

*Nick Thorpe discusses materialism...*

- 1 On my desk stands a miniature of an Easter Island moai, carved for me by a Rapa Nui craftsman from the same stone his ancestors used for the world-famous monoliths. It is precious to me, but it is also an uneasy symbol of humanity's precarious relationship with the material world. The original 13-foot ancestor statues were quarried in the Middle Ages with a fervour to match any modern production line; more than 800 were carved and dragged into position using rope and log rollers hewn from timber, before somebody cut down the last mature tree on the isolated habitat. Ecological collapse ensued, bringing strife and starvation. 5
- 2 You would think that this blunt parable of unsustainable consumption would help me moderate my relationship with my stuff. But my mobile phone contract is nearly up, and shiny new iPhones beckon. My desktop *moai* is frowning reproachfully: what kind of object needs to be replaced every two years? At least statues endure. 10
- 3 We have got used to the transitory nature of our possessions, the way things are routinely replaced — whether it is last season's cut of jeans or computers that mysteriously slow down as if clogged by quick-drying cement. According to data aggregated by the Global Footprint Network, it takes the biosphere a year to produce what humanity habitually consumes in roughly eight months, a situation that is logically unsustainable. And yet we persevere with the 'hedonic treadmill', holding out the unlikely hope that the spike of satisfaction from our next purchase will somehow prove less transitory than the last. In fact, the opposite is true — the cravings of consumerism tend to make us more miserable. 15 20
- 4 Most of us know this instinctively, and yet remedying our troubled relationship with material possessions is no easy matter. If Western consumer culture sometimes resembles a bulimic binge in which we taste and then spew back things that never quite nourish us, the ascetic, anorexic alternative of rejecting materialism altogether will leave us equally starved. The better approach is to learn to enjoy our things more. Who, then, can teach us how to celebrate our possessions with the mindful, celebratory spirit of a gourmet? 25
- 5 Perhaps we can look to the Chilean poet-politician Pablo Neruda, a self-described 'thing-ist'. A passionate socialist and an erudite curator of curious objects, such as carved pipes, grotesque African masks, ships in bottles, and whales' teeth, Neruda was materialistic in the purest and most playful sense, delighting in textures, noises, colours, the taste of a rattle, the subversive shock of a magic trick. He saw no clash between this celebratory 'thing-ism' and socialism's impulse towards redistribution. He would give his toys away if guests asked, but expected the same generosity in return. Could it be that our problem with materialism is not that we value material things too much, but that we do not truly value them enough? 30 35
- 6 After all, things matter. The humble baguette is quintessentially French: it has its origins in a law made after the French Revolution, which stated that there would only be one type of bread — no longer a bread of wheat for the nobility and a bread of bran for the poor, but a bread of equality. Andy Warhol's serial repetition of a can of Campbell soup has also come to represent the age we live in, where the ordinary is celebrated. Museums and art galleries, filled with items that tell our stories, feed a fascination with objects both significant and otherwise. The British Museum, home to over 8 million items — ranging from the toothpicks used by the Qing Dynasty peasants to the Rosetta Stone, the key to deciphering the hieroglyphs — is proof, if any were needed, that we define ourselves by our things. 40 45
- 7 In recent years, a range of voices from science, philosophy, political activism, and the arts have begun to coalesce into a movement that grounds us ever more mindfully in the material world. This 'new materialism' challenges us to love our possessions not less but

more — to cherish them enough to care about where they came from, who made them, and what will happen to them in the future. If we could truly cherish the things in our lives and retain the pulse of their making, would we not then be the opposite of consumerists? 50

- 8 But if we are ever going to respond more consciously to our knee-jerk replacement anxiety, we need products designed to last. With that in mind, I have been looking with interest at the Fairphone — launched by a Dutch start-up in December to model what a smartphone might look like in an economy that honours the origins of things. With an open-source operating system that allows users to get round obsolescence, it has two SIM-slots for those who might otherwise need to carry two phones for work and home. But will it make enough money for any long-term market presence, if nobody needs to replace it? I will watch with interest. 55
- 9 Another solution could very well be sustainable models that allow us to extend the lifespan of products, such as the growing network of community repair shops in Edinburgh, dedicated to teaching ordinary people to repair and reuse household goods. There, people sit in a room chatting, repairing clothes, learning new skills — creating an experience that is joyful. The New Economics Foundation explains that creating a society in which things last longer and are endlessly re-used will necessarily entail a major shift to the services that keep things going, thereby creating employment to replace lost manufacturing/retail output. It is, essentially, an economics of better, not bigger. I suspect that will mean paying more, but less frequently. And so, I have started weaning myself off craving bargains and willing myself to pay more for better-made things. 60 65
- 10 The New Economics Foundation also predicts that the new materialism will lead to more emphasis on spending on ‘experiences rather than disposable goods’, which means less shopping and more music, film, live performance, sport, and socialising: more lasting satisfaction and less of the transitory hit of ownership. This in turn might lead to a proliferation of festivals, sporting competitions, and cultural events celebrating the talents we share and occluding the endless proliferation of retail stuff. There are also some indications that the fetish of ownership is passing in favour of a ‘sharing market’: people are increasingly opting to hire, and films and music are also increasingly available by subscription, via digital services such as Spotify or Netflix, calling time on those unrecyclable CD, video and DVD formats that often end up in a landfill. 70 75
- 11 Interestingly, this was more or less what changed for Easter Islanders when it became obvious that building totemic tribal monoliths was not going to save them from the ecological abyss. The *moai* became a sculpted lesson that no way of living or thinking can endure forever. There are many who believe that our own society is in the process of learning a similar lesson. However, a more deliberate commitment to love and cherish what we already have might yet save us too, and leave us more deeply connected to one another. 80 85

*Adapted from “The Love of Stuff”, Aeon (March 2014)*