

Active Objects: An Introduction

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We are surrounded by things doing things. Consider the computer on which you are reading, or perhaps from which you just printed, this essay. Listen to it whir and hum, feel the heat radiating off it, notice the pallor of your skin within its glow. The influence of computers on our daily life is commonplace now, but primarily in terms of what they can do *for* us, and not so much *to* us. As we sit in thrall to our machines, our eyes begin to water, our backs tighten up, and we feel again that dull ache in our forearms and elbows that we assiduously try to ignore; computers are physical objects and act on us physically. But they do not act alone. The repetitive strain injuries that afflict many of us arise out of the interaction of the screen, the mouse, the desk, and the chair with the muscles, bones, tendons, and nerves of a human body adapted for other tasks, other tools, and other postures. As we use our computers, they are, however subtly, manipulating us in return.

In some respects, the shift of focus to concentrate on the active nature of objects might seem a simple matter of semantics. Rather than sitting on a chair, the chair maintains us at a constant height above the ground. But this simple act by the chair can have a profound impact on people not just bodily, but also

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

personally, socially and politically.¹ This seemingly mundane shift in focus can reveal to us the rich complexities of our interactions with and through things.

Although we have been long attuned to the power and call of the *things* we study, art historians have nonetheless largely maintained a perspective that sees people as acting on, with, and through those things, and have only rarely considered how artworks may have acted *on* the people around them. This has been particularly true over the last twenty-five years, in what was often referred to as the “New Art History.” In contrast to more traditional concerns such as periodization and style, there was a growing interest with the diverse audiences for art, with the roles of patrons (and not only of artists) in production and symbolism, and with vernacular and secular (that is, not only liturgical) arts.² These new approaches developed through Art History’s engagement with and adoption of interdisciplinary methodologies: from literary criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, reception theory, narratology, psychology, postcolonialism, feminism, and new historicism. With these methodologies, we “redirected attention from very circumscribed approaches” focused on style, form, dating, and artists toward larger concerns of the function of artwork in its historical contexts: economic, social, cultural, ideological, gendered, and perceptual.³

In a broad sense, we can still characterize the project of medieval art history in recent years in much the same way: we have deepened and refined our questions, with some concerns—such as reception, gender, and narrative—emerging as more prevalent and more productive than others. The geographic

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

scope of medieval art history has changed; our engagement with critical theory has given us an increasingly subtle historical consciousness. Our methods and goals, however, are strikingly similar to those of the 1990s. As Nina Rowe wrote in her introduction to the 2012 collection *Medieval Art History Today – Critical Terms*, “the kind of work exemplified by the essays in this volume—work attuned to analyzing social conditions, identity formation, and the imbrication of visual culture with society and politics—is now pursued as a matter of course within most art history graduate programs. ... In the early 1990s these modes of inquiry represented resistance to “orthodoxy” ... but now [they] might be considered the voice of the establishment.”⁴

Recently, however, there have been new noises around medieval art. In conference papers, in journal issues, in symposia: there is a new fervor for the objecthood of medieval art. This is work that takes materiality as its starting point, rather than artists, patrons, or beholders, and which explores networks of things rather than power structures or social conditions or the relationship between word and image. This current is informed variously by “New Materialist” approaches such as Thing Theory and Object-Oriented Ontology, and also by work in recent years on medieval objects and materials, such as Brigitte Buettner’s study of gems, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s work on stones, and Caroline Walker Bynum’s 2011 book, *Christian Materiality*, among many others.⁵

Many of these New Materialist ideas were rattling around our heads as the two of us walked together through the exhibition “Treasures of Heaven,” which gathered together relics spanning the whole of Christian history, focusing

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

particularly on the Middle Ages.⁶ As it traced the importance of relics and reliquaries in the development of early Christianity, “Treasures of Heaven” also drew attention to the vibrancy that sacred matter held for medieval Christians. Far from serving passively as beautiful containers for important objects, reliquaries clearly did considerable work both in projecting the sacrality of the objects within and shaping the experience of the people who encountered them. We wondered how the new object-centered approaches might develop our understanding of reliquaries, *vasa sacra*, and other instruments of faith. How did the vivid nature of these objects—their mass and texture, their form, their brilliance, their aroma—shape the way people acted with them, or simply behaved in their presence? Would it be possible to track the ways in which the agency of a specific object changed over time? Finally, should we, can we, and do we want to consider how the agentic power of medieval objects influences our own relations with them in the present day?

Along with our colleagues in the Material Collective⁷ and sponsored by the International Center for Medieval Art, we developed two sessions on “Active Objects” for the 2012 International Congress of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo: “Optics and Transparency” and “Agency and Phenomenology.” The papers stimulated rich discussions that continued well after the sessions had ended, and inspired many of us in new projects. We are very pleased to present four of those papers here, along with an additional essay and a review of Bynum’s *Christian Materiality*.⁸ Taken as a whole, these essays demonstrate the diversity of approaches and insights made possible by a “New Materialist” approach, even

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

when the material is restricted to Western medieval art. These projects can constructively challenge our methods of social art history, particularly iconography and iconology, which often focus on single, holistic moments of meaning-creation or interpretation.

In his essay, “Copper-Alloy Substrates in Precious-Metal Treasury Objects: Concealed and Yet Excessive,” Joseph Salvatore Ackley argues that the specific composition of metalwork objects mattered in a number of ways: symbolic, economic, aesthetic, and technical. But what medieval beholders “saw” —and what medieval inventories recorded—was not always the *real* material of devotional objects: the social meanings and indeed the terminology of precious metals were constantly in flux, and in their layered composition, metalworks were dynamic. “On the Enigmatic Nature of Things in Anglo-Saxon Art,” by Benjamin C. Tilghman, also explores problems of transformation and transience in the view of *things* in both the riddling tradition of Anglo-Saxon England and contemporary ontological theory. Instability and visibility are taken up by Genevra Kornbluth’s “Active Optics: Carolingian Rock Crystal on Medieval Reliquaries.” She focuses on the tricky transparency of curved surfaces, and shows that the material properties of engraved crystals created multiple views, each of which was only partial, and all of which depended on collaboration between reliquary, viewer, and light. Alexa Sand describes the reciprocity between object and subject in “*Materia Meditandi*: Haptic Perception and Some Parisian Ivories of the Virgin and Child, ca. 1300.” As Sand elegantly illustrates, the nature of ivory is affective, and the objects both model and respond to the

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

haptic perception of the divine. That devotional objects had to be handled in order to be useful—and that their forms and materials assert this—is also central to Beatrice Kitzinger’s “The Instrumental Cross and the Use of the Gospel Book Troyes, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 960.” By considering the relationship between colophons and a particular kind of pictorial cross, Kitzinger shows that liturgical books and even the images in them were a kind of active object, which set into motion an eschatological tableau for the medieval beholder.

As these essays present distinctive approaches to a common set of concerns, they come together in various ways. Many readers may be surprised to find little attention in some essays to the symbolic qualities of the works’ respective media, a topic that has been mined productively in recent years.⁹ Sand, for example, notes the metaphorical import of ivory as a symbol of divine purity, but she is more concerned with its sensual qualities, and Tilghman locates the importance of the whalebone of the Franks Casket not so much in its associative meanings as in its nature as a transformed thing. Kitzinger makes only the briefest mention of the parchment and ink of a manuscript, preferring to explain how the both the book itself, and the representations on its pages, served as votive offerings. The medium is not necessarily the message; rather, it is a thing unto itself, with particular qualities that affect the workings of the object.

One important implication of New Materialist approaches made clear by these essays is the abandonment of visual experience as the exclusive, or even primary, means of accessing works of art. Sand explores the intimate circuit of touch between Virgin and Child in small statuettes and how the ivory that forms

Overbey and Tilghman – Introduction

them warms to the hand; Kornbluth's essay, though primarily concerned with optical experience, makes the important point that such experience was predicated on gems being handled and moved about. Both Kitzinger's and Ackley's studies consider images and materials that were hidden from sight, whether closed up in a book or lurking just beneath a gilt surface. And Tilghman makes the point that medieval beholders may have perceived the true nature of objects as skulking deeper still, beyond human ken.

Each of these essays prompts us to consider the relationship between what an object is in and of itself and what it might be for the humans who come into contact with it. Attention to objects and their "actions" does not entail a complete negation of the human: it never could. For example, there are good reasons for the Gozbertus thurible to have been made from copper-alloy, as Ackley describes, but it was important that it present itself as gold to its beholders. And as Tilghman notes, questions of what an object might be lead inexorably to questions of what they are for *us*. Indeed, the tension between an object's past lives and its present position lies under all of these essays. Do the ivory statuettes in Sand's essay fully exist when they are on display in vitrines, never to be touched? Can Matian and Digrenet's souls be saved now that their gospel book, examined by Kitzinger, has left its Breton church for a library in Troyes?

Art objects and people exist in complex networks of space and time. The challenge of the New Materialisms for Art History is to view these networks as not *necessarily* human-centered, and even to recognize that art objects cannot be understood solely or completely within these networks.¹⁰ Can we talk about

artworks without considering them in terms of the intentions and desires of those who made and interacted with them? What kinds of art historical inquiries, and what insights about things—both historical and contemporary—might come from doing so?¹¹ This problem is our delight and our dilemma, and it is at the core of the essays in this volume.

¹ For some thoughts on chairs, see Julia Reinhard Lupton, “The Renaissance *Res Publica* of Furniture,” in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphant Books, 2012), 213-30.

² An early statement of this shift can be seen in Lucy Freeman Sandler and Herbert L. Kessler, “An Exchange on ‘The State of Medieval Art History’,” *The Art Bulletin*, 71:3 (1989): 506-07.

³ Conrad Rudolph, “Introduction: A Sense of Loss: An Overview of the Historiography of Romanesque and Gothic Art,” in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006): 36.

⁴ Nina Rowe, “Introduction,” in “Medieval Art History Today – Critical Terms,” special issue, *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): xi.

⁵ Brigitte Buettner, “From Bones to Stones: Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries,” in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, ed. Bruno Reudenbach and Gia Toussaint (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), 43-59; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Stories of Stone,” *postmedieval* 1 (2010): 56-63; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

⁶ “Treasures of Heaven,” Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, February 13–May 15, 2011. The exhibition was also mounted at the Cleveland Art Museum, Cleveland, October 17, 2010–January 17, 2011 and the British Museum, London, June 23–October 9, 2011. See *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2010).

⁷ The Material Collective consists of Marian Bleeke, Jennifer Borland, Rachel Dressler, Martha Easton, Anne F. Harris, Asa Simon Mittman, Karen Eileen Overbey, Nancy M. Thompson, Benjamin C. Tilghman, and Maggie M. Williams. The Collective maintains a blog at <http://thematerialcollective.org/> and encourages discussion and mutual enlightenment through an open group on Facebook, which anyone interested is welcome to join.

⁸ In addition to the essays published here, the Kalamazoo panel included papers by Gerald B. Guest, Bettina Bildhauer, and Christopher Lakey. We are grateful for their input and comments, as well as those of the audiences at the “Active Objects” session.

⁹ A comprehensive bibliography is impossible here, but important works include Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien: Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1994); Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2004), esp. 19-45; and the essays collected in “*Res et significatio: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages*,” ed. Lisa Reilly with Libby Parker, Aden Kumler, and Christopher R. Lakey, special issue, *Gesta* 51:1 (2012).

¹⁰ The question of how to understand objects as they exist simultaneously within and outside of networks is a central question of recent work in object-oriented ontology. See Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

¹¹ A recent attempt at finding such a voice is the short essay, “Lush Ethics,” by Anne F. Harris and Karen Eileen Overbey, which will appear in *The Future We Want: A Collaboration*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, D.C.: Oliphaunt Books, 2014). A version of “Lush Ethics” was published on the blog *In the Middle*: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2013/07/the-future-we-want-field-change.html>