

Knolling

The Art of Material Culture

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EVIDENCE OF OUR THOUGHTS, DESIRES, AND PAST ARE REVEALED THROUGH MATERIALS—THINGS.

In many contexts, materials are categorized into collections to be analyzed and compared. Today, we call the process of arranging items of similar theme “knolling.” Those familiar with design history may recognize the root of the word, *knoll*, in reference to Knoll Furniture, a manufacturer known for designs by Florence Knoll, an architect who later married the company’s founder. The term *knolling* was first used in 1987 by Andrew Kromelow, then a janitor at Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica studio (Heathcote, n.d.). At the time, Gehry, an architect, was designing furniture for Knoll. While cleaning the studio, Kromelow would arrange the displaced tools at 90° angles to create an organized surface. Perhaps done out of admiration for Florence Knoll’s angular, modernist designs or some other reason, Kromelow’s organization method allowed Gehry to see all his tools at once. More specifically, the designer was able to make visual relationships between each tool and its prospective use. Contemporary sculptor Tom Sachs worked in Gehry’s shop for 2 years before adopting the knolling method and subsequently popularizing the term. Sachs’s (2009) studio manual *10 Bullets* gives instructions on how to knoll for efficiency:

1. Scan your environment for materials, tools, books, music, etc. which are not in use.
2. Put away everything not in use. If you aren’t sure, leave it out.
3. Group all ‘like’ objects.
4. Align or square all objects to either the surface they rest on, or the studio itself.

Knolling can be considered for exploration as part of the broader study of material culture. Advocacy efforts push for material culture studies as a foundational part of K–12 art education curriculum. The expression “material culture” is often associated solely with human-produced and/or manipulated objects. However, the expression is more expansive, inclusive of all cultural actions, expressions, and engagements that we, as physical bodies, have in, about, or with our environment (Bolin & Blandy, 2003). Bolin and Blandy (2003) provide seven statements of support for the inclusion of material culture studies in art education. Their fourth statement particularly resonates with the subject of knolling. Bolin and Blandy reference the ability of material culture studies to embrace the

investigation of everyday objects and expressions. Contrary to art education today, the study of material culture reaches beyond emphasizing only the “objects and forms deemed by experts to be the grandest examples representing a particular cultural group or type of object” (Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 253). Scholars of this field present the importance of studying the breadth of human-mediated objects, for the everyday object truly exposes what Prown (1982) called “human intelligence operating at the time of fabrication” (as cited in Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 253). Further, in exploring creative matter in art education from a new materialist perspective, Hood and Kraehe (2017) asked, “What if, as educators/artists/researchers, we took seriously our interconnectedness with things—lingering within wonderment, struck by the power of the things that pull us out of our routines?” (p. 33). Thus, a rethinking of material culture’s “thing-power” (Bennett, 2010, 2012) can be a powerful catalyst for artmaking, art education, and arts-based research.

Each artist mentioned in this instructional resource provides a unique approach to material culture through an aesthetic similar to knolling. Although material culture also refers to a vast range of actions and expressions, these artists have mastered the role of materials in their work. Through object juxtaposition, design concepts, and visual literacy, the innovators, sculptors, and photographers discussed in this resource offer a refreshing perspective to contemporary material culture.

Historical Evidence

Artists select and curate items to be displayed in various venues, with museums serving as a traditional platform for collections of items based on techniques and methods. The idea of knolling—the artful organization of things—dates back to antiquity. Suetonius, a Roman historian who died in 122 A.D., noted that Emperor Augustus “had his houses embellished, not only with statues and pictures but also with objects which were curious by reason of their age and rarity” (Koepppe, 2002).

Similarly, cabinets of curiosities, a product of the Renaissance, served as the precursor to museums of today. These installations consisted of the collection and display of objects that lacked any sort of categorical boundary. With 16th- and 17th-century *wunderkammern*, German for “wonder rooms,” as models,



Figure 1. Mark Dion, *Memory Box* (Detail), 2016. Wood, steel, shelving, various objects. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

contemporary artist Mark Dion creates contemporary cabinets of curiosities. Dion is credited with saying that the job of the artist is to challenge perception and convention (Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 2013). Dion uses different display cases for each of his collections, considering both the framework for the collection and

the engagement of the audience. Dion encourages and promotes the interaction of the audience with his work, especially in the installation *Memory Box* (Figure 1).

The collection is held in a shed, and on a shelf lies hundreds of boxes: cigar boxes, shoe boxes, and enamel and leather boxes



Figure 3. Jason Travis, *Tomeka Diptych*, 2016. Photograph.

From the same series is Rosenthal's *Blue Ocean* (Figure 2). At first glance, this composition appears to be curated by color, since the objects are either cobalt blue or cyan. However, according to Rosenthal, the collection is also paired with the concept of anthropomorphism, or the use of human traits in combining like items (Rosenthal, 2017). Rosenthal provides a prime example of Bolin and Blandy's (2003) fourth statement of support for material culture studies that emphasizes the relevancy of everyday objects. In *The Grid*, Rosenthal curates a collection based on the architectural structure and longevity of plastic objects. Of the materials he used for this work, Rosenthal noted that though their usefulness had long passed, the objects "remain in the environment for years and years" (Rosenthal, n.d.). This is similar in thought to Prown's (1982) idea that everyday objects reveal "human intelligence at the time of fabrication" (as cited in Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 253). By collecting washed up everyday items that have lost their purpose, and sometimes identity, and juxtaposing them in visually intriguing relationships, Rosenthal gives them a "new life" (Rosenthal, 2017).

▷ JASON TRAVIS

With a seemingly opposite curatorial process, photographer Jason Travis creates his compositions spontaneously. In his *Persona* series, he photographs individuals in their immediate environments and then knolls items they carry in their bags or purses. Travis combines the photos into a diptych allowing for the viewer to make visual comparisons between the individual, the environment, and the things they carried with them (Figure 3).

▷ MICHAEL JOHANSSON

Swedish artist Michael Johansson takes a three-dimensional approach to knolling, as he is attracted to an exaggerated form of regularity. His *Untitled* series consists of Tetris-like sculptural arrangements. For *Rubiks Kök*, everyday kitchen objects were tightly fitted under the table's structure to create the sculptural

form (Figure 4). However, other sculptures in this series consist of objects curated by color. In *Chameleon* (Figure 5), Johansson fitted the objects into negative space to camouflage the sculpture. Johansson's series *Some Assembly Required* contrasts strongly with

Figure 4. Michael Johansson, *Rubiks Kök (Rubik's Kitchen)*, 2007. Kitchen table, kitchen equipment.





Figure 5. Michael Johansson, *Chameleon*, 2014. Ordinary items.

Figure 6. Michael Johansson, *Engine Bought Separately—Hugin III*, 2008. Hair dryer, welded metal frame, spray paint.

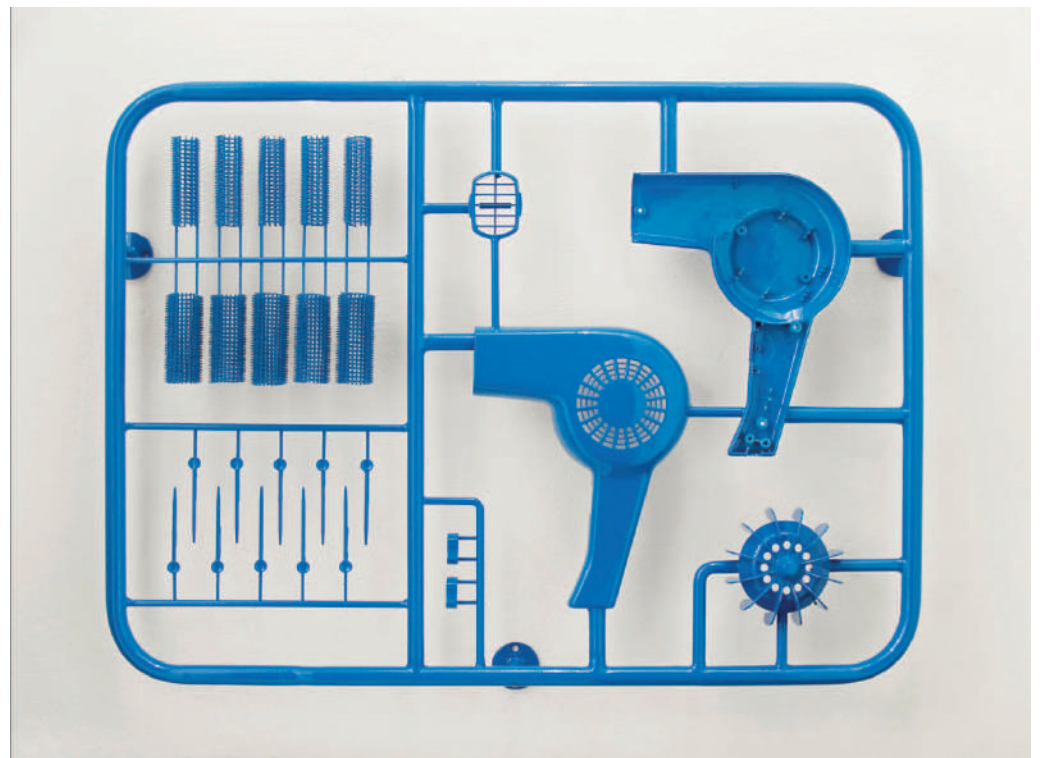




Figure 7. Jim Golden, *Barrette Collection*, 2017. Photograph.

Untitled. Sculptures in this series were made up of deconstructed, spliced items in which the parts were arranged, reconnected, and frozen in their net-like metal frame. Johansson then spray painted the connected net a uniform color. Similar in aesthetic to the *Some Assembly Required* series is Johansson's *Engine Bought Separately* series (Figure 6). Here, Johansson used everyday objects from mid-20th-century housewives (Johansson, 2007). While the visual aesthetic of the function was revealed after deconstruction, the true functionality was removed (Johansson, 2007).

► TOM SACHS and JIM GOLDEN

Known as the “knollmaster,” Tom Sachs practices art in a manner that entails hard work, discipline, craftsmanship, and authenticity (Radcliffe, 2016). From 1999 until 2016, Sachs developed an 18-piece collection of sculptures titled *Boombox Retrospective*. These sculptures explore the extraordinary—a concept contrasting that of Michael Johansson's depiction of the ordinary. Through this collection, Sachs presents the definitive hip-hop street culture icon, the boombox. Sachs integrated art and science to experiment with themes of functionality and mythology. The Brooklyn Museum held an installation of the 18 works, with the sculptures continuously playing music and

igniting a sound-filled environment. The work of award-winning photographer Jim Golden delivers a similar retro appeal (see Figure 7). Golden's compositions of food are artfully arranged and pungently bold in color. While not knolling in the same manner as works by Sachs, Golden's photography presents the same strong yet simple aesthetic. Spending more than 20 years in the advertisement industry, Golden has mastered still life and product photography (Golden, 2017).

► BENNY LAM

Hong Kong-based photographer Benny Lam walks along streets searching for scenes that are not usually noticed by the common eye. His *Subdivided Flats* series documents Hong Kong's dilemma of space (Figures 8 and 9). Lam explained that 40 square feet could be the size of someone's kitchen, toilet, 57 tiled sheets of A4 paper, or the size of someone's entire home. The spatial constraints of these homes compel dwellers to do everything from their beds: washing vegetables, bathing, play, and work (Prix Pictet, n.d.). Lam's images help us visualize the close relationships that we have with our everyday objects and materials. The angles at which he photographs prompt viewers to contemplate proximity and juxtaposition.



Figure 8. Benny Lam, *Subdivided Flats* (untitled), 2012. Photograph.

Connections to the National Visual Arts Standards

This section offers suggestions for how this instructional resource connects to the National Visual Arts Standards. Definitions and explanations are from the National Coalition for Arts Standards (2014) handbook.

ARTISTIC PROCESS—CREATING

Definition: conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work

Anchor Standards: (1) organize and develop artistic ideas and work and (2) generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

Enduring Understanding: We can analyze an object, form, or image and propose ways to enhance the viewer's interaction.

Essential Question: How do artists consider the environment and/or materials around them in their artworks?

ARTISTIC PROCESS—PRESENTING

Definition: interpreting and sharing artistic work

Anchor Standards: (1) develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation and (2) convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Artists select and curate items based on techniques, methods, or venues.

Essential Question: How does the arrangement and juxtaposition of objects suggest meaning?



Figure 9. Benny Lam, *Subdivided Flats* (untitled), 2012. Photograph.

ARTISTIC PROCESS—RESPONDING

Definition: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning

Anchor Standards: (1) perceive and analyze artistic work and (2) apply criteria to artistic work

Enduring Understanding: When preparing artwork for presentation artists consider the ways in which the viewer will interact with the image.

Essential Question: What qualities affect or change our perception and/or response to an artwork?

ARTISTIC PROCESS—CONNECTING

Definition: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

Anchor Standards: (1) relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding and (2) synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art

Enduring Understanding: Viewers “read” a piece of art by analyzing the formal elements of art and principles of design.

Essential Question: How can the viewer “read” a piece of art or image like text?

Suggested Studio Activities

Grades K–5: 100 Items

In elementary school, starting in kindergarten, students learn to count and categorize. A fun activity for students in kindergarten is to search an environment and find 100 items that are in the same category (hair bands, candies, buttons, etc.). To expand this activity, students can share their collections with peers. This activity could easily turn into a collaborative piece. Students could collectively gather all red objects and glue them to a board, and the next day they could collect orange objects. After going through the rainbow, students could form an assemblage similar to Jim Golden's *Barrette Collection* (refer to Figure 7).

Grades 6–12: Learning About Ourselves Through Material Culture

In the secondary art classroom, integrating technology and social media is both meaningful and engaging for students. Flat-lay compositions are commonly found in social media–based advertising. Using the cross-disciplinary theme of visual literacy, students will create compositions while considering the ways that the viewers will read the images. They will be challenged to make new relationships between objects that are juxtaposed within a composition. Students can curate their compositions based on a theme or create a spontaneous composition in the style of photographer Jason Travis (refer to Figure 3).

Web-Based Resources for Further Investigation

Jane Bennett. "Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter." <https://vimeo.com/29535247>

Things Organized Neatly. This blog, created by Austin Radcliffe, features knolling artists and published a print book in 2016.

The book contains the shorts of 14 artists, with accompanying full-page photos of work: <http://thingsorganizedneatly.tumblr.com>

Tom Sachs. *Ten Bullets*.

- The short film was created for any past, current, or future studio assistants of Sachs. The specific rules, including Sachs's coined line, "always be knolling (ABK)," entail efficiency. www.youtube.com/watch?v=49p1JVLHUos
- Bullet 8 "Always Be Knolling." www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-CTkbHnpNQ

Emily Jean Hood and Amelia M. Kraehe. "Creative Matter: New Materialism in Art Education Research, Teaching, and Learning." <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2017.1274196>

Barry Rosenthal. *Found in Nature* photography series. Rosenthal's wide range of innovational compositions from found objects are inspirational to say the least. <http://barryrosenthal.com/found-in-nature>

Michael Johansson's work. www.michaeljohansson.com/works.html

Jason Travis. *Persona* series. www.jasontravisphoto.com/persona ■

Author Note

This IR is an outgrowth of an assignment given in my undergraduate studies in art education at Towson University.

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