

The Stories Objects Carry

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe an exploratory visual narrative inquiry in which I examined the stories held by three objects that were given to me during my time as a PK-12 public school art teacher. Using a methodology of following the trail, I use a combination of comics-making and narrative writing to story and re-story these three objects. This exploration revealed that how we go about storying objects matters, as it can either limit or expand how we view the active roles objects have in our lives. Ultimately, this work sketches the contours for how we can use storying and re-storying to further inquire into the vitality of objects and unlock the stories they carry.

KEYWORDS: Objects, Narrative Methods, Visual Methods, Comics, Teaching Experiences

New York-based artist Rose Salane explores how objects that she buys (such as rings and coins) at New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority auctions have the power to speak about the individuals who once owned and carried them (Ozer, 2022; Salazar Moreno & Wiland, 2022). Through her artmaking practice, Salane seeks to better understand how these objects can retell personal histories, reflect themes in society (such as value, loss, and reclaiming), as well as trigger more questions and stories. Salane stated, “Objects and their movements become access points or pinholes and ways for me to approach things I was not always available or alive for” (Ozer, 2022, para. 4). For Salane, these pinholes are gateways to reveal larger narratives. For example, Salane’s 2022 artwork *64,000 Attempts at Circulation* shows how the various objects that individuals attempted to use as currency reveal, document, and store stories of social and urban transformations as well as desires of society. Salane’s artmaking practice exemplifies how artists recognize objects as vehicles that carry meaning, values, and stories.

As demonstrated by Salane, objects can be a productive site for artistic inquiry. In this article, I describe an exploratory visual narrative inquiry in which I investigated the stories held by objects in my possession to see where they may lead and what I could learn. This inquiry was guided by the following questions, 1) What stories are embedded

within the objects in my possession? and 2) What does the process of storying objects reveal and conceal? I begin with an overview of theory that informs this inquiry including material culture studies, storying objects, visual and verbal storytelling, as well as new materialism. I then discuss the methodology I used for this inquiry before presenting my visual narrative and analysis. I conclude with a brief discussion before outlining the implications of this inquiry and possibilities for storying objects. Ultimately sharing this work is my attempt to sketch the contours for how we can use storying to further inquire into the agency of objects and things in our lives.

Material Culture Studies

The study of objects is often associated with material culture studies. Bolin and Blandy (2003) defined material culture as “a descriptor of any and all human-constructed or human-mediated objects, forms, or expressions, manifested consciously or unconsciously through culturally acquired behaviors” (p. 249). Therefore, material culture studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationships between humans and their things including the production, history, preservation, and interpretation of objects (Blandy & Bolin, 2018; Dudley, 2012). This includes studying how objects construct, acquire, and change meaning and value.

Studying objects can reveal how they play an active role in mediating meaning and experiences as well as reveal how they can function as metaphors in and for our lives (Blandy & Bolin, 2018). Additionally, studying objects can help us see how they have social lives and biographies that evolve through exchange (Serig, 2011). Inquiry into objects also teaches us that meaning is not necessarily inherent to objects; instead meaning is contingent and in flux, and objects possess multiple and even contradictory meanings influenced by many variables (Burkhart, 2011). Ultimately examining and researching objects can help us learn more about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Therefore, objects can be a productive place to engage with critical questions and dialogue (Baxter & Wilson McKay, 2011).

Storying Objects

Objects are companions in our life experiences (Garber, 2019) and are valued for their financial worth and/or personal significance (Blandy & Bolin, 2018). They carry memories and enable the production of narratives that define and illustrate our own histories, identities, and values (Bey, 2012; Witcomb, 2012). In other words, our lives and iden-

tities are shaped by the stories we tell, which in turn are shaped by the objects we collect, display, and exchange (Blandy & Bolin, 2018). Therefore, storying objects is one strategy to examine and better understand these artifacts of material culture.

Blandy and Bolin (2018) stated that sensory contact with objects often triggers the memory of specific life stories, which if told, then trigger in others the memory of their own life stories. In compilations such as the short film *Objects of Memory* (ERRATICA, 2017) and Sherry Turkle's (2007a) edited volume *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, individuals presented and discussed an object that was significant to them. While these objects initially elicited recollection of personal experiences, larger themes emerged such as objects representing life events, objects as a means of connecting to a role model or loved one, and leveraging objects to come to terms with the past. This work exemplifies how objects are more than just things we accumulate. Coupled with stories, objects shape how we view and understand the world and our place within it (Turkle, 2007b).

Visual Narrative – Combining the Visual and Verbal in Storytelling

As humans, we lead storied lives—stories and storytelling are central to our lived experience and how we come to understand the world (Bach, 2007; Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019). However, scholars problematize the limitations of language and verbal narratives in expressing the full potential of what objects can do (e.g., Witcomb, 2012; Shin & Yang, 2021). This is because experiencing objects involves more than words—it involves a synthesis of visual, tactile, and other sensory experiences (Blandy & Bolin, 2018; Garber, 2019).

Visual narrative inquiry is an intentional and reflective process in which the inquirer explores and makes meaning of experiences both visually and narratively (Bach, 2007). This stems from the recognition that incorporating the visual into stories adds layers of meaning (Bach, 2007). Additionally, since stories can be written, read, and heard in multiple ways it is important to give attention to the different forms that narrative can take (Guyotte, 2014; Johnson, 2004). Placing visual and verbal narratives on equal footing can fill in the gaps each leaves behind while also acknowledging and accounting for the complexity of narrative interpretation (Johnson, 2004; Sousanis, 2018). For example, comics is a multimodal narrative artform that blends words and images in a deliberate sequence that can control, bend, and/or resist linear time (McCloud, 2006). Comics are open to multiple interpretations and

often invite readers to enter, reflect, and make connections they may have not seen before (Sousanis, 2018). Therefore, comics-making can be a viable means to explore the potential of storying objects in ways that productively combine visual and verbal forms of narrative while also accounting for other sensory experiences.

New Materialist Considerations of Objects

Scholarship on material culture studies, especially as conceptualized in art education, prioritizes human agency and activity (Blandy & Bolin, 2018). However, some material culture scholars (e.g., Dudley, 2012; Walklate, 2012) and art educators (e.g., Garber, 2019; Hood & Lewis, 2021; Shin & Yang, 2021) have begun to embrace new materialist ideas. These scholars recognize the blurred lines between humans and objects, as well as account for the ways humans and things come together to constitute and express each other. Elizabeth Garber (2019) defined new materialism as “a theoretical integration of materiality as it affects people, systems, and things, with our understanding of nature, society, and subjectivity” (p. 9). New materialists recognize the materiality of objects, beings, discursive practices, and social structures and their interaction or “intra-action” (Barad, 2003). In essence, new materialism sees things not just for what they mean, but also what they do (Hood & Kraehe, 2017).

Like other new materialist scholars, political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) called for a shift in focus away from the human experience of things to focus on the active role all (human and nonhuman) material bodies have in our daily lives. Bennett contends that “without proficiency in this countercultural kind of perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms” (p. xiv). Turkle (2007b) uses the term “evocative object” to name the dynamic relationship between things and thinking. Despite the human-centered tendencies of storying objects, Turkle (2007c) suggests that storying the evocative object can be a process of defamiliarization which allows us to explore how objects have multiple and fluid active life roles.

While Turkle’s (2007a) compilation is a bricolage of singular evocative objects, collectively these stories come together to show how objects can reveal wider social relationships. Turkle’s discussion of relational webs and networks closely relates to new materialists’ calls for greater awareness of the interconnectedness and inseparable entanglement of all material bodies (Barad, 2003; Bennett, 2010). However, this entanglement of being and knowing does not erase power differentials

(Gamble et al., 2019). While Bennett's (2010) vital materialism seeks to flatten ontology and displace human causality, Karen Barad (2003) recognizes the asymmetrical nature of relations through a performative account to acknowledge the role humans play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming.

A Methodology of Following the Trail

As established in the literature on material culture studies and new materialism, objects can be a dynamic site of knowledge production. Some scholars suggest that following the trail of objects can help reveal the active roles objects have in our lives (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Shin & Yang, 2021; Turkle, 2007b). As a method, following the trail requires that we pay special attention to what materials, objects, and things lead us to see, hear, feel, remember, and learn (Bennett, 2010; Shin & Yang, 2021). Following the trail has potential to productively align with visual narrative inquiry. This is because visual narrative inquiry is open to possibilities and imaginings that may overlap and intersect in non-linear and organic ways (Bach, 2007). And most importantly, there are no static categories in visual narrative inquiry; instead, one perception leads to another perception (Bach, 2007).

In this experimental inquiry, I adopted a methodology of following the trail to write and draw my visual narrative. Guided by my initial question (what stories are embedded within the objects in my possession?), following one object led to another and then another, resulting in a narrative that recounts the stories associated with three objects that were given to me during my time as a PK-12 public school art teacher. I think visually, and often use drawing to aid in my writing process. Specifically, I gravitate towards comics-making because it comes as second nature to me, especially when telling stories. Creating my narrative was an iterative process in which I went back and forth between sketching portions of my comic and writing my verbal narrative. Through this process, both approaches to creating my narrative informed one another. The comic shows each object and key moments that the object prompted me to remember. The written narrative expands upon my comic to provide more specific detail about the moment I was given each object, the story of the person who gave it to me, and the impact they had on me. In the following section, I share excerpts of this narrative in which I weave the comic and written narrative together to illustrate my narrative-creation process.

Following the Trail – The Stories Objects Carry

My journey began as I questioned, what stories are embedded within the objects in my possession? As I looked around, I noticed how many of these objects serve as artifacts of the near and distant past—objects that hold family history, stories of being rescued from the trash, or fond memories of my childhood (see Figure 1).

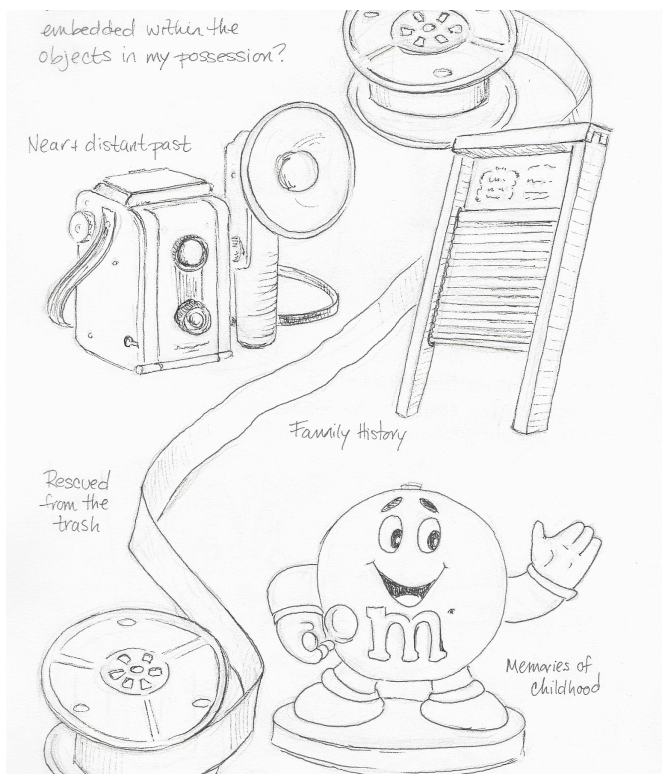


Figure 1. Page from my comic showing drawings of an old camera, a typewriter ribbon, a washboard, and a m&m dispenser that hold family history, stories of being rescued from the trash, or fond memories of my childhood.

Other objects that surround me are artifacts from my eleven years as a PK-12 art educator, most of which consist of artwork and objects gifted to me from past students and colleagues (see Figure 2). Looking at these objects, I wondered, why do I hold onto these objects? In what ways do these objects tell the story of my teaching, the relationships I formed, and the lessons I learned along the way?

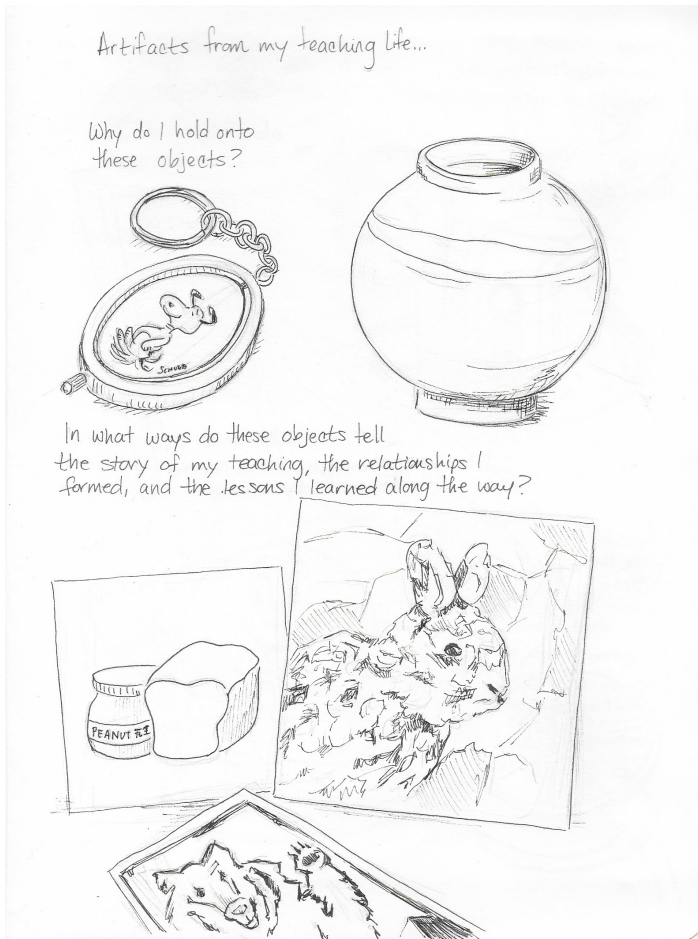


Figure 2. Page from my comic showing of artifacts from my eleven years as a PK-12 art educator, most of which consist of artwork and objects gifted to me from past students and colleagues.

There are three objects which hold vivid stories that exemplify the richness of my teaching experiences: a wooden giraffe sculpture, a Bob Ross plushie doll, and a rotary phone (see Figure 3). Alone each object tells the story of the individual who gifted them to me.



Figure 3. *Drawings of a wooden giraffe sculpture, a Bob Ross plushie doll, and a rotary phone.*

The wooden giraffe sculpture holds the story of Matt whom I first met as an eighth grader. A few weeks into the semester, Matt who had just returned from a family vacation, handed me a wooden giraffe sculpture. He told me how he saw it when he was on vacation, thought of me, and decided to buy it for me as a gift. I was moved.

As I drew the giraffe and the moment Matt gave it to me, I recalled the qualities he possessed. I drew memorable interactions I had with him that school year and reflected on what prompted such interactions (see Figure 4). I recalled how Matt occasionally requested that I have more patience for his classmates. Matt wisely pointed out how his classmates were grappling with their impending move to high school where they will be granted more freedom, yet also bear more responsibility. From Matt, I learned to have even more patience and compassion for my students.



Figure 4. Page from my comic that I created as I recalled memorable interactions with Matt.

As I continued drawing what came to mind, my thoughts and pencil went to three years later when I was transferred to the high school. I recalled the moment Matt showed up at my classroom door, beaming with a smile ear to ear. Matt excitedly told me he heard that I was teaching at the high school and asked his guidance counselor if he could be enrolled in my Digital Media class. I then drew another memorable moment. Later in the year, Matt stopped in my classroom to show me the finished portfolio he used to apply to college. He included several artworks he created in my class, including the artwork he was most proud of, his text portrait of Bob Ross. As I drew this point of Matt's story with his Bob Ross portrait, I was reminded of my time with another student who gifted me a Bob Ross plushie doll (see Figure 5).

I vividly recalled the June of my last year teaching at the middle school. The bell just rang for students to proceed to the next period, and I stood outside my classroom door greeting my eighth-grade students as usual. Claire arrived and nonchalantly handed me a gift bag, quietly stating, "You were always my favorite" as she continued walking into the classroom. I reached into the bag and pulled out a Bob Ross plushie doll! I excitedly looked over to Claire and thanked her. Claire explained how she saw it in the store and thought of me. I suspected that this was because Bob Ross had been the subject of a running joke with my eighth-grade class that semester.



Figure 5. Page from my comic showing my memories of Matt in high school which led me to make connections to the Bob Ross plushie doll and Claire.

By that point I had known Claire for nine years. I drew snapshots of my recollections of the time I first met Claire as a kindergartner and then later as a middle schooler. I recalled her creative spirit, the personal artwork she showed me, and collaborative projects she completed in my after-school sculpture club. I then recalled and drew how I witnessed Claire's growth and transformation into high school, as Claire transitioned to Chad and began using he/him pronouns (see Figure 6). As the year progressed, I witnessed Chad form new friendships, quickly finding a supportive, like-minded group of friends in the same social circle as Matt despite their three-year age difference (a crossing of paths that I did not realize until this writing). I recalled how my pride and admiration for Chad grew enormously that year. While he encountered many challenges during his first year of high school, he grew immensely as a person.

From Chad, I learned how it is such a gift to be an art teacher. His story exemplifies how I was able to connect with and get to know my students. And by having the opportunity to teach the same students year after year—and in my case, teach some students from kindergarten through high school—I was able to witness and be a part of their personal and academic growth over an extended period.



Figure 6. Page from my comic showing my memories of Chad which led me to make connections to the rotary phone and Gary.

Chad's story led me to recall how I acquired an old rotary phone. It was just before school one morning when my colleague Gary burst into my middle school classroom carrying a bag. "I found one! Here you go," he exclaimed. I got up from my desk and walked over to see what he was talking about. It was a black rotary phone. Gary remembered our conversation a few months earlier when I showed him my grandparents' old telephone table that I refinished. I mentioned that I was searching for a rotary phone like my grandparents used to have to put on top.

I first met Gary when we both taught at the elementary level. However, I did not really get to know him until he was transferred to the middle school where we shared the same lunch and hall duty posts. Looking back at my drawings, I realized how Chad was influential in helping me get to know Gary. Chad's regular visits while Gary and I were on hall duty sparked laughs and conversation between all of us. As time went on, I came to see Gary as a supportive figure who I could go to for advice or to share a funny story. Looking back, Gary came into my teaching life at the right time. I needed to learn to roll things off my back and to find laughter in frustrating experiences. Gary was the person I credit with giving me those skills. His lessons and advice gave me the foundation to find the strength to navigate the journey that laid ahead for me.

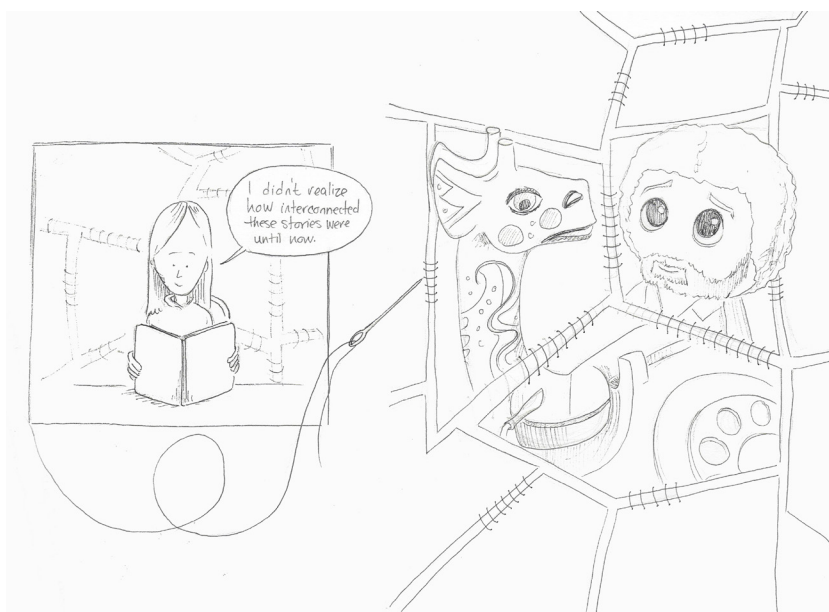


Figure 7. Page from my comic showing pieces of the wooden giraffe, Bob Ross plushie doll, and rotary phone stitched together.

While the wooden giraffe sculpture, Bob Ross plushie doll, and rotary phone each came into my life at three different moments, from three different individuals, they all come together to begin forming the narrative of my teaching experience. And although we have all gone our separate ways, these objects still bind our stories together (see Figure

7). These objects are a reminder of the individuals who gave them to me, the stories we share, as well as who I was at the time. Collectively, these objects and embedded stories reveal how we are all connected to one another.

Retelling the Story as Narrative Analysis

While my initial visual narrative recounts the interwoven stories of the individuals who gave me those objects, I wondered why I was pulled to recount those particular stories. In other words, why did I choose to draw and write about those objects and not the many others in my possession? While following the trail is an important first step, Bennett (2010) emphasized how lingering in moments with objects can open us to see their material vitality. Visual narrative inquiry is a recursive process that entails searching and re-searching—that is, visual narrative is a continual reformulation and not a definitive end (Bach, 2007). Therefore, the initial narrative that I created is not a means to an end.

There are many approaches to analyzing narrative (Bleakley, 2005). Holistic narrative analysis is one such approach and entails a process of synthesizing ideas and experiences through narrative (Bleakley, 2005). In other words, the researcher thinks with and retells the story to let themes emerge (Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019). As a result, I analyzed my initial visual narrative by reformulating and retelling the story of how I created my initial narrative. In this analytical retelling, I was guided by my second research question: what does the process of storying objects reveal and conceal?

By revisiting and retelling my story of creating the initial narrative, I lingered with the objects and story in an attempt to be more open to the influence of their material vitality (Bennett, 2010). In other words, through this retelling, I sought to uncover why and how I was pulled to write and draw about those three objects. In the following section, I share excerpts from my retelling using the same woven format as my initial narrative. This retelling gives attention to my sensory experiences with the objects and how this intra-action played a significant role in guiding the development of my initial narrative.

Following and Lingering – A Retelling of The Stories Objects Carry

I sat at my desk with my laptop and visual journal open. I had just finished watching the short film *Objects of Memory* (ERRATICA, 2017) and was prompted to create a narrative about the objects in my pos-

session. I looked around my small apartment. It was an assemblage of materials, objects, natural daylight, and the sounds of the downtown traffic below, among many other things. I noticed the array of objects that I had strategically placed around my apartment as décor when I first moved in. This was an attempt to make this temporary living arrangement feel homier. As I pondered over which object to select, I felt the urge to turn and look over my right shoulder. The afternoon light poured through the western facing windows. The acrylic paint on a multicolored wooden giraffe sculpture glistened in this light, calling for my attention. Following this call, I got up from my desk and picked up the giraffe. I noted how lightweight it felt and wondered what kind of wood it was made of. My tactile and visual attention then shifted to the raised painted designs.



Figure 8. Page from my comic that documents the wooden giraffe catching my attention and my tactile interaction with it.

As I walked back to my desk, I recalled how this giraffe trinket has stayed with me and followed me throughout various career and life events. I placed it down on my desk and I started making an observational drawing (see Figure 8). My eyes and hand moved along the contours of the giraffe. As I did this, my mind wandered, recalling the moment I received the giraffe as a gift. I recounted other moments, drawing them as my comic organically grew. I then shifted my attention to my computer and started to write. As I wrote, I looked to my comic and giraffe for guidance, but also let my thoughts wander, following wherever they took me.



Figure 9. Page from my comic that documents the Bob Ross plushie doll catching my attention and my tactile interaction with it.

As I finished writing, another object sitting at the edge of my visual periphery called for and caught my attention. This time it was the Bob Ross plushie doll. I walked over to the white bookshelf it was perched atop of and picked it up. As I stroked the soft, fluffy brown material that made up the doll's hair, a flood of memories came over me. I decided to follow this object's trail and continue my narrative, letting it lead my thoughts (see Figure 9). I drew and wrote just as I had done with the giraffe sculpture, visually and verbally documenting what came to mind.



Figure 10. Page from my comic that documents the rotary phone catching my attention and my tactile interaction with it.

As I sketched and wrote about the Bob Ross plushie doll, I felt another object call for my attention. This time it was the black rotary phone that was sitting atop a chestnut-colored telephone table behind me. I answered the call. I got up from my desk and walked over to the phone. I stuck out my index finger and began to rotate the dial—*swoosh*. I pulled my finger away and listened to the rhythmic purring as the dial returned to its starting position. The phone and I repeated this call and response. Each time I started at a different number and when I let go, the phone purred in response as it returned the dial to its resting position. As I dialed, I recalled the circumstances that led this phone to come into my possession. I drew and I wrote (see Figure 10).

In the initial narrative, I wrote about how each object comes together to begin telling the story of my teaching experience. However, as I finish this retelling, I begin to see more clearly the assemblage of nonhuman materials that directed my attention to these particular objects and how my sensory experiences with them played a significant role in triggering my memory, which in turn, guided the development of my initial narrative. Yet, this also leads me to wonder, what are both narratives missing? Or more specifically, what is not accounted for?

Discussion – Revealing the Assemblage

Our lives are woven stories (Bach, 2007). And while we may compose our own narratives, other humans and nonhumans shape our experiences. In this visual narrative inquiry, I followed the trail of three objects. This trail was ultimately guided by each objects' proximity to one another and placement within a wider assemblage of nonhuman materials, many of which are still beyond the purview of my awareness. However, this assemblage was only temporary, contingent upon that moment in time. This means that the meaning and significance of these objects will continually shift with the passing of time and change in location (Turkle, 2007c). Should I return to story these objects again, the narrative will likely be very different.

The combination of comics-making and writing complimented one another, helping me to follow the trail of the three objects. Additionally, comics-making and writing prompted me to linger so as to notice and document more than what I was initially consciously aware of. As noted by Sousanis (2018), working with images can bring out what is beyond the purview of our awareness. For me, this was enhanced and made clearer by additional narrative writing.

This exploration only begins to scratch the surface of revealing the power of objects. My initial visual narrative gives special attention to how these objects came into my possession and why I hold on to them. It also highlights instances where narrative paths crossed and connected, as well as the lessons I learned along the way. However, this initial narrative explicitly tells a story that centers humans including myself, my students, and my colleague. More importantly, it places the objects and other nonhuman materials in a secondary role. In other words, my initial narrative does not explicitly account for the vitality of objects and things—instead it only acknowledges them as conduits for unlocking the interwoven stories of our lives.

The process of analysis through re-storying prompted me to linger in my comics and writing, thereby revealing how I unknowingly began to account for some of the nonhuman influences on my initial narrative. My analytical retelling in comic form begins to account for the active role the giraffe, the bob ross plushie doll, and the rotary phone had in forming my initial narrative. It also begins to account for the influence of additional nonhuman materials such as my apartment, my visual journal, and a bookshelf. My written analysis more explicitly accounts for some of these additional nonhuman materials, but only does so because I used the comics to guide my writing. However, my narrative analysis also falls short of fully acknowledging the vitality of these objects and other nonhuman materials—and perhaps more importantly, my narratives do not let the objects speak.

Implications and Possibilities

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, sharing this work is my attempt to sketch the contours for further inquiry into the agency of objects and things. Thus, this experimental visual narrative inquiry has revealed implications for how art educators create narratives about and with objects in teaching and research. Examining objects from the lens of material culture studies informs us about how objects construct, acquire, and change meaning and value. Storying objects is one strategy used in material culture studies to help us better understand how objects shape the ways we view the world and our place within it. However, material culture studies, like art education more broadly, has a humanistic lineage, thereby limiting what and how we can learn from and with objects.

Shifting our perspective to follow the trails of objects and letting them speak can better account for the active role objects play in our lives

while also expanding possibilities for what we can learn from and with objects. As Shin and Yang (2021) suggested, agency analysis is a first step, but we can do more to analyze distinct agencies and follow their potential. Specifically, while storytelling is a human endeavor, we can integrate new materialist perspectives to make a conscious effort to let objects lead us on the trail as we become narrators of their vitality. However, this does not come without challenges. In an interview, Rose Salane said the biggest challenge of creating artworks such as *64,000 Attempts at Circulation* is figuring out how to let the objects talk (Ozer, 2022). This is a challenge that I also encountered in my exploration.

Stories can help us to see the world in new ways, and yet “they can never offer the definitive way of seeing it” (Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019, p. 16). Therefore, how we go about storying objects matters as it can either limit or expand how we view the active roles objects have in our lives. The recursive process of storying allows us to build on prior stories, create new stories, or relive them in new ways (Bach, 2007). This means that storying and re-storying objects using different forms of narrative can perhaps lead us to find new ways to honor objects’ vitality and unlock the stories they carry.

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