

Object Lesson Brainstorming Questions

Please print out this document **before** starting your Object Lesson exercise so that the guiding questions are in front of you while you are observing your object and taking notes.

These questions are lightly edited from anthropologist Joseph Dumit's article, "[*How Is the World in "It" and How Is "It" in the World?*](#)" They serve to guide you in brainstorming about the object at hand. You do not need to respond to all of these questions in your notes but do keep track of which dimensions and specific questions seem most relevant to your energy ethnography, which questions seem the most vexing to address, and which you want to dig into during your research.

In the ~2 hours that you do your object lesson, reflect on these questions and take notes of your responses. Remember, do not do supplemental research during this exercise like Googling. This is an exercise for you to grapple with your own observations, knowledges, assumptions, and beliefs.

Material dimensions: What materials are involved in its production and maintenance? Where have these materials come from? How are they disposed of? What hazards are considered among these materials? What are the histories, sciences, and political dimensions of these materials? How do these help constitute it?

Context and situatedness: Where does it appear in the world? How does it appear and next to what or in what? What activities or ways of life enable one to come across it? What kinds of audiences is it addressed to? Who is excluded in these addresses? When can it appear? What is the rhythm of its appearance?

Labor: How is it produced and who is involved in its production? Are there stages in its production? Where has it traveled to and from? What are the histories of its productions? Who maintains these processes of production? Where are they maintained? How is it used and how is using it seen as labor, or not? What forms of labor and work incorporate it or make use of it? Is it used up? If not, how is it passed on, transferred, communicated? What routes do these processes take? What kinds of actors (human and nonhuman) are involved, and what kinds are excluded?

Political dimensions: What kinds of local, national, and international bodies claim jurisdiction over it? What bodies play a part in approving it (e.g., lobbyists, patents, corporate sponsorship, etc.)? What are the histories of regulations concerning it? How do these regulations help constitute it? How is it understood in terms of political positions in the world? How can we articulate the ways it is understood with political discourses? How is it hegemonic—in what ways can we see it as marshaling our consent to dominant orders? What kinds of legislation affect it? How do political considerations make use of it? What are the political positions as seen through the lens of this artifact (they often vary by artifact and moment)? How does this matter?

Technological dimensions: What kinds of technologies and machines enable it to be produced and maintained? What technologies are joined with it? Who has access to these machines and technologies? What are their histories? What sorts of information technologies are involved? What are the political, economic, bodily, labor, and historical dimensions of these technologies? How do they help constitute it?

Economic dimensions: The process as commodity: how is it marketed, purchased, consumed? Where and by whom? How is it involved in a world marketplace? What kinds of capital, debt, credit, and labor relations are involved in producing, marketing, and circulating it? Who sells it? How are costs calculated? How are risks calculated? By whom and when? What are the histories and materialities of those relations? Who is involved at each stage and how are differences in power situated? How do these help constitute it?

Professional/Epistemological dimensions: How is knowledge of the process and its production demarcated and professionalized? What kinds of knowledge count in talking about it? What kind of professionals are involved in making expert decisions regarding its development, production, and dissemination? How are each of these stages funded? In projecting its future use? What kinds of controversies of this knowledge are happening? Who is involved? In what kinds of institutions do they work? How is it articulated by medical, legal, governmental, religious, psychological, engineering, military, economic, academic, new age, and educational professionals? What are the political-economic histories of this?

Textual dimensions: What texts are involved in it? What texts refer to it? What kinds of texts? Who produces them and who reads them? Where and in what organizations and institutions are the texts produced and read? What are the histories of these texts and how are they funded? What kinds of textual associations can be made? How does this matter?

Bodily/organic dimensions: How are bodies related to it? What forms of attention, affect, emotion, and cognition are involved? Are there particular ways in which we think of ourselves that also involve or sustain this process? What kinds of bodies, including nonhumans, and bodily relations are involved in producing it? What kinds make use of it? How are these bodies

and relations gendered? Are there racial, gendered, differently abled, or other group identifications that help construct these bodies? What ways of life are involved? What are the histories of all these relations? How do these help constitute it?

Historical dimensions: What concepts refer to it? What are the histories of these concepts? Was it invented, when and by whom? Are there different and competing versions of its histories? Who tells these histories? How has it traveled historically? Repeat the above dimensions for each aspect of its history. How do these help constitute it?

Educational dimensions: How does it appear in our socialization? When do we learn about it in school? During the rest of life? What kinds of people/bodies get to learn about it? How much do we learn about it? What aspects of it are avoided? What are the histories of teaching about it? How does this matter?

Mythological dimensions: What roles does it play in fantasies? What kinds of national narratives make use of it? How does it appear in entertainment? What other grand narratives, stories, and strong associations involve it (e.g., progress, risk, joy, fear, science, militarism, success, decline, horror, self-improvement, financial security, nuclear family, motherhood, fatherhood, independence, adolescence, democracy, origin stories, stories of difference, privilege, death, pornography, sports)? How do these matter?

Symbolic dimensions: What are the many different ways in which it can be taken as a symbol? How does this process serve in symbolic systems? What sorts of ideas, metaphors, movements, ideologies, and the like are associated with it? For whom are these relevant, to whom do they matter, and what contests over meaning are they involved in? What are the histories of these meanings and contests over meaning? How do they matter?

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