

Beyond Representation: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Nature of Things

Bard Graduate Center and Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, New York, Sep 27–29, 2012

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The three day conference “Beyond Representation: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Nature of Things” organized by Jaś Elsner (Oxford), Finbarr B. Flood and Ittai Weinryb (both New York) explored the reevaluated status of crafted things as a current key issue in archaeology and art history by integrating perspectives from anthropology, history, history of science and political theory. The event was planned as part of a four-year research initiative at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to examine and enhance the institute’s research program. [\[1\]](#)

In their introduction the organizers set out the theoretical ground for the conference’s theme and commented on how its guiding questions were generated through their own research on art in classical antiquity, on medieval Christian and Islamic material culture. Finbarr B. Flood summed up their collective sense of a cross-disciplinary development that led to a new interest in the life of things and their potential as agents going beyond the “as if” qualities of representations. Consequently, not only the ontological status of artifacts and material images is shifting, but also modern distinctions between living and non-living, animate and inanimate, subject and object, nature and culture are blurring. The conference’s ambition was therefore twofold. On the one hand, it took this development on through discussing its implications with researchers from different disciplines; on the other hand, it was aimed at strengthening the awareness for the historic precursors of this latest twist in thinking about material culture.

In response to the conference’s overall title, presentation topics ranged widely. However, the papers could be roughly concentrated around three interconnected, guiding concepts: materialization, animation and agency. [\[2\]](#) Emphasis on the dynamic status of the materiality of things was symptomatic for several papers. Science historian Pamela Smith (New York) for example commented on early modern practices of mining and metal workshops. She stressed the central role that the worker’s body, its senses, capacities and products such as bodily fluids had played in the transformation of raw materials, for instance tin, into things that at the same time constituted knowledge about nature.

Historian Caroline Walker Bynum (Princeton) argued that non-anthropomorphic sacred materials,

most importantly bread and wine of the Eucharist, reveal more profound issues of representation and materiality than anthropomorphic, mimetic images such as crucifix or the pietà. Her iconographic analysis of the complexity of St. Gregory's medieval mass paintings elucidated to which extend the depiction of the transubstantiation of bread and wine is understood as the staged exploration of questions of representation and of religious presence in the material.

In contrast to Walker Bynum's focus on non-anthropomorphic, sacred representations, mimetic images of Christ became a subject for examining the complex interplay of lifelike representation and animation. Beate Fricke (Berkeley) explored medieval crucifixi dolorosi and pietàs around 1300 with a particular interest in the various artistic methods to elaborately model the flow of blood; "the crafted shapes of life". By commenting on numerous examples, she argued insightful that the beholder's animation of the sculptured or painted dying Christ does not rely on the naturalism of its representation but on the understanding of the body as an organism in which the loss of blood signifies the loss of life.

Frank Fehrenbach's (Cambridge) discourse analysis of the concept of the living in natural philosophy in the early modern period revealed that the organism itself was understood as a synthesis of constant processes of mortification and invigoration. Renaissance artists anticipated and experimented with those issues through unfolding a playful but serious game with the ambivalence of lifelikeness and lifelessness wherein representations were always on the threshold beyond representation.

In order to discuss how the literary writing that stones have evoked since centuries is driven from an oscillation between their indifferentiality to people and their animation through people, the anthropologist Hugh Raffles (New York) introduced a social network of Chinese collectors, poets and sellers of stones.

Taking representation and animation as the two conflicting, basic capacities of human beings, Caroline van Eck (Leiden) encouraged a dialogue between those art historians and psychologists who are currently investigating the attribution of life to objects or artworks. While she discussed Aby Warburg's writings on the living artwork in regard to his reflections on psychological developments of humanity as a whole, she reevaluated psychoanalytic object relations theory by Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and others who focused on the infant's individual development. Van Eck thus argued to think not only beyond, but also "before representation": Empirical research on the creation of transitional objects, such as toys or blankets, and their role in the development of a child's awareness help to understand the attribution of life and emotions to art historical objects such as Canova's "Venus Victrix".

Peter Geimer (Berlin) initiated the audience to think "before representation" in a different way. He introduced profane relicts such as the walking stick of Thomas Mann or the writing pen of Marcel Proust; things that are preserved and exhibited as representatives of absent persons. Hereby, his crucial question was what these things would signify by themselves, far from the representational. While reflecting on the practices of attributing meanings to things, Geimer introduced aura according to Walter Benjamin and Georges Didi-Huberman as a mechanism of our imagination that mediates between the object and its changeable attributions.

By using Darwin's dog example, Spyros Papapetros (Princeton) finally focused the discussion on animation on a discourse that had emerged in the 1870's along the fine line between animism and animalization. In "The Descent of Man" Charles Darwin told an autobiographical episode of his dog growling at a slightly moving parasol in his garden. Darwin not only concluded the animation

of the object by the dog. He also compared it to spiritual agencies imagined by savages. [3] Papapetros illuminated how Darwin's episode resonated in the writings of Herbert Spencer, Tito Vignoli and through the latter had an impact on Aby Warburg. Analyzing the ambiguity of Warburg's epigram "Du lebst und thust mir nichts" [4], Papapetros indicated that the reflexive rationalization of animistic behavior in modernity connects Darwin's episode with Warburg's epigram.

It was Alfred Gell who took on the anthropological concept of animism within the framework of modern sociology and in 1998 suggested a theory of agency wherein art was considered as "a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it." [5] Not surprisingly, several papers of this conference were infused by a Gellian vocabulary. The social anthropologist's theory was explicitly critical addressed in the paper of Richard Neer (Chicago) amongst others for its tendency to decontextualize. While Neer's reading of Gell stressed agency as the attribution of intentionality to an image or object, a lively and controversial debate claimed an agency conception that leaves the notion of intentionality or will behind and underlined the enhancement of some of Gell's anti-constructivist ideas within the philosophy of embodiment and concepts of the extended mind.

An alternative way to theorize material agency without giving up the notion of causality was suggested by the political theorist Jane Bennett (Baltimore). On the basis of her reading of Paracelsus and Walt Whitman's poetry collection "Leaves of Grass", Bennett conceptualized sympathy as an apersonal infrastructure that creates affinities or connections between human and non-human bodies; an "undetermined leaning toward".

Different perspectives on the agency of things were exemplified with the paper of David Frankfurter (Boston). In the light of his interest in the ritual efficacy of female figurines in late antique, early Christian Egypt, Frankfurter described the dynamics of mimetic identification of an assumed female buyer with the miniature at the workshop. His tackling of the question, what the figurines were meant to do in the context of a shrine or a domestic altar, animated members of the audience to reverse the question of the agency of the buyer or supplicant. By considering the complex gestures of the figurines, the efficacious latency of movement is what brought people to behave or to act. [6] Brigitte Bedos-Rezak (New York) suggested that the figurines already dictated possibilities of their use due to their capacity of mass-produced objects. Her own paper analyzed how during the 12th century contractually organized personal relationships between individuals were more and more infused with techniques of mediation such as wax seals discussing them as mobile agents of human affairs.

Milette Gaifman (New Haven) tackled the distinction between handling things and looking at things. By presenting the imagery of ancient Greek vases, she demonstrated how the instrumentality of things depends on representations on their surface.

Concerning the concept of agency, the conference revealed differences among art historians that were also indicated by questions of translation. Glenn Peers (Austin) mainly focused on the relational transformation of things and persons in Byzantine art by interpreting them as quasi-objects and individuals; the latter to be understood as in opposition to discrete entities like subjects or individuals. [7] Peers used the term 'image act' with reference to the anthropologist Liza Bakewell. [8] This term was objected by Horst Bredekamp (Berlin) in favor of 'picture act' as the English translation of the German term 'Bildakt'; thus emphasizing his focus on materializations. [9]

Based on his recent investigation of prehistoric artifacts, Bredekamp's paper introduced his anthropological conception of agency as picture act using the example of stone axes with fossil

shells. He argued that the process of sculpting the axe around the fossil is driven by an effective principle of pictorial form. Designing the tool was intrinsically tied to the act of placing and framing a natural thing consequently creating what Gottfried Boehm had coined as “iconic difference” [10] and thus a realm of reflection. Bredekamp’s claim that the challenge of objective forms has to be considered as an autonomous pushing force of the evolution of man independent of climatic and environmental conditions provoked a controversial discussion.

While Zainab Bahrani (New York) and Gerhard Wolf (Florence) gave a response at the end of the first and second conference day, Christopher Wood (New Haven) made the closing remarks by highlighting the thing as an artifact of a secular modernity: Having been advocated since the 19th century, it was created and discovered by the artwork that gives the message “I wish I were a thing”.

Instead of developing a shared vanishing point, the conference proved to be most productive in displaying a panorama of various research traditions and current approaches in advancing the discourse of material culture and image theory. The event, which was accompanied by speaker workshops, provided a platform not only for an interdisciplinary dialogue, but also for a transatlantic exchange on future art histories that should be continued. [11]

Notes:

[1] The Bard Graduate Center and the Institute of Fine Arts co-sponsored the conference, which was funded both by the Bard Graduate Center and the Mellon Foundation.

[2] This report does not follow the order in which the talks were given at the conference; the sessions were not organized thematically.

[3] Charles Darwin: *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vol. 1, London: John Murray, 1871 (repr. 1873), p. 64-65.

[4] Aby Warburg: *Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer monistischen Kunstpsychologie*, Warburg Institute London, quoted in: Ernst H. Gombrich: *Aby Warburg. Eine intellektuelle Biographie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 98.

[5] Alfred Gell: *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 6.

[6] In that sense, Maria Luisa Catoni and Markus Rath had discussed the agency of the figurines at the international conference „Figuren – Modelle – Schemata. Antike Grundlagen von Bildakt und Verkörperung“ in Berlin in 2011. For the conference’s program see:

<http://bildakt-verkoerperung.de/en/2011/07/international-conference-figures-models-schemata-ancient-foundations-of-picture-act-and-embodiment/>

[7] For some of his main arguments see: Glenn Peers: *Real Living Painting. Quasi-Objects and Dividuation in the Byzantine World*, in: *Religion and the Arts*, 16 (2012), p. 433-460.

[8] See: Liza Bakewell: *Image Acts*, in: *American Anthropologist*, 100 (March 1998) No. 1, pp. 22-32.

[9] See: Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010. For Bakewell’s and Bredekamp’s different reference to the concept of speech act see: Bakewell 1998, p. 22-24, 30 and Bredekamp 2010, p. 51-52.

[10] See: Gottfried Boehm: *Ikonische Differenz*, Rheinsprung 11. Zeitschrift für Bildkritik, 1 (2011), p. 170-176. <http://rheinsprung11.unibas.ch/archiv/ausgabe-01/glossar/ikonische-differenz.html>

[11] See also: Christopher S. Wood: *Iconoclasts and Iconophiles*. Horst Bredekamp in Conversation with Christopher S. Wood. Interview, in: *The Art Bulletin*, XCIV (Dec. 2012) No. 4, p. 515-527.

Recommended Citation:

Jana August: [Conference Report of:] Beyond Representation: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Nature of Things (Bard Graduate Center and Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, New York, Sep 27–29, 2012). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 4, 2013 (accessed Jul 17, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/5516>>.

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