DEPERSONALISED THINGS: PARADOXES OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXHIBIT

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Abstract: In ethnographic research into material culture, things are described primarily as signs of social phenomena, while the things themselves remain in the background. Even in the case of 'object-orientated' research in the museum, the material object appears as an element of a taxonomy, or as a model of the techniques of making and being in a local tradition, or as a representative of the cultural contexts from which it was taken. The very fact that things are preserved in museums in the format of a collection casts a shadow over a thing's uniqueness, since its singular nature does not fit into the collection as a whole, in that every object is indeed a 'world of individuality'. The article examines ways in which museum ethnography might escape from the parameters of its native anonymous and depersonalising discourse. A 'biographical' focus is proposed as an alternative to this, allowing objects' subjectivity and individuality to be seen. A thing's uniqueness is manifested not only in its biography, but also in its physical nature: its material, form, construction, finish, colour, weight, smell, etc. Close attention on the part of museum ethnography to particular people and the unique objects associated with them allows an elucidation of those details and peculiarities without which a culture as a whole cannot be understood.

Keywords: ethnographical museum, anonymous discourse, biography of things, singularity, subjectivity, museum collections.

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Depersonalised Things: Paradoxes of the Ethnographic Exhibit

In ethnographic research into material culture, things are described primarily as signs of social phenomena, while the things themselves remain in the background. Even in the case of 'object-orientated' research in the museum, the material object appears as an element of a taxonomy, or as a model of the techniques of making and being in a local tradition, or as a representative of the cultural contexts from which it was taken. The very fact that things are preserved in museums in the format of a collection casts a shadow over a thing's uniqueness, since its singular nature does not fit into the collection as a whole, in that every object is indeed a 'world of individuality'. The article examines ways in which museum ethnography might escape from the parameters of its native anonymous and depersonalising discourse. A 'biographical' focus is proposed as an alternative to this, allowing objects' subjectivity and individuality to be seen. A thing's uniqueness is manifested not only in its biography, but also in its physical nature: its material, form, construction, finish, colour, weight, smell, etc. Close attention on the part of museum ethnography to particular people and the unique objects associated with them allows an elucidation of those details and peculiarities without which a culture as a whole cannot be understood.

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'Typical' things

During a visit to an exhibition of folk costume organised by art historians at an art gallery, my attention was caught by the labels accompanying the exhibits of clothing, accessories, equipment and other typical ethnographical objects. The organisers of the exhibition had followed the structure of labelling usual in art galleries, which reflects the perspective and priorities of the art historian. They all began with the maker's name. Since the organisers had not troubled to adapt the structure of the labels to the ethnographical thrust of the exhibition, in this case they all began identically: 'Anonymous'. In fact, in many cases it would have been quite possible to establish the maker's name (or the previous owner's name) and label the objects accordingly, but that would have contradicted the very spirit of the ethnographical museum, which is orientated towards the typicality of things, which does not sit well with the concept of authorship. So far there has been hardly any interest taken in the problem of the anonymity of museum ethnography, although James Clifford did draw attention to the anonymity of exhibits, speaking of nameless craftsmen in the ethnographical museum, whereas in the art

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gallery objects are regarded as the works of particular individuals [Clifford 1986: 242].

The aim of this article is to reassess both the anonymous discourse that has established itself in ethnographical museums, and the practice of dealing with things only as examples of a taxonomy or as typical manifestations of ethnic traditions, and to propose a 'biographical' focus that would allow us to see subjectivity and individuality in them.

The depersonalising approach to things has predominated in the majority of ethnographical museums to this day: they are interested in typical things that reflect the general phenomena of a culture and which may be described as social, ethnic, industrial, ritual, artistic and so on. Unique things, characterised by singularity,[1] that is, those that have their own inimitable biography that cannot be reduced to an average type, remain as a rule outside the sphere of interests of museum ethnography. A research strategy so typical of the museum as cataloguing, which forms a long series of things, often deprives each particular thing of its meaning and, consequently, its reality, as Tatiana Tsivyan has observed [Tsivyan 2001: 126]. To paraphrase Mandelstam, one might say that museum objects 'have been ejected from their biographies like billiard balls from a pocket' [Mandelstam 1987: 74].[2] This is where the line is drawn that separates the interests of the ethnographical museum, with its passion for creating typologies, on the one hand, and ethnography, understood as the science of details [Geertz 1973; Chesnov 1999], on the other. Indeed, the habit of collecting 'typical things' was already present in the first ethnographical museums of Russia,[3] and one traditional motivation for not acquiring ethnographical objects is that objects 'of that sort' are already present in the museum collections. It should nevertheless be noted that being typical was not understood as being part of a series; the latter often served as an argument for refusing to acquire an object, and this was publicly announced more than once: 'The ethnographical museum does not acquire or exhibit standard mass-produced objects of everyday life' [Baranova 1981: 34]. In Europe in the middle of the 1980s there was a certain disillusionment with the sort of material research that saw an object only as a category, and not as a thing per se (cf. the extremely telling title of Daniel

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1 I use the term 'singularity' in order to stress two aspects of a thing's nature: 1) the relative character of its uniqueness, which as such is ready to be transformed into something general, if we speak of continuance in time; 2) the character of the thing as event, treating singularity in the spirit of Gilles Deleuze.

2 This phrase refers to Mandelstam's discussion of the person in a novel: 'A person without a biography cannot be the thematic axis of a novel, and a novel, in turn, is inconceivable without an interest in a particular person's fate — the plot and all that accompanies it' [Mandelstam 1987: 75].

3 For example, this was one of the aims of the Dashkov Ethnographical Museum, one of the departments of the famous Rumyantsev Museum [Shangina 1994: 15].

Miller's well-known work, *Artefacts as Categories* [Miller 1985]), first of all in ethno-archaeology, not ethnography (see, for example: [Miller, Tilley 1984; Miller 1985] and Dan Hick's critique [Hicks 2010: 53]).

In the broadest sense this is a reflexion of the anthropocentric perspective from which things are always regarded as 'evidence of something', and can tell you about absolutely anything, but very seldom about themselves. Even in the case of so-called 'object-orientated' museum research, objects appear only as representatives of some classificatory series or cultural context. Recently Sergei Sokolovskiy drew attention to this peculiarity of the museum viewpoint (as preferring a comparative-typological approach to the analysis of a thing or a collection, within which each particular object is regarded as a bundle of signs relevant to the comparison). He noted that 'from this point of view a particular thing interests the ethnographer as evidence of something else (the history of a culture, ethnic contacts, migrations, influences and so forth) but not in itself. It may be said that the encounter with the thing in all its physical materiality does not take place here at all, or rather it takes place within a strictly limited mode of examination, in which the thing is immediately reduced to a unit in a typological series of similar things. A thing's uniqueness (and in the literal sense all things are unique) is either discarded under such an examination, or (when it is impossible to fit the thing into a series) regarded as an enigma and a stimulus to a further search for parallels' [Sokolovskiy 2016: 15–16]. Even when a thing does enter a museum storeroom, that does not guarantee its material individuality any priority; rather the reverse — it begins to function as a sign of the social. Essentially, the museification of material objects means, as Zbyněk Stránský said, a shift in the centre of gravity from 'things as such' to their 'museum significance', i.e. their memorial and cultural value [Ananyev 2014: 78]. In a certain sense an object's mode of existence in the museum presupposes the suppression of those of its important physical properties that determine the pragmatics of its use in the natural environment. And, according to Albert Baiburin, the very idea of using the thing as set of signs is one of the ideas that are essential for museums to come into being and function [Baiburin 2004].

The same depersonalisation of things that characterises the object in an exhibition is encountered in museum inventories. How exactly the thing was created, what 'resistance' from his material the craftsman met with when he was making it and how this determined the future interrelations between man and thing, whether the thing outlived its owner or otherwise — this all needs to be known in order to understand the 'nature' of each particular thing. However, this information, with rare exceptions, is missing from the legend and remains outside the scope of museum research and the

representation of material culture. When I speak of things as signs, I mean not their semiotic functions within 'their own' culture, but things as signs of that culture for the modern observer. Their place in the modern cultural context forces exhibits to be examined rather as some abstract types, as manifestations of cultural phenomena, than as inimitable artefacts. In its ultimate expression, this perception of exhibits begins to resemble what modern archaeologists are criticised for when they study 'not things as such, but things as traces' [Joyce 2012: 128].

Looking at a thing as an example of a particular class makes the determination of its value problematic. Value is, indeed, perhaps the least obvious property of an ethnographic object, since, unlike, for example, a work of 'high' art or a historic relic, the value attached to a bread shovel, a bast shoe or a pot is entirely conventional in character, and there is moreover agreement about its value within an evident minority of the museum community. The concept of so-called 'low', i.e. peasant or non-European culture, which is not allowed to be represented in the 'gallery of world masterpieces', drags behind many colleagues who are not ethnographers like a train. The ethnographical museum, or more precisely its acquisitions committee, encounters this position at the official level when it is compelled on every occasion to demonstrate to experts of the Central Purchasing Commission (on which there are no ethnographers) both the necessity of acquiring such and such an artefact and the basis for valuing it — not to mention people outside the profession who describe ethnographical collections as an assemblage of 'rags and spinning wheels', if not as 'old sticks'.

One way of rejecting the transformation of the ethnographical object into an 'example' is to reconceptualise it, by recognising it, for example, as a work of 'folk art'. This has already happened in the history of the RME, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, when village clothing, equipment, furniture, ornaments, etc. were displayed as works of folk art under pressure from ideological instructions to show contemporary life while avoiding the connotations of 'old traditions'. Similar tendencies may be observed in the European museum politics of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, giving James Clifford the occasion to ask why many anthropological museums have recently started to display some of their objects as masterpieces [Clifford 1988: 220]. Similar processes are characteristic of the museums of Asia (for example, cases of mass 'transfer' of collections of Korean traditional culture into the category of works of art in the 1960–1980s described in [Ko 2004]). The most outstanding example is the opening of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, the successor to two ethnographical museums that are no longer open, the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. In an effort to leave

behind the 'politically incorrect', i.e. ethnographical, display of non-European cultures and to break with the colonial heritage by including their most outstanding achievements in the history of world art, this museum transformed its extremely rich ethnographical collections into an art collection. The consequence of this aesthetic turn was the decontextualisation of ethnographic representation, a breaking of the links between things and everyday life and their functions: cultural contexts, and with them peoples, disappeared from the exhibition, giving place to a gallery of masterpieces of non-European art.[1] A way out of the situation is found by combining the aesthetic approach with the anthropological, and not by opposing them, since neither on its own guarantees a better understanding of an alien culture [Clifford 1988: 121; Grognet 2010: 179].

The reductionist nature of the collection

Another manifestation of the de-individualisation of things as a result of the museum's natural reductionism is the museum's collecting activity itself, through which the collections are obtained and composed. One peculiarity of a collection is that its properties and significance as a certain whole are greater than its parts and cannot therefore be reduced to them. As Baiburin has noted, 'It was observed long ago that while each individual object in any collection may not have any value, a collection made up of "useless" objects may attain an enormous value' [Baiburin 2004]. At the same time it does not matter so much what sort of collection it is: whether it is the personality of the collector or owner that unites its components, or whether it is, in accordance with museum tradition, the instrumental use of this concept (for example, a collection of spinning wheels, a collection of ceramics, a collection of means of transport, etc.) — in every case we are dealing with a hierarchy in which the part is subordinate to the whole, which means that the uniqueness of each of the things that compose it is pushed into the background. And if we keep sight of the fact that any collection is a result, determined operationally, locally, or fortuitously, the costs of the collection format become evident. In this sense the ethnographical museum appears as a model of reductionism, since museum value is represented for it not by unique things with their own inimitable trajectory through life, but by those which are typical, representative, and reflect the general phenomena of culture. Things that are 'unusual' in their form, material, construction or other aspects do not usually find a place in museum collections. Michael Herzfeld has spoken of museum workers' allergy 'to improvisational *forms* in general, since *they resisted the kind* of *museological*

[1] For more detail on the Musée du quai Branly see: [Conte 2007; Viatte 2007].

reductionism that *served* the *goals* of *national consolidation*' [Herzfeld 2012: 50].

It is obvious that the significance and semantics of a collection cannot be reduced to its components, and not only because the whole is something bigger than the sum of its parts, but also, by contrary, because the singular nature of things cannot be accommodated within this whole, insofar as each thing is indeed 'a world of individuality'. Even considering that the thing itself is made up of smaller components, these components, taken one by one, may turn out to be of patently greater significance than the physical object that they compose.[1]

The critique of the reductionist nature of the collection is by no means a call to reject any form of orderly classification of things — I am far from sanctifying the new, 'flat' ontology with its ignorance of constructed hierarchies and boundaries between nature and culture, the living and the inert, the material and the immaterial. I only want to draw attention to the instrumental and temporary character of classifications of the world of objects, which serve towards an extremely convenient identification and analysis of only one, or only a few sides of the life of things. In the end, being in a collection is only a part, or rather a continuation of the biography of a thing. And if we are to speak of the instrumental use of the concept of the collection, then, insofar as the very preservation of the collection in a museum presupposes operations to contrast and juxtapose the exhibits and to place them accordingly in classificatory series on the basis of one relevant characteristic or another, in this case the order of things within the museum may itself be evaluated as the result of knowing them.[2] That is not all: as Boas thought, the very act of classification in turn communicates to the visitor a particular theory of material culture [Jacknis 1986: 90]. But do such theories bring us any closer to an understanding of an actual thing?

Recently the conceptualisation of the museum object solely as a source of information about what lies 'beyond the thing' has been criticised by such theoreticians of museum studies as Zbyněk Stránský, Friedrich Weidacher and Soichiro Tsuruta [Dolák 2018: 30], but the rejection of the object's singularity and its right to exist still occupies a strong position in Russian museum ethnography. In a certain sense the recognition of the possibility that a thing might have its own biography raises the question of its subjectivity and

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1 Sokolovskiy gives the example of the postulates of modern physics, according to which waves are something bigger than the objects that they compose [Sokolovskiy 2016: 23].

2 As Smirnov noted over a hundred years ago, 'things must not be arranged in that order in which the course of history has placed them, but in a different order that emerges from their inner relationships and is indicated by scholarship' [Smirnov 1901: 229].

even agency. This would have meant for the 'classical' ethnographical museum a recognition of its own illegitimacy as an institution, in that the activity of the museum is based on control over the movements of things and their significances and thus presupposes an asymmetry in the relations between people and artefacts.

It is already insufficient to speak of objects only as subjects, stressing their agency and intentionality. The very concept of the subject, as Readings penetratingly observed [Readings 1997: 115], obscures the unique nature of a particular thing. Moreover, the agency of a thing (its capacity for action) is, in Ingold's opinion, an utterly enigmatic property [Ingold 2010: 163]. Therefore, perhaps, the use of the term 'singularity' appears more accurate, allowing an emphasis on a thing's individuality. However that might be, the approach that maintains that only singular, unique things really exist, the proponents of which are called populationists by M. DeLanda,[1] is gaining popularity in the social sciences. Mikhail Epstein has proposed the term 'realogy' for the description of the nature of singular things. According to the definition in the *Projective Philosophical Dictionary*, 'realogy perceives reality not only in generalised concepts and not even in more concrete images, but in singular things, and seeks the means for the best description and interpretation of innumerable haecceities. The singular exists, which means that it is substantial' [Epstein, Tulchinskiy 2003: 346].

'Material' uniqueness

But how does material uniqueness manifest itself, and how is it to be described? Appadurai suggests following the things themselves, since their meaning is implied in their forms, uses and trajectories [Appadurai 1986: 5]. Boas might have quarrelled with this assertion, since, although he supported the study of particularities, because 'in ethnology all is individuality' [Jacknis 1986: 79], he nevertheless considered (probably in defiance of evolutionist constructions in museum exhibitions) that the interest of the anthropologist should be shifted from the external form to the significance of things, because the exterior itself (the form) is deceptive.

It may be that a flat ontology that makes no distinction between a thing's relevant and irrelevant features could be useful in this case for the 'anthropological scanning', so to speak, of a material object. Then an account of every crack, scratch, stain, dirt and deformation is important for the understanding of a specific object. The above-mentioned singularity of an object is precisely the recognition of the

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[1] DeLanda notes that 'for the typologist the type (εἶδος) is real, and variation is illusory, whereas for the populationist the (average) type is an abstraction and only the variation is real. There can hardly be any two views of nature that are so far apart' [DeLanda 2017: 40].

unique nature of an object that is not unique. Stanisław Lem noted the gaps in the study of the material world that result from the neglect of seemingly unimportant details: 'The sciences of the time held, more or less, to the following schema: if we wish to know the mechanism of a clock, the fact of whether or not there are bacteria on its cogs and counterweights has not the least significance, either for the structure or for the kinematics of its works. Bacteria certainly cannot influence the movement of a clock!' [Lem 1999: 199].

One can of course dispute the assertion that microbes or spots on the surface have any significant effect on the clock's physical characteristics, but it would be hard not to agree that it is often precisely the stains, scratches and other distinguishing marks on the 'body' of a thing that make it visually unique and bring it closer to a human being. In this respect it is notable how in folklore the depersonalisation and identity of characters become a classificatory sign of their non-human nature. For example, in the Eastern Slavs' rituals around childbirth many of the adults' actions were directed towards discovering a 'sign', or 'sign of parenthood' — the birthmarks, moles and other features that make the infant corporeally individual and inimitable, whereas their absence was an omen of the infant's death.[1] In other words, the lack of distinguishing features is a sort of sign of the absence of the person, and likewise of the thing itself.

The material individuality of an object, if we are speaking of traditional culture, takes shape from the very beginning, i.e. from when it is made. As Tatiana Shchepanskaya (using the theory of tradition developed by Kirill Chistov) rightly points out, 'literal and exact reproduction, copying, or multiplication is a property of the industrial type of culture with its means of mass production and mass information' [Shchepanskaya 2011: 53]. By contrast, inherent in the making and use of an object in a traditional culture is the principle of variation, which acts as a mechanism for the translation of culture [Ibid.: 54].

Once a thing is made, its life-story is as a rule only just beginning. It changes constantly over time, which leaves its marks on it, and these become, in a certain sense the visual evidence of its biography,

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1 Folkloric texts contain specific extensions of the motif or recognition by birthmarks. Thus in one version of the folk epic Dobrynya's Wedding, Dobrynya's mother recognises her son, who has returned after a long absence, by the birthmark on his cheek: 'Recognise me by my right cheek. | On my right cheek I have three signs, | I have three signs of my parenthood' [SRNG 1976: 308]. In stories on the subject of 'the cunning art' [SUS 1979: 118, no. 325], the son who has been apprenticed to a sorcerer can only return to his father if the latter recognises his child; in the story from Alexander Afanasyev's collection, this recognition takes place thanks to a 'little fly' (mushka) on the son's right cheek: 'When you walk past the young men, take note: a little fly will keep settling on my right cheek. The master will ask again, "Have your recognised your son?", and you point at me' [Afanasyev 2014: 590]. In this context compare mushka in the sense of 'artificial birthmark'.

which consists not only of the change in the thing's social status and in semantic shifts, but also of the dynamics of the transformation of its material characteristics — fragmentation, losses, deformation. There have been many examples in museum practice when, after an exhibit's number had been lost, the only means of identifying it was the description of its state of preservation in its record. Besides, the uniqueness of a thing need not be only visual: it may also be functional, that is, manifest itself in the specifics of its use: a pot with a hole in the bottom could stop being used for its normal purpose and become a 'chicken god',[1] fulfilling an essentially semiotic function; an embroidered holiday shirt, faded and frayed with long use, is excluded from holiday life and becomes an everyday garment, and so on.

An important physical feature such as size is also a most important manifestation of a thing's individuality. In the *System for the Scholarly Description of Museum Objects* issued by the Russian Ethnographical Museum, which sets out a general method for the attribution of ethnographical objects, Dmitriev notes that 'recording the dimensions of an object allows it both to be described and recognised, and also, if necessary, reconstructed, [and therefore] in museum conditions the parameters of measurement often acquire a primary significance when an object is to be picked out from a series of similar objects' [Dmitriev 2017: 46–47]. He cites an occasion, connected with the flood of 1924, when many museum objects that had been stored at that time in the basement had lost their inventory numbers. In this situation it was the exact parameters of the objects, preserved in their documentary records, that allowed them to be identified [Ibid.: 47]. Moreover, an object's dimensions may be an indication of its intended use, its date, or the place where it was made or existed [Ibid.: 48]. Hence the requirement for accuracy in measuring museum objects.[2]

The extent of the object in space, which allows exact measuring procedures to be applied, has served as a basis for classifying its museum description as a form of scientific activity, which implies that the general rules for scientific research apply to it: 'Measurement is one of the obligatory techniques for studying natural, social and cultural phenomena, including material objects, those of museum significance among them. Presenting the properties of real objects in the form of numerical values is one of the most important methods of empirical research, effected by quantitative methods'

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1 [A talisman used for the protection of poultry: see W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999, p. 221. — Trans.]

2 For example Kajtag embroidery varies in size from 100×50 cm to 120×60 cm, so that other dimensions are a reason to consider whether it is Kajtag embroidery that we have before us, or a model, a replica, a souvenir, etc. (my thanks to Evgenia Guliaeva for this communication).

[Dmitriev 2017: 46]. Furthermore, research into the material object has to start from its measurement, since it is 'the first operational model of study, which is fundamental to all subsequent research operations' [Ibid.].[1] But it must still be admitted that the physical reality of things remains little studied outside theoretical discussion, and if it is examined, then only as a peripheral part of the analysis.[2]

In a wider perspective the measurement of a thing corresponds not only to its identification, but also to its inclusion in an existing order of things and to the determination thereby of its place in that order. In traditional measurement practices the world is systematised and obtains stability thanks to the commensurality of all its components. At the same time, measurement functions as an instrument for objectifying the material world and alienating it from humanity. Measuring a thing is drawing a line between it and the human being, to separate the two.

'Taking the measurements' of an object for museum ethnography is sometimes the only opportunity of 'acquiring' it, or rather of acquiring its representation in the form of recorded spatial parameters. This is the case in an ethnographer's fieldwork, when measurements are taken of objects which for various reasons (their owners' reluctance to part with them, the impossibility of moving buildings or natural objects into the museum space, etc.) cannot become part of museum collections. Here a thing's numerical parameters become its representatives in the museum space.

It goes without saying that it is not only an individual exhibit, but the collection itself that can be seen as an inimitable assemblage of things; however, as a rule, this uniqueness is interpreted only as a projection of the individuality of its owner or collector, a continuation of his personality. This situation may be suitably described with the concept of the 'distributed personality', which emphasises its composite, heterogeneous character and the possibility of 'delegating' human characteristics to the world of objects, which can interact with it, that is, the 'distribution', outside the singular human body, of significant components of the personality in an environment beyond the limits of the body. One person can thereby have an effect on others, albeit deferred in time, via this world of objects [Gell 1998: 104, 231]. Daniel Miller calls this distribution of the personality among things the material subject, understanding this as a more concrete process — the extrapolation

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1 The author identifies a whole series of research questions which dimensions may help to answer. Some of these are: identifying the use and functions of the object; in certain cases, determining its date; narrowing down the place where it was made or used; identifying replicas, models, maquettes, votive images and even copies [Dmitriev 2017: 48].

2 On the incapacity for connecting material science with material culture and materiality in greater detail, see: [Hodder 2012].

of personality onto the things that belong to it [Miller 2005: 8]. Vladimir Toporov examines a series of mythological traditions in which the idea, for example of a house as a sort of external alienated body of its owner, continuing his / her own inalienable body, is relevant [Toporov 1983: 255, note 58]. One might note in response that another, diametrically opposed conclusion is equally true: a personality may be described as the result of the collection or making of things, as a result of the projection of the assemblage of objects. In such a case things form his / her image and status.

Such a perspective allows things to be examined not statically, but in process, as a continuous event which involves humanity. Ingold, offering an alternative to material agency, recommends focusing not on life in things, but on things in life, which are in constant motion [Hicks 2010: 77]. This motion of objects is accompanied by a change in the ontological status of the personality. A person's gender, social, and generational identities are not only reflected in the things (s)he has made or the things (s)he owns, but require constant support through their making. Compare, for example, this highly typical utterance for a countryman: 'He can make anything for the household. That's the main thing in a man. They're right when they say "If not for bast and birch-bark, the man would fall to bits"' [Fileva 2018: 28]. The distributed character of personality may be literally expressed in archaic notions of the aggregate nature of the human body, for example 'in the peculiarities of the depiction of a human being in archaic art (the potential for the figure to be "taken apart"), and in "linguistic" mythology, cf. the inner form of a series of denominations of the body on the principle of "aggregation, junction, combination"' [Toporov 1983: 255, note 58].

The biography of a thing

The above considerations make one wonder whether the ethnographical museum has lost something very important for the understanding of the nature of a particular object, material culture or, more broadly, culture in general, when it presents its exhibits purely as categories, as abstract types, even if they represent a local tradition. Isn't it time for museum ethnography to renounce, at least in part, the depersonalisation of things, and to recognise the right of each of them to have its own inimitable fate, and to look at the material world itself, in Igor Kopytoff's words, as 'the natural universe of individuation and singularization' [Kopytoff 1986: 64]? From such a perspective a thing without a biography cannot be a museum exhibit, and at the same time a museum is inconceivable without an interest in the fate of individual things.

I shall give only one recent example to demonstrate the importance for museum ethnography of discovering the uniqueness of existence

of a particular thing that has entered the museum. This is the acquisition of a 'typical' home-woven cloth with embroidered edges using decoration with a plot characteristic of the North Russian tradition. There are several hundreds of such cloths in the Russian culture collection of the RME, and from the point of view of museum ethnography the acquisition of yet another might seem superfluous, since it adds nothing new regarding the tradition of production, use, or local peculiarities. It is just another brick in the 'wall' of classificatory series. At the same time the circumstances under which the cloth came to the museum are such that labelling it as typical leads to unavoidable losses in the ethnographical understanding of it. The cloth in question came into its owner's possession several decades ago when she was travelling round the Urals with friends. Descending a mountain river by boat, they were passing some children who were bathing when they heard cries for help: one of the boys had got into a strong current and was drowning. The tourists pulled him out of the water, rendered first aid and carried him to the village. The grateful parents organised a celebratory dinner, at the end of which the people who had saved the boy were solemnly presented with the most significant family treasure — this cloth. Here we encounter a case, in Kopytoff's terminology, of the familial individuation of a thing. Though an object of low value in the commercial sense, typical of the rural population, the cloth in this particular family had become a priceless family relic, with a status connected to the memory of their forefathers. Its specific value was revealed in the situation when it was given as a token of gratitude for saving the child.

This situation provides the ethnographer with rich material for analysing the processes whereby things are personalised within the family. Thereafter, in new hands, the object's former individualisation was lost, and some time later it was given to the museum as an object of little necessity. It is not only the peculiarities of the technique of production, or the subject of the ornament, or the range of colours, etc., that make it unique in the eyes of the ethnographer and a desirable acquisition for the museum, but also the cloth's inimitable history. Alfred Gell calls this the 'biographical' view of the object, focused on the various stages of life that it has 'lived through', presupposing that it should be looked at from a specific temporal perspective, unlike sociology with its so-called 'supra-biographical' approach, which goes outside the temporal framework of an individual object, or, more broadly, social agent [Gell 1998: 10–11].

The existence of a specific thing and its biography is always in a certain sense interwoven with the biography of a person, and produces important milestones in the latter. Irina Sleptsova, analysing the diaries of the peasant P. V. Bugrov, notes the important

place that things occupy in the diary entries. For example, at the end of December 1907 Bugrov compiled 'chronicles' of all the most important events in his life in a separate notebook, beginning in 1898. The second point, after the 'chronicle of births', in which he indicated the days on which all the members of his family were born, and the days on which his father and children died, is 'purchase of things'. This is a list of his most important acquisitions over ten years, with an indication of their cost. This is followed by 'chronicles' of newspapers, jobs, buildings, 'earnings for each year', and the 'chronicle of events', in which he gives a short account of his life-history for those years. The purchase of things is thus included among the most significant events in Bugrov's life [Sleptsova 2018: 10].[1] More than that, the very objects turn into a sort of materialised version of their owner's biography and memory. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, the past is a luxury of the possessor of things, it is impossible to retain memory without them [Sartre 1938: 99].[2]

The autonomy and uniqueness of a thing's life may be revealed when its biography does not entirely coincide with that of its owner. As a rule, either the owner outlives the object or the object outlives the owner. And if the latter case is perceived as the person's parting with his past [Tsivyan 2001: 124], the continuation of the thing's life after its owner's death turns it into a material sign of remembrance of the man. This is true until the thing enters an ethnographical museum and turns into what is essentially a unit that has lost its individuality in an endless series of things.

If we include the biographical focus in the 'ontological turn', the personalisation of the thing becomes its 'personification', which,

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[1] Nikolai Gogol was one of the first to draw attention to the particular role of things in a person's life. In his prose epic *Dead Souls*, the world of things is not self-sufficient or neutral with regard to human beings, but, thanks to its constant connection with them is 'infected with the human factor', and at times reveals the most profound psychological features of its owner, since 'even the inert material of a thing may be a mirror for the mobile human soul' [Toporov 1995: 9]. The inner nature of Gogol's Plyushkin [in *Dead Souls*. — Eds.] unfolds in the character of the things that surround him: old, often practically unnecessary objects witness to a certain disinterest in their owner. Possessing them does not add anything to Plyushkin: their primary function is as a memory of the past, of the things that used to be dear to him. Plyushkin's collection and preservation of a multitude of old things that have a semiotic function makes Plyushkin's house in a certain sense a prototype of a personal museum — the symbol of its owner and of his cultural space.

[2] 'Ils vivent au milieu des legs, des cadeaux et chacun de leurs meubles est un souvenir. Pendulettes, médailles, portraits, coquillages, presse-papiers, paravents, châles. Ils ont des armoires pleines de bouteilles, d'étoffes, de vieux vêtements, de journaux; ils ont tout gardé. Le passé, c'est un luxe de propriétaire. Où donc conserverais-je le mien? On ne met pas son passé dans sa poche; il faut avoir une maison pour l'y ranger. Je ne possède que mon corps; un homme tout seul, avec son seul corps, ne peut pas arrêter les souvenirs; ils lui passent au travers.' [They live in the middle of legacies, presents, and each of their pieces of furniture is a souvenir. Wall clocks, medals, portraits, sea-shells, paperweights, screens, shawls. They have cupboards stuffed with bottles, with fabrics, with old clothes, with magazines; they've conserved it all. The past is the luxury of the proprietor. So when can I preserve mine? You can't put your past in your pocket; you need a house to arrange it in. All I own is my body; a single man, with just his body to his name, cannot halt memories; they surge past him.] [Sartre 1938: 99].

as Viveiros de Castro maintains, is a necessary condition for understanding it, because ‘an object is only an insufficiently interpreted subject’ [de Castro 2014: 26]. Things may possess reason and intention, but this reason and intention are ascribed to them by human beings, it is human reason, which is only accessible to our understanding [Gell 1998: 17]. The thing is an agent only in a certain context, in the presence of the human, it cannot be one by itself. To describe such situations Gell uses the concept of ‘distributed personality’, which goes beyond the limits of the human body, acting as the combination of interactions with other personalities and including the world of objects. In this sense the ethnographical museum is faced with the task of retrieving the human ‘presence’ that bestows subjectivity and individuality on a thing.

The name of a thing

Of course, the individuality of an object is not the same as the individuality of a human being: it is blurred, relative and ascriptive, that is, it becomes such as a result of the presence of human beings, and the application by them of the procedure of distinction and identification. It is also understandable that whatever may be said about the subjectivity of things by representatives of the object-orientated perspective, nevertheless, as Ingold has remarked, no non-human being can ask itself what makes us human (or not human) [Ingold 2010: 165]. This distinction is true of names as well. Vladimir Toporov perceptively noted that one of the principal differences between human beings and things is their names. Indeed, one asks what a thing is called, but what a person’s name is. ‘One does not address a thing (apart from the situation of the “respected wardrobe”, or the inkwell, “companion of my idle life”[1]), one does not call it or call upon it: it is always to hand, always at man’s service, you have but to stretch out your hand. One asks someone else about it, as about a dead person who cannot speak for himself, and even its name is entirely seized and assimilated by man. The difference between a person and a thing is the same as between **to be** and **to have**. A thing’s name is *to be had*, you *have* it. A person’s name *is*’ [Toporov 1994: 34, note 18]. True, this scholar makes one (very cautious) step towards acknowledging the thing’s subjectivity, when he considers the relation, constructed as dialogue in the riddle, between person and thing: ‘The name of the thing is in a way its “little” ego, and at the same time a means, if not of extending “personality” to the world of things, then a least of finding in it some correspondence with the “personality” of the [human. — *D.B.*] Ego,

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[1] [The references are to Chekhov’s play *The Cherry Orchard,* and to Pushkin’s poem ‘To My Inkwell’. Toporov misquotes the latter: it should be ‘companion of my idle thoughts’. — Trans.]

its own inner condition that would open a way for contact with the "personality" of the Ego' [Toporov 1994: 34].[1]

Of course, one might recall instances of things' having been given proper names. This concerns riddles, in which a thing is concealed behind a name, for example: 'What Frol is in the cottage? — A table'; 'Long Makar trotted over the snowdrifts. — A poker'; 'Lean Matvei bends over, a hunchback dog stares in the jug. — A crane by the well' [Mitrofanova 1968: 109, 108, 92]. However, unlike a person, the thing 'hides' behind the name (the whole point of the riddle is that its connection with a particular name is not obvious). If a person's name stresses his / her individuality, allowing him / her to be distinguished from other people, the name of a thing, even though it reveals some deep peculiarity, so to speak, the 'frolity' of the table, the 'malanity' of the mortar, the 'matveity' of the pestle or the 'makarity' of the mop, indicates the uniqueness only of a kind of thing, and not the thing itself in all its inimitability. Any table could be Frol, but not, say, the floor; any mortar could be Malanya, but not a tub, any pestle Matvei, but not an axe, any poker Makar, but not the tongs.[2] Here the riddle is an example of the denial of

[1] In the literary tradition, a thing losing its name and being consequently depersonalised, evokes existential horror in people: 'J'appuie ma main sur la banquette, mais je la retire précipitamment: ça existe. Cette chose sur quoi je suis assis, sur quoi j'appuyais ma main s'appelle une banquette. Ils l'ont faite tout exprès pour qu'on puisse s'asseoir, ils ont pris du cuir, des ressorts, de l'étoffe, ils se sont mis au travail, avec l'idée de faire un siège et quand ils ont eu fini, c'était ça qu'ils avaient fait. Ils ont porté ça ici, dans cette boîte, et la boîte roule et cabote à présent, avec ses vitres tremblantes, et elle porte dans ses flancs cette chose rouge. Je murmure : c'est une banquette, un peu comme un exorcisme. Mais le mot reste sur mes lèvres : il refuse d'aller se poser sur la chose. Elle reste ce qu'elle est, avec sa peluche rouge, milliers de petites pattes rouges, en l'air, toutes raides, de petites pattes mortes. Cet énorme ventre tourné en l'air, sanglant, ballonné — boursouflé avec toutes ses pattes mortes, ventre qui flotte dans cette boîte, dans ce ciel gris, ce n'est pas une banquette. Ça pourrait tout aussi bien être un âne mort, par exemple, ballonné par l'eau et qui flotte à la dérive, le ventre en l'air dans un grand fleuve gris, un fleuve d'inondation; et moi je serais assis sur le ventre de l'âne et mes pieds tremperaient dans l'eau claire. Les choses se sont délivrées de leurs noms. Elles sont là, grotesques, têtues, géantes et ça paraît imbécile de les appeler des banquettes ou de dire quoi que ce soit sur elles: je suis au milieu des Choses, les innommables. Seul, sans mots, sans défenses, elles m'environnent, sous moi, derrière moi, au-dessus de moi. Elles n'exigent rien, elles ne s'imposent pas: elles sont là' [I put my hand on the seat, but swiftly remove it: the seat exists. The thing that I am sitting on and putting my hand on is called a seat. They made it so that one could sit down: they took leather, springs, cloth, they set to work with the idea of making somewhere to sit, and when they finished, that was what they had made. They carried it here, in this box, and the box rolls and coasts right now, with its shaking windows, holding this red thing on its flanks. I mutter: this is a seat — a little like an exorcism. But the word rests on my lips: it refuses to attach itself to the object. It remains what it is, with its red plush, its thousands of little red paws, in the air, totally rigid, its little dead paws. This huge stomach rotated into the air, bleeding, ballooning out — bombastic with all its dead paws, its stomach floating in this box, this grey sky: this is no seat. It could just as well be a dead donkey, for example, ballooning with water, buoyed up and floating, stomach in the air in a huge grey river, a river in flood; and I would be sitting on the donkey's stomach with my feet dipped in the clear water. Things have liberated themselves from their names. They are simply there, grotesque, stubborn, larger than life, and it would be insane to call them seats or to say what that might be upon them; I am in the middle of Things, which cannot be named. Alone, with no names, with no defences, they surround me, under me, behind me, below me. They demand nothing, they do not impose; they are simply there.] [Sartre 1938: 178–179].

[2] Mandelstam characterised the relationship between thing and word using the metaphor of body and soul, which are relatively autonomous in relation to each other: 'The living word does not denote an

singularity: the answer is not a particular thing with an inimitable nature, but a kind of things. On a more abstract level the very word 'thing' is notable for a contradiction, which Tatiana Tsivyan has aptly termed 'the paradox of enantiosemy'. It contains opposite meanings: *thing* as a particular object in the physical world, perceptible by the senses, and also *thing* as an indefinite pronoun, as something impalpable and immaterial, that loses its status as an object [Tsivyan 2001: 125–126].[1]

Conclusion

It is not only the exhibits, but the museum ethnographers too (or rather their relationship with the objects, as manifested in the anonymity of labels and explanations usual in the museum tradition) who have found themselves in a situation where anonymous discourse predominates. But still, any explanation of the exhibits always reflects the position of the person who wrote it, and therefore does not exclude alternative labels. In other words, there is always an intellectual gap between the label and the exhibit that it explains: the authors describe not only the actual object being shown, but also their own idea of the object or phenomenon. In this sense one might agree with the position of J. Pedro Lorente, who insisted, as a fundamental requirement of critical museology, that the labels of an exhibition should be signed, 'because that is the only way of breaking away from the institutional and anonymous discourse that has established itself in museums' [Lorente 2011: 61]. In practice this means leaving the anonymous space and changing explanations and labels as a genre in the direction of 'subjectivisation' and 'personalisation'. In the first case (subjectivisation), the very fact that explanations and annotations have authors indicates the incompleteness and relativity of ethnographic knowledge, thereby signifying the prospects of ethnography as a science. Secondly, it draws attention to the fact that museum knowledge is not an abstract, faceless value, but that there is an actual person behind every text who is responsible for the particular ethnographical information that the text contains. Typologically this may be compared with the well-known edict of Peter I requiring icon-

object, but chooses freely, as if for a habitation, one or another objective significance, materiality, the body it likes. And the word wanders freely around the thing, like the soul around a body that it has left, but not forgotten' [Mandelstam 1987: 42]. Aleksei Losev has another view of the name and the thing; for him a thing's name is its 'germ of meaning, which actively forces the thing to appear and grow, although it is not itself the thing, and in order to succeed already presumes a material otherness' [Losev 1993: 832–833].

[1] 'The word *thing* functions like the indefinite pronoun *something*. In other words, the thing loses its materiality, becomes dissociated and impalpable, and loses those very features that make it *a thing*. And it is only one step from *something* to *nothing*, which is clearly expressed in the semiotic path of the word "thing" in English: *thing → some-thing → no-thing*' [Tsivyan 2001: 125–126].

painters to sign their work, with the aim of increasing their personal responsibility for the 'ideological conformity' of their work.

One reason for the ethnographical museum's preference for typical things is the very nature of its collecting and exhibiting activity, which is basically representational. The majority of public museums were founded with the idea of presenting not so much the things themselves as the cultures and peoples from whom they had been alienated. Being representative, the exhibits 'sacrificed' their individuality for the sake of displaying the cultures of the most diverse ethnic groups. The museum framework for research into material culture did itself materialise and 'freeze' ethnic and cultural distinctions. Even though such abstract categories as 'people', 'ethnos' or 'ethnic culture' are being marginalised in the current professional discourse, the museum still retains its status as an institution for preserving / creating ethnic identity, subject to a great extent to outside pressure from various communities, and satisfying their need to describe their identities in ethnic categories [Golovnev 2012: 6; Guliaeva 2020].

The departure from anonymous discourse is connected with the critique of ethnographical presentism that views things only as categories or as some traces of general social phenomena, and means looking at 'things in life, and not life in things' [Hicks 2010: 77, 82]. The modern ethnographical museum must focus on specific people and the inimitable objects associated with them, attention to which will allow the elucidation of those details in particular, without which it is impossible to understand culture as a whole.

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