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MOTION: TRANSFORMATION

35th Congress of the International Committee of the History of Arts

Florence, 1-6 September 2019

Congress Proceedings

– Part 2 –

Bononia University Press

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Contents

CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS - PART 2 -

SESSION 7

Matter and Materiality in Art and Aesthetics: From Time to Deep-Time

CHAIRS

Francesca Borgo
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CONTRIBUTORS

Fabian Jonietz
Small Matter and Eternity: Michelangelo's Last Judgment

Nicolas Cordon
The Liveliness of Stucco: Vanishing Statues and Creamy Clouds in Baroque Palermo

Bronwen Wilson
Lithic Images, Jacopo Ligozzi, and the Descrizione del Sacro Monte della Vernia *(1612)*

Amy F. Ogata
Making Iron Matter in Second Empire France

Stefania Portinari
The Venice Biennale as a World Map: Cartographies, Geological Interventions, Landmark Layers

Liliane Ehrhart
Towards the Creation of Original Material Depictions of the Human: Marc Quinn's Sculptures

Jing Yang
The Human and Non-human Interconnectedness in Three Chinese Contemporary Artists

Introduction to Session 7

Matter, material and materiality: over the course of the past two decades these three words have become ubiquitous in the humanities and social sciences. Driven by a rising ecocritical awareness and backed by a focus on mobility and trade, the discourse on materiality has profoundly shaped both the theory and practice of our discipline. A response to the 'linguistic turn' of the 1970s and 1980s, this 'material turn' now compellingly counterbalances the dematerialization of today's digital reality, the loss of a culture of tactility and manual crafts.[1] But why does materiality appeal so much to art historians? Perhaps it is because it extols the idea that images are not signs but embodied objects that call for our own, discipline-specific expertise; perhaps because it claims a much larger field of intervention for art history, well beyond the realm of art, into that of material culture and even beyond, past the fabricated object and towards unbounded matter of all kinds.[2] On the one hand, materiality has reinforced the disciplinary boundaries of our academic field; on the other, it has broadened them.

This focus on the matter of art has often translated into an emphasis on the moment of the object's creation: its making, production, and the artist's choice of medium. This session looks instead at what happens *over time*.

In attending to time, the following contributions address an often-overlooked dimension in the biography of the 'animated' artwork: not its coming into life, but rather its slow aging and eventual release into a novel configuration of matter – be it a fragment, ruin, or waste. By following matter before and after the finished, localized object, the session encourages to think about materials subject to time scales at odds with those of human experience, moving – as the title suggests – from the time of human history to the deep time of geological history.[3]

The effect of time on artworks is a matter of great concern for conservators, curators, and policymakers, but it has rarely been the focus of art historical inquiry and interpretation. Art historians might even harbor hostility toward time because it obliterates the objects we study. Issues of conservation remain relegated to restoration reports and are often seen as peripheral to the field. Art history established itself as a humanistic discipline by insisting on this distinction: in a now canonical contribution, Erwin Panofsky advocated for the separation between the scientific work of technical art history and humanist inquiry, arguing that "from the humanistic point of view, human records do not age".[4]

When, as art historians, we consider the temporal instability of artworks, we tend to interpret it as the visual manifestation of the distance that separates us from the original condition of the object, a condition we assume to be the relevant one. This session proposes instead to read time more productively and sympathetically: not just in terms of its 'subtractive agency', but as an active, shaping force that compels artists and audiences to confront the object's processes of making and unmaking.

Our session interprets the theme of the 2019 CIHA Congress, *Motion: Transformation* in temporal terms. By focusing on movements that are not just across space but also across time, we hope to complement the current emphasis on the circulation and mobility of objects: the pathways, trajectories, and exchange practices that have helped us productively rethink so much of our globalized discipline.

The themes that the contributions of this session address are rather episodes of stillness and stasis (the dusting of fresco surfaces; the progressive hardening of wet stucco; the freezing of blood; the slow growth of silkworms and plants). They are episodes where movement is vertical rather than horizontal, a deep dive into the earth's stratigraphy and the abyss of geological time

(the rocky escarpments of a sacred mountain; the extraction of iron; the excavations through the geological strata of the Venice Biennale). Taken collectively, they help revise the assumption that matter and objects that are 'on the move' are more significant or have more to offer to art history than those that remain halted, stuck, or marooned.[5]

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Matter, material, materiality: so far, we have used these words as synonyms. But do these notions share the same semiotic content? Today, we are still missing an accurate analysis of their distinct applications in different historical and geographical contexts. A survey of the usage and dissemination of these terms would undoubtedly surprise us with respect to our understanding of art history. With its attention to the material *facies* of works of art, our discipline is, within visual humanities, exceptionally well equipped to deal with these issues.

And yet, over the course of the last century, materiality has been neglected, partially as a result of the pull of two important artistic shifts. First, during the avant-garde, when artistic attention was increasingly focusing on ether vibrations, electromagnetic waves, radioactivity, and other invisible phenomena that could be reinvested in the aesthetic field and beyond the material world – a trend Lynda Henderson has designated as *vibratory modernism*.[6] Later on, in the 1960s, conceptual art challenged materiality in an even more radical fashion. After centuries during which artmaking was fully ruled by the paradigm of visibility, it seemed that, oddly enough, artists were interested in making their works invisible, investigating the threshold of the visible and dismissing its subject matter.

Invisibility, absence, emptiness: the new agenda promoted by conceptual practices involved long-term consequences regarding the role of museums and art institutions, as well as the function of art exhibitions in legitimizing artworks. The material that mattered was now the exhibition itself. This historical move was aptly and timely grasped in 1968 by Lucy Lippard in *The Dematerialization of Art*, a volume that offers a valuable overview of that period.[7]

Within this framework – one that challenges materiality while moving towards invisibility – one should also mention nuclear energy and radioactivity, as it is in these fields that invisibility first revealed its potentially destructive force. This *avisuality*, to use the expression coined by Akira Mizuta Lippit, threatened to engender a catastrophe that would instantly annihilate human presence on earth.[8] Nuclear energy, however, does not endorse the negation of matter but rather its transformation: a conversion of matter into the infinitesimal, into a microscopic scale that is simultaneously invisible to the naked eye and colossal in its effects. It is no accident that contemporary artistic practices have so often turned to nuclear energy as the subject matter or 'material' of art.[9]

What these practices and experiences have in common is a compelling invitation not to oppose materiality and de-materialization in a simplistic manner. As a form of de-substantialization, the dematerialization of objects and media does not necessarily lead to the immaterial. Materials – even when they are invisible to the eye – might still possess a matter of some sort, leading to an *impasse* of the modernist aesthetics grounded on the scopic regime or the oculocentric model.

More recently, according to Jane Bennett, matter has been reconceived not as a passive and inert substance but rather as an activated and energetic element, subject to timescales that are much grander than those of human history.[10] This 'deep-time' of geological history and its unyielding remoteness force the limits of the anthropocentric humanities, eluding our comprehension. Exercising our ecological and geological imagination draws attention to the visual aspect of materiality while challenging common assumptions about the paradigmatic intertwining of time and matter in visual and cultural practices. It leads us to explore the power of images to visualize the materialities that make up our present in an historical framework.

Deep time also resists being reduced to the present moment, to a form of 'presentism' that contemporary art appears to cultivate; it exceeds the human scale and perhaps even our imagination.[11] How do artists respond to the materiality that is specific to what has been now called the Anthropocene? How do they visualize an increasingly controversial and threatening geological era that eschews clear-cut and reliable representations? How do they face the catastrophic events that this might engender? How do they respond to a future that is not only unfathomable, unpredictable, or inscrutable, but also unimaginable?

These questions might offer new methodological insights into the exploration of matter and materiality: both in the historiographical weight these terms carry and in their resonance in contemporary artistic practices. With regard to this session, they provide a useful background to shift the focus away from human orchestration towards human and non-human collaborations; to consider material flows and productively rethink the relationship between matter and form beyond the hylomorphic model, the formalism of art history, and the visibility of the Western scopic regime; and to broaden the *longue durée* – encompassing, according to Fernand Braudel, the history of the Mediterranean sea in the XVI century – into an ecology of deep time towards which the current era of the Anthropocene has stretched.

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As a testament to the liveliness of the material turn, this session offers only a small selection of the many proposals we received. This final line-up follows a rough chronological order but also groups papers by the nature of the material they primarily address. With Fabian Jonietz, we start our journey into matter high above ground: from the subtle, fine particles of dust floating in the air and quietly settling on the surface of Renaissance frescoes. We then move on to the glittering marble dust that is stucco, the stuff of otherworldly, celestial softness: of clouds, wings, fleshy dimples, and garlands spreading onto the baroque ceilings of early 18th-century Palermo in Nicolas Cordon's contribution. From there, we descend to the metallic, the mineral, and the lithic. First, with Bronwen Wilson, exploring the rocky landscape of La Verna, among mountains, boulders, and cliffs and then the underground, as Amy Ogata follows iron from Algerian mines to French furnaces and forges, all the way up to the railroads and lamp posts of the Second Empire. We continue with the complex curatorial stratigraphy of the garden of the Venice Biennale in Stefania Portinari's essay, before resurfacing to organic life: to Marc Quinn's manipulation of biological matter in Liliane Ehrhart's essay and finally, with Jing Yang, to the ecological entanglements of human, animal, and vegetal life of contemporary art in China.

Francesca Borgo, Riccardo Venturi

Notes

The session is the result of the authors' cooperation and collective decisions. Borgo authored paragraphs 1-7, 16 and Venturi 8-15 of the introduction. Both authors would like to thank the contributors for their collegiality and lively exchange.

[1] N. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, "Materiality, Sign of the Times", *The Art Bulletin* 101, no. 4 (2019): pp. 6-7, as well as the issue "Notes from the Field: Materiality", *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (2013): pp. 10-37.

[2] For both claims see, respectively, M. Cole, "The Cult of Materials", in S. Clerbois, M. Droth, eds., *Revival and Invention. Sculpture through its Material Histories* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Brussels, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 1-15; J. Roberts, "Things: Material Turn, Transnational Turn", *American Art* 31, no. 2 (2017): pp. 64-69.

[3] N. Heringman, "Deep Time at the Dawn of the Anthropocene", *Representations* 129, no. 1 (2015): pp. 56-85.

[4] E. Panofsky, "The History of Art as Humanistic Discipline", originally published in *The Meaning of the Humanities*, ed. T.M. Greene (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), pp. 98-118. See C. Fowler, "Technical Art History as Method", *The Art Bulletin* 101, no. 4 (2019): pp. 9-17.

[5] For a similar conclusion, see also C. Heuer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2019), pp. 174-195. On the impact of the discovery of geological time on 19th-century art, see S. O'Rourke, "Staring into the Abyss of Time", *Representations* 148 (2019): pp. 30-56.

[6] L.D. Henderson, "Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka, and the Ether of Space", in B. Clarke, L.D. Henderson, eds., *From Energy to Information: Representation in Technology, Art, and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 126-149.

[7] L. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973, 2001).

[8] A. Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[9] Cf. E. Carpenter, ed., *The Nuclear Culture Source Book* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016).

[10] J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

[11] F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).