward through its assertive materiality as Elisa remarked regarding an incense burner. She was disturbed by the gift’s domestic connotations. ‘It’s definitely a fantasy,’ she said, ‘this guy gives me this home object because he fantasizes about living with me.’ She hated the thought of the rose scented incense that the client had selected moving invisibly through her personal space and into her body: ‘It’s a very intrusive thing; smell is so important.’ Here, the object’s materiality contributes to what Kathleen Stewart would call atmospheric attunements, in that it works to produce an atmosphere that evokes feelings. Atmospheric attunements are ‘palpable and sensory yet imaginary and uncontained, material yet abstract. They have rhythms, valences, moods, sensations, tempos and lifespans’ (2011: 445; see also Buchli, this volume). But who controls and manages this attunement is constantly negotiated.

The ‘intrusion’ of clients into the home and body was exemplified via the many luxury foods given as gifts. Rori explains she would regularly receive luxury preserves from a client:

I’ve wondered why he always gives me preserves. I can see that he gets a lot of pleasure from giving me food and feeling that he is caring for me [...] but I’ve also noticed that he is very into bodily fluids and often says how nice it is that we ‘taste’ each other. I wonder if the jars of sticky jam are a symbolic substance, a kind of proxy for bodily fluids [...] if me storing them in my cupboard and ingesting them is a way for him to transcend the boundaries of our sessions, inserting himself somehow into my home and body.

While Rori enjoyed having reminders of the client in her domestic space, the very stickiness of the jam, the tackiness of the substance when in the mouth, gave rise to new and unwanted forms of association. Rori explained that for obvious safety reasons she maintains highly policed boundaries of bodily fluids and exchange at work. In this sense, the jam served as a substitute and morphed from being a pleasurable conserve to being an index of the body and its fluids (see Warnier 2007). The very materiality of the jam is important here as its stickiness mobilises the index and enables the transference of the relation (see Keane 2013). It was through both its social context and its material qualities that the jam’s stickiness animated a particular indexical relation. Thereby the jam became an object to be dealt with in order to maintain boundaries of work and non-work.

Just as Rori expressed how jam traversed the bodily boundaries of sexwork, Chelsea explained how an endoscopic camera could create new dynamics

of bodily interactions when the client is not physically present. The camera was donated to the London exhibition by Chelsea, who frequently worked in camera-based chat rooms. Clients would send digital ‘tips’ that would result in clothes being removed or actions performed. Her clients occasionally sent gifts through the post to feel as though they had ‘done something special.’ The camera was the ‘strangest’ gift she received while camming. A client had often asked for close-up shots of her vulva in the public chat room. Chelsea said this was not unusual in itself, given that ‘everyone is happy for a bit of a close-up.’ He sent the endoscope for her to make him a custom video of the inside of her vagina – ‘not just close but right inside!’ She reflected on how gifts like this function as a way for clients to indicate a fantasy that they might be too shy to verbalise. In cam-work the boundary between the viewer and viewed is mediated by the webcam. The camera offered new perspectives, new forms of penetration as it transcends boundaries and becomes a mobile mechanical consciousness (Deleuze 1983: 23). The camera was not just an inalienable object that carried the spiritual essence of the giver (see Mauss 2002[1925]), nor simply an object that instantiates a social relation (see Strathern 1990), rather it created a new form of labour practice and labour relations.

The exhibitions demonstrated how objects (books, clothes, food, technology) produced and were imbricated in, rather than represented, sexworker–client relations. These relations extended beyond the presence or even the intention of the client via the assertive materiality of the objects themselves. At times clients would use objects to evoke others who were not present. Maria says gifts reflect the sorts of stories that clients like to ‘spin about themselves’ when buying sex. She recalled one client used gifts of particular clothes and perfumes to revisit memories of his late wife. The gifts had to be performed, touch flesh, be embodied in order for the client to remember. This enabled a simultaneous subjectification of his wife via object engagement with the sexworker who, through a performative act, animated particular indexical qualities of the objects and transformed the sexworker into a body, animated and with a vitality of life, which enabled these indexes to be efficacious in evoking memories of smell, touch and personal relations with the dead. In all cases, the objects themselves did not represent a person, but were brought into efficacious indexicality through the performative acts of the worker. This animation was showcased in the ‘surprising’ banality of the majority of objects on display. As one reviewer of the London show noted:

As an outsider, you can imagine the gifts that sexworkers are given by clients; Champagne, flowers, sex toys and lingerie all make the list. Marks & Spencer’s jam, however, doesn’t come to mind. Neither does a Twinings tea gift box, a Mizuno golf visor or a history book. But [the] ‘Objects of Desire’ exhibition proves these preconceptions wrong.

(Lloyd 2016)

Both shows had a similar collection of objects with themes of domestic gifts, work tools (such as bags and coats), techniques of discreetly getting to work, and the interviews particularly discussed the process of switching between work and non-work personas. The Berlin show contained a dressing table adorned with annotated make up, perfumes and mirrors to demonstrate the point. All interviewees talked about how the stubbornness of objects often made it difficult for them to switch from working to not working, as outlined above, jams and incense can pervade private space. However, the Berlin show raised an interesting point that was absent in the London show. In Berlin the new law made it mandatory for sexworkers to carry ID cards. These force sexworkers to reveal private information and make them vulnerable to being identified by both clients and authorities, as one worker outlined.

It will be weird to see my real name and my alias together on the Hurenpass. I do think that for those who worked in brothels before, there has always been a connection for the police between identity and work. I have heard stories where you're pulled over and the cop's looking at your papers, has called to check and then came back with a certain comment like, 'oh you also work in this brothel.' Maybe in front of your friends and family. This is because they collect data from raids, and brothels are always raided every once in a while, mostly for taxes. I don't know why, but I was already really intimidated by these tax people, the *Steuerfahndung*. It's so intrusive somehow. You're there in your thong, and you show your passport, which you don't ever show to anyone in this place. No one knows your name, and there you stand.

The ID cards not only identify sexworkers but enables an objectification and moralization of them as 'sexworker' at any moment. They can be identified via their real names when they are working. Here, the ID card as object is used as a regulatory object, an object of power.

Influenced by the idea of the contact zone (see Clifford 1997; Pratt 1991; Schacter, this volume) we used the shows to draw multiple communities together, from different sexworkers, service workers, authorities, the public and art and museum institutions. In the process of curation and display, we echo Schacter's perspective whereby curation is less a practice of presenting artefacts, but of creating spaces to generate, circulate, and co-produce knowledge. To provoke and assert questions of being human alongside your interlocutors, as Schacter notes, curation 'becomes a model in which the anthropologist engages in experimental, speculative, long-term processes wherein we can speak together with our interlocutors, mediating, not controlling, their own ways of seeing.' But further we can use our ethnographic techniques and our approach to objects in order to elicit stories and narratives of the complex process of mediating social relations so that they can be foregrounded to communicate things such as how sexwork is work, to a wider audience.

Objects, sexwork and material culture theory

The exhibitions approached objects, not as static representations, but as caught in particular contingent and contextual moments of making social relations. They are, as material forms, caught in a moment of objectification and subjectification. We lean on the object biography as a method of orientating the research, of disseminating information and of expressing how sexwork is work. However, we are less interested in what happens when the object ‘moves to a new domain’ (see Drazin, this volume) than we are in seeing how objects move into, and out of, those domains. What, we ask, are the motivations for throwing away jam, putting incense burners out or forcing someone to carry a card? What social relations does this produce, regulate, or manage? We are political in our ethnographic moment, that is, the moment where we have a need to understand (following Strathern 1996), but also there comes a moment that we need to make others understand in the politics and inherent labour of managing the social relations of sexwork and the objectification of the sexworker.

We recognise that our approach requires an ability to trace objects movements and the associated stories. Such contexts and narratives are not always available to the anthropologist (see Mercier, this volume) but is crucial in the focused political ethnographic moment practiced here.

As noted above, our analysis and attentiveness to the biography of an object was heavily influenced by the works of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff – in particular, the edited collection, *The Social Life of Things*, where Appadurai argues that in looking for the value of objects, ‘we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (1986b: 5). However, our approach places emphasis less on the meanings inscribed on the object, but on how the object is imbricated in a process of managing social relations. We focus on the processes through which particular subject positions, such as sexworker, client, and others are involved in a constant process of becoming un/stable in relation to the management, placing, moving, naming, and experiencing of material forms. In the moving, use and consideration of a material form, both object and subject become something in particular in relation to each other and in relation to a wider social realm.

Our approach to foregrounding objects via curation aims to interject narratives of labour, work and practice, into what Webb Keane (2003: 410) would call the ‘representational economy’ around sexwork, particularly where the ‘sexworker’ was an objectified figure. Keane emphasises the historical and social formation of different modes of signification asserting that underlying assumptions and historical norms determine how ‘one distinguishes between subjects and objects, with implications for what will or will not count as a possible agent’ (2003: 410). Keane argues that the relation between subject and object mean they are always imbricated in a dynamic economy of representation. Rather than drawing attention to the ‘dynamic interconnections among

different modes of signification' (2003: 410), OoD's emphasis was less on signification and rather on the ways in which the objects are involved in dynamic webs of relations – not only between people and people, or people and things, but also in the relation between the material world and concepts, ideas, and forms. That is, we examined how it is that objects are involved in the ongoing process of the experience and labour of sexwork and being a sexworker. With this, we push a form of political corrective to a material culture conversation that has been overly concerned with the notion of defining what an object *is* as opposed to considering why it is both considered an object in the first instance and what said object *does*.

Going beyond representation is not new to material culture theory, as the chapters of this volume attest, and the work of Alfred Gell (1998) has been hugely influential in shifting anthropological analysis towards a more performative and dynamic understanding of material/human relations (see Küchler 2002, 2005; Keane 2003, 2005b; Pinney 2002, 2005). Gell tackled Saussurean linguistics, which he felt was overly focused on representation, through his employment of Peircean linguistics, which allowed him to place greater emphasis on the performative, whereby meanings are felt as well as read. Gell's work allowed more space for the phenomenological and affective modes of explanation in the relation between people and materials. Through the notion of the index, Gell analyses why acts of iconoclasm, such as the slashing of Diego Velázquez's painting *Rokeby Venus* by suffragette and women's rights campaigner Mary Richardson, have such potency (Gell 1998: 64). The slashing, asserts Gell, was a form of 'volt sorcery,' whereby its slashing was an attack on the excessive agency that the painting held in the context of the imprisonment of campaigner Emmeline Pankhurst. In this sense objects, or art in this case, are more than a representation but are a 'constitutive act' (Gell 1998: 191), in that their potency goes beyond the symbolic to recognise the ways in which objects bring about an association of relations which can be either implicit, explicit or, as Küchler and Carroll (2021b) state, 'imminent.' Implicit here is a recognition of a wider field of power relations as well as the material qualities of the objects themselves.

To think through an example, the jam took assumed an excess when considered in relation to the client and their fetish for sticky fluids. The jam, without context is not particularly potent. One can be attentive to its material qualities, the stickiness, the sweetness, the glistening, but such qualities only become potent when contextualised within its social relations. Jam is indexical to the client, specifically to his desire to exchange sticky fluids. But further, jam is more than representational of the client; its very presence is a constitutive act. It brings forth indexical relations that are out of place. The act of eating jam creates, through the sensual experience of its materiality and the imminent relations it foregrounds, an excess of the client's desires and the associated labour. The jam becomes potent and is in need of policing in order to maintain stable boundaries. Transporting this relational nexus into a wider public discourse via the exhibition space affects what jam is and can be. As

one exhibition goer remarked, ‘I will never eat jam in the same way again.’ Here, the anthropologist is not the passive describer of an object or a relation but curates relations alongside their interlocutors, in order to assert how sexwork is work and de-objectify the labourer.

Daniel Miller’s (2005b) critique of Alfred Gell’s *Art & Agency* (1998) is that, in recognising the operative act of art objects in human agency, Gell affords them a degree of second-order agency. Miller’s humanist approach enhances the role of things by making them operative in the making of humans; he states, ‘the things that people make, make people’ (2005b: 38). Holbraad and Pederson (2017: 205) critique the ways in which Miller’s ‘humanist’ approach leaves the ontological distinction between people and things unmodified. Following Viveiros de Castro’s call to ‘take people seriously’ (see 2004; Holbraad and Pederson 2017: 291), they ask how could a thing which may be said to be a spirit, not be theorised as a *conduit* of spirit but *as* a spirit. Or rather, to take Holbraad’s example, how could we think about powder in Ifá divination not as *representative* of power but *as* power? In essence, their argument for relationality suggests that, ‘instead of treating all the things that your informants say of, do to and with things as modes of “representing” the things in question, treat them as modes of defining what those things are’ (Holbraad and Pederson 2017: 213).

OoD presence objects in order to foreground their role in the mediation of a relation, what they *do*: their efficacy. This involves understanding them as symbolic and representational but also imminent, and as operative through their material qualities. Chris Witmore (2009) asserts that how a thing becomes a thing is dependent on a set of contextual relations. Labour is needed to either maintain objects and subjects as stable entities or break them down. Witmore differentiates this approach from that of Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s, asserting that, in their conception of object biographies, objects can fall into the trap of ‘vacuous actuality,’ (2009: 26) where things happen to them. Witmore stresses that the ways in which objects are ‘actively *happening*’ (ibid) must be addressed with a focus on an object’s local conditions and how it is made and remade in a nexus of relations, of shifting associations with other entities; however, this is not to say that objects are understandable through their relations alone, instead they hold something in reserve (2009). Objects often have surprising or stubborn qualities through their ability to smell or stick, and they demand to be dealt with. The objects presented in the exhibitions were not passive representations of aspects of sexwork, but active mediators of relations that likewise demand to be dealt with.

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the specific moments of interacting with jam, books, scarfs, and cameras to illuminate the forms of social relations active in negotiating the subject positions and labour relations of sexwork. These everyday interactions are a product of the wider context of objectification

of both the subject and subjectification of the object. In this dynamic, the materiality, social context, and process are important. An object-orientated methodology of object biographies was used to trace the details of the everyday practice of sexwork as work. A heavy regulation of boundaries, such as between one's work and one's personal life, the physical spaces of home and work and between client and friend was evident throughout all the interviews, and the objects selected often troubled the maintaining of such boundaries. The stubborn materiality of objects and the potency of their relations required that they be dealt with. Where does one put a gift? Do I really have to carry this card? What name do I use? How does one engage with it while maintaining highly regulated boundaries?

Both the exhibitions and this chapter have been influenced by, and form a response to, debates within anthropology regarding the ways in which materials are conceived. Further, it is a response to the role of the anthropologist as a curator and active agent in foregrounding the ways in which social relations are managed, challenged and regulated through objects. There has been a call to focus on the materials themselves, 'in their own terms,' and to 'take materials seriously' (Ingold 2007: 14). Such a materials-orientated approach opens up new ways of thinking about how the materials have efficacy in a given social situation – for example, through the stubbornness of the jam's sticky presence. On the other hand, others (see Witmore 2009, Küchler and Carroll 2021b) have argued that an over-focus on the material properties negate the fact that such affordances only become social when within specific contexts, so jam can feel sticky but only when conceived of in a specific context does that potential matter to the anthropologist. In this sense, an object – say a cloak within a museum collection – requires specific attention so that it does not stand for all cloaks, or merely a cultural variation on a cloak (see Geismar 2018). Rather what (or when) an object is, what it does, and how it evokes particular experiences, subject positions and relations, are dependent on the context. The anthropologist, through the choice of an analytical focal point, makes a political decision on the ways in which we foreground the configuration of object, subject, and persons via writing, talking through, or exhibiting their making to new audiences.

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