

Material Image. Affordances as a New Approach to Visual Culture Studies

Deadline: Nov 27, 2020

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Special Issue on the Material Image. Affordances as a New Approach to Visual Culture Studies.
Editors: Martina Sauer and Elisabeth Guenther

The deadline for the submission of essays is November 27, 2020. This issue is scheduled for publication in early March 2021.

Within disciplines concerning artworks from prehistoric artifacts to virtual realities, it is self-evident to discuss the materiality of objects and images. Paradoxically, however, the study of historical and literary sources often shifts the scholarly focus away from this material dimension of visual culture studies. While the so-called material turn tries to counter this development and has a high impact on public discourse, other studies emphasize that objects and images gain meaning through their involvement in human activities. In this respect, the concept of affordance offers new perspectives on the study of ancient and modern artworks.

The concept of affordance is rooted in the studies of the American psychologist J. J. Gibson, who revolutionized the field of perception studies in the 1960s. According to him, things (natural and artificial) inhere affordances; in other words, they offer a certain range of possible activities and, thus, become part of human–thing interactions, depending on their shape and material qualities. This includes a social dimension, as more recent researchers such as A. Costall and D. A. Norman have stressed. The perception of affordances underlies social conventions and mental frameworks of experiences and expectations, as described by frame theories in social and cognitive sciences (e.g., by E. Goffman and A. Ziem).

This has further implications for the field of visual studies: It opens a new methodological pathway in addition to formal analysis and iconology and sheds light on the role of human perception and cognitive activities within reception processes. Besides the intellectual deciphering of images and image-bearing objects, affordances help to describe and discuss rather instantaneous and unconscious modes of perception and reception and, thus, a mode of direct human–thing interaction. The material qualities, the aesthetic effects or “feelings,” and the integration of images into social practices become crucial factors for the unconscious and intellectual aspects of reception processes. Since the design of images and image-bearing objects is an expression of the understanding of affordances by their creator(s), affordances have a historical dimension and allow us

to study the socio-cultural and economic frameworks in which they were created.

The special issue of Art Style Magazine, "The Material Image. Affordances as a New Approach to Visual Culture Studies," shall discuss the impact of affordances for visual culture studies in art history, design theory, new media, archaeology, classics, and related fields. Papers should offer both a critical review of the theoretical background and an in-depth analysis of the socio-historical importance of affordances respect to one of the following aspects, preferably linked to case studies:

- The potential of affordances as a new approach and perspective in visual culture studies.
- New methodological pathways inspired by the concept of affordance and their relation to traditional approaches and/or the so-called "material turn."
- The potential and limits of cognitive studies/neurosciences for understanding reception processes.
- The relation of "natural" affordances, as proposed by J. J. Gibson, and "artificial" affordances, as discussed in design theories.
- The dependency of affordances on social and historical frameworks.
- The impact of affordances on the study of aesthetic effects and the interdependency of aesthetics and functionality.

The extended essay should be submitted to editorial@artstyle.international.

Reference:

CFP: Material Image. Affordances as a New Approach to Visual Culture Studies. In: ArtHist.net, Sep 19, 2020 (accessed Aug 11, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/23579>>.