

# Centre for Public Culture and Ideas

## Nathan Seminar Series

### *'Everything and the kitchen sink': constructing the everyday material worlds of postwar New Zealand*

The 1950s and 60s are being rethought by scholars in New Zealand, as they are elsewhere. The decades are known as, on the one hand, ones of grey dull conformity, with perhaps some stirrings of protest and counter culture towards the end of the 1960s, and on the other hand as the source of retro/modernist cool, much more complex and varied. Historians have examined high culture (modernist literature, art and design), politics or the major events and turning points of this era. I will discuss my current book project, an examination of this period through its everyday material (and visual) culture, which takes an interdisciplinary approach. It combines detailed consideration of objects, images and archives, drawing upon extensive research in museum collections, as well as other sources. In the book I take the reader on a tour of what ordinary people had around them in their daily lives – at home, on the street, at work and at play. In examining lived experiences, the book attempts to examine how how a wide range of things looked and felt, and what they meant to people.

I will focus in particular on key work from recent historical material studies or material histories, as they are usually called, as well as contemporary material culture studies, and their utility for my study. Indeed, the concept of 'material culture' is often used synonymously with phrases such as 'the texture of everyday life'. Yet much work in material history remains within an overall framework of consumption, focused on purchase, acquisition and shopping, rather than material use. Surveying recent historical work in this area, Karen Harvey notes how 'artefacts are tools as well as signals, signs and symbols. Their use and function are multiple and intertwined'. Taking this further, Frank Trentmann argues that the focus should be on habits, routines, patterns and practices, 'not just what things mean but how things are done'. The implications for international material histories, not just those from New Zealand, are emphasised.

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Her teaching and research interests include: material culture history and theory, clothing and textiles, histories of collecting, history in and of museums, visual culture history and theory, photography, social and cultural history, welfare history, and gender.

**Wednesday 23 September 2009**  
**12:00 noon - 2:00pm**  
**Business 2 Meeting Room (N72\_1.18)**  
**Free (light lunch provided)**  
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