



The Agency of Display Objects, Framings and Parerga

Edited by

Johannes Grave · Christiane Holm

Valérie Kobi · Caroline van Eck

Parerga and Paratexts

How Things Enter Language
Practices and Forms of Presentation
in Goethe's Collections

Volume 2

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Johannes Grave · Wolfgang Holler
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The Agency of Display

Objects, Framings
and Parerga

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JOHANNES GRAVE · CHRISTIANE HOLM
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The Agency of Display. Objects, Framings and Parerga— Introductory Thoughts

I

Decentring 'Agency'

For at least two decades, the humanities and social studies have been fascinated by new conceptualisations of the apparent power of things to speak and act. 'Things that talk,'¹ 'art and agency,'² 'the power of images,'³ and the 'agency of objects'⁴—to quote only the most influential keywords and phrases of these manifold and diverse discussions—more and more have attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines. It seems that neither structuralist approaches that insist on general preconditions guiding our social life, nor semiotic theories, are able to illuminate and completely explain our complex interactions with tangible things. Current approaches underline the peculiar, sometimes idiosyncratic intrinsic logic of things by referring to multifarious experiences of not being able to fully control them. The stubbornness of the so-called inanimate has become a challenging problem that can no longer be ignored.⁵ Scholars of science studies, art history, media studies, sociology, ethnology and anthropology have provided a wealth of evidence that puts the 'power' of things onto the agenda.⁶

Moreover, the most radical thinkers in this field, for example Bruno Latour or Philippe Descola, have taken this evidence as a reason to fundamentally question our familiar ontology and its distinction between subjects and objects.⁷ However, Latour's proposal to consider a 'symmetrical anthropology'⁸ that—from a methodological point of view—deals with human and 'non-human actors' in the same way has provoked strong criticism; and the same holds true, for example, for Horst Bredekamp's 'theory of image acts.'⁹ Both scholars did not

¹ Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk*, 2004. ² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998. ³ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 1989. ⁴ Gosden, 'What Do Objects Want?', 2005. ⁵ See, e.g.: Brown, 'Thing Theory,' 2001; Ferus and Rübel (eds.), *Die Tücke des Objekts*, 2009; and Frank, Gockel, Hauschild, Kimmich and Mahlke (eds.), 'Fremde Dinge,' 2007. ⁶ See: van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence*, 2015. ⁷ See: Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 2005; and Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, 2005. ⁸ See: Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1993, especially pp. 91–129; and Latour (interviewed by Miranda), 'A Dialog About a New Meaning of Symmetric Anthropology,' 2016. ⁹ See: Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, 2018 [2015].

hesitate to indicate the practical consequences of their theories: Latour drew the outlines of a new ‘politics of nature’ that forces us to rethink political ecology,¹⁰ whereas Bredekamp insisted on the ‘right to life’ that should also be attributed to images and artefacts.¹¹ But, above all, such approaches raise the question of what ‘agency’ means, if it is also assigned to things. As Alfred Gell, in many respects the most rigorous theorist of the agency of objects, has already argued, there can be no attribution of agency to objects without at least considering the question of whether there can be any agency without intentionality and consciousness.¹²

The harsh criticism that such approaches have provoked indicates a fundamental conflict between ontology and phenomenology in our dealings with objects. As language often mirrors ontological presuppositions, the problem might be connected to the limitations of our semantics: applying the phrase ‘agency of x’ to things or artefacts seems, at first sight, to suggest that these objects ought to be regarded as full equivalents to (human) subjects. Whereas Latour’s actor-network theory proposes to question and to overcome the established dichotomy of subjects and objects, the inherent ‘logic’ of our semantics tends to reinstate such dualisms and thereby persistently shapes our ontologies and epistemologies. This is one of several reasons why theories that try to do justice to the inescapable human need to attribute the power to act to objects, and to interact with them as if they are animate or even sentient, are often criticized. As Latour’s and Bredekamp’s theories tend to perpetuate the familiar semantics that implicitly attribute agency to *one* single actor, they seemingly assign the same agency that humans are capable of to objects. For that reason they are charged with animism, fetishism or the anthropomorphisation of the inanimate.¹³ From such a point of view the actor-network theory or Bredekamp’s concept of image-act would simply attribute to things what previously was taken for a unique capacity of human beings. If that were the case, we would still stage the same drama—merely having exchanged the actors that perform the roles.

However, the broad and productive reception that, for example, the actor-network theory has found in anthropology, archaeology, art history, and many other disciplines, points to the fact that it not only enlarges the scope of ‘actors’ in social life, but changes the way in which actions and interactions have to be conceived of. If the central assumptions of Latour’s actor-network theory are taken seriously, we have to break with the tendency to attribute agency exclusively to one person or even one object. Instead we have to understand ‘agency’ as an effect that is produced in and through the interactions between human actors and artefacts, in networks, art nexuses, collectives and processes. From such a perspective, agency is not exercised by only one actor but decentralised and

¹⁰ See: Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 2004. ¹¹ See: Bredekamp, *Das Beispiel Palmyra*, 2016; and Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, 2018 [2015], p. 282: ‘It is in the right to life that images may [...] claim for themselves that there arises the command that one care for them, use them, but also address them critically.’ ¹² See: Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998, pp. 12–26; and van Eck, ‘Alfred Gell,’ 2018. ¹³ See, e.g.: Wiesing, *Sehen lassen*, 2013, pp. 78–105; and Büchsel, ‘Das Ende der Bildermythologien,’ 2014. ¹⁴ Knappett and Malafouris, ‘Material and Nonhuman Agency,’ 2008, p. XI. ¹⁵ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998, pp. 12–26 and 28–38. ¹⁶ Latour, *Pando-*

distributed ‘in relational networks’¹⁴ or ‘art nexuses’¹⁵ that may constantly change. It ‘resides’—as Latour put it himself—‘in the blind spot in which society and matter exchange properties.’¹⁶ Action does not merely rely on a single actor who intentionally uses things to act on passive objects. Rather, it implies situations in which humans become entangled with non-human entities. Therefore, Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris have emphasized that we should be ‘more concerned with understanding agency as a situated process, rather than debating what or who is or is not an agent.’¹⁷

Current developments in the humanities offer a good basis to do so. Several approaches from different disciplinary contexts share the common objective of overcoming traditional definitions that trace agency back to causal relations between human intentions and events. Developed mostly independently from each other, these new approaches highlight phenomena that effectively codetermine the situations in which agency is produced, but which were hitherto underestimated or dismissed and condemned as idolatry, primitivism or fetishism. They throw light on factors that are different from the involved subjects and objects but nevertheless are indispensable for performing specific actions. The theory of affordances, recent research on ‘cultural techniques’ as well as practice theories, to mention only a few of the relevant approaches, show a shared interest in leaving behind the subject-object-dichotomy by exploring the relations and networks in which actions are situated. In doing so, these approaches prove to be highly attentive to largely neglected factors and to the potential relevance of contingencies for the production of agency.

By the neologism *affordance* James J. Gibson has conceptualized offerings or action possibilities in the environment of human actors that are not necessarily identical to specific functions of the thing concerned. One of Gibson’s key examples is an object that may be used as a seat without being constructed for this purpose: ‘If an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped, then it affords sitting-on.’¹⁸ Focussing on action *possibilities*, Gibson has not attributed agency to objects that exhibit affordances, nevertheless he has underlined that this perspective cuts across traditional distinctions between subject and object or actor and environment:

‘The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.’¹⁹

ra’s Hope, 1999, p. 190. ¹⁷ Knappett and Malafouris, ‘Material and Nonhuman Agency,’ 2008, p. XII. ¹⁸ Gibson, ‘The Theory of Affordances,’ 1977, p. 68. See also: Hodder, *Entangled*, 2012, especially pp. 48–50. ¹⁹ Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 1979, p. 127. See also: McGrenere and Ho, ‘Affordances,’ 2000 [http://graphicsinterface.org/proceedings/gj2000/gj2000-24/; DOI 10.20380/GI2000.24 (last accessed 3 March 2018)]: ‘By cutting across the subjective-objective barrier, Gibson’s affordances introduce the idea of actor-environment mutuality, the actor and the environment make an inseparable pair.’

Display Displayed¹

I

Introduction

In discussing display, I wish to make two main points. First, nothing shown to us, nothing humans view, is isolated. Humans never look at single things oblivious to those other things that surround them. Second, in questions of display, art is not everything—the entirety of the world is—though art itself can remind us of this state of affairs. Because this is a volume addressing questions of agency, I also wish to make a third point as a coda, though without going into any detail regarding recent notions derived from the work of Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell (in their different ways), and others.² This point is that at least some appeals to agency are hampered by philosophical naiveté.

First, though, let us remind ourselves that display is not an exclusively human phenomenon. Many living creatures engage in display, notably for courtship and conflict. Humans act similarly, and for a wide range of purposes. They enact displays of aggression, as in a Māori *haka*, performed by warriors to intimidate their foes. Humans arrange commercialized displays of sexual competition, as in the annual Miss World contest. They also show off hierarchy and status, as Cambridge University demonstrates each year at its Congregation ceremony to confer honorary degrees. Clad in academic robes, the participants process through the streets, displaying themselves. These are all displays as forms of performance, but display can also be a contrivance to show things off statically. Such

¹ I am grateful to Caroline van Eck and her colleagues for the invitation to give the introductory address at the symposium *Collections, Displays, and the Agency of Objects* at the University of Cambridge in September, 2017. My revision of the text preserves aspects of its origin as a lecture, although in published form it cannot be as generously illustrated as when delivered. I was able to undertake research and writing thanks to my permanent fellowship at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg (Advanced Study Institute in the Social Sciences and Humanities) at the Georg-August University, Göttingen. I should like to acknowledge the stimulation provided by the director, Martin van Gelderen, his colleagues, and the other fellows at the Kolleg. Jane Whitehead was my companion in just about all the explorations that inform my thoughts here expressed. She is also my most consistently stringent critic. This essay is for her. ² For Latour, see, among other publications, his *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-*

displays concern many kinds of human activity: from commercial displays of goods; to displays for religious purposes; to assertions of power or vainglory through structures in the built environment; or a determination to perpetuate a social memory by means of conspicuous monuments, often incorporating statuary. Humans engage in displays for more numerous reasons than other animals, and displays, both static and performative, or both, frequently jostle within a few yards of each other. Clearly, not every display contrived by humans concerns art, but it is with some among that relatively small group of things displayed as art—art in the European manner—that I shall begin.³

2

Inside

Consider *The Geographer* by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter, Johannes Vermeer. Art historians usually point out that this painting is likely one of a pair, the other work being *The Astronomer*, for they are recorded together a number of times between 1713 and 1797 when they were separated at an auction sale. Their pairing is far easier to accomplish in reproduction than in actuality, for the *Geographer* is in Frankfurt, and the *Astronomer* is in Paris (Fig. 1). These things cannot simply be hung side by side on a whim, although they have been brought together several times, including in an exhibition in Frankfurt in 1997 to mark the 200th anniversary of their separation.⁴ Instead of discussing further an art historical arrangement that defies the usual state of affairs in which the *Geographer* exists, I want to attend to that current existence. The *Geographer* is displayed in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt. Standing in front of it, a viewer might like to try to attend to it as a single thing, but she faces insuperable difficulties. She might try to exclude the surroundings from her peripheral vision by approaching the painting as close as possible without provoking the disapproval of a gallery attendant. She might try to focus on details, such as the dividers the geographer holds in his right hand. While it is true that a viewer—especially a practiced viewer—can mentally focus on such a detail (or on an entire single work to the exclusion of others beside it) by exercising a cognitive skill that temporarily excludes adjacent features from mental consideration, it is nonetheless the case that perceptually, however hard a viewer tries, she can never see those dividers unreservedly in isolation.⁵ They form part of a greater whole. That whole is the entire painted surface. But neither is

Theory, 2005; for Gell, see: *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, 1998. ³ I acknowledge that, whereas display is pancultural, all my examples concern art and artefacts in the European manner. Certain strategies of framing for display are culturally specific—including the physical enclosure of a rectangular pictorial field—whereas others—such as the deliberate setting of a thing within a specific environment—need not be. ⁴ Maek-Gérard (ed.), *Johannes Vermeer*, 1997. ⁵ I am grateful to Dario Gamboni for pointing out that viewers can concentrate on details with some success in spite of the inevitable presence of other things in the field of vision. Steven Lubar points out the invention of the ‘sciascope’ in the early twentieth century by Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston between 1893 and 1925. This device was designed to narrow the field of vision to enforce attentive looking at individual works or their details: Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum*, 2017, pp. 171–172.



Figure 1:
Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, 1668, oil on canvas, 50 × 45 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre;
and *The Geographer*, c. 1668–1669, oil on canvas, 53 × 46.6 cm. Frankfurt, Städel Museum.

the entire painting available to viewers in isolation, for it is in a black wooden frame that itself has an assertive physical presence in spite of its function of demarcating the pictorial world of the painting from the actual world in which it exists.⁶ That actual world begins with the blue wall on which the framed painting hangs. Also on the blue wall, immediately next to the framed painting, is its label that the viewer must find impossible to exclude from her field of vision. From a moderate distance, the blue wall seems to threaten to overwhelm the painting. This is inevitable, for no wall on which a painting hangs can dematerialize (although displays of paintings on transparent free-standing panels or by suspension within independent armatures have been contrived). On either side of the *Geographer* are further paintings, placed at a tactful distance, but an unavoidable presence nonetheless (Fig. 2). These paintings—including the *Geographer*—constitute an ensemble whose elements interact with one another. The relative importance of the Vermeer is signalled by the distance between it and the next painting on either side being greater than the distance between those flanking paintings and the other ones immediately adjacent to them. Not only the central placement of the Vermeer emphasizes its precedence, but

⁶ Jacques Derrida discussed aspects of the effects of framing in *La vérité en peinture*, 1978. I do not see a difference in kind between literal framing (including those artefacts associated with many pictures in the European manner) and the placement of an item so as to be deliberately framed by its surroundings.



Figure 2:
Installation shot of Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer* and other paintings.
Frankfurt, Städel Museum.

so too does the subtle differentiation of relative distance. The paintings form a hierarchical ensemble. That those five paintings, centred on the Vermeer, form a coherent group is stressed by their being framed by the doorway into their gallery when viewed from the adjacent gallery. From further back, that doorway frames the Vermeer alone, but on either side of that doorway are further paintings that from this more distant vantage point accompany the Vermeer and set it off. This arrangement doubles the device of flanking the Vermeer with ostensibly less important paintings, reinforcing its position within the display as being at the very top of this local hierarchy. Try as viewers might, they cannot consistently and sustainedly see the Vermeer as an isolated thing. The experienced and scholarly curator, Jochen Sander, has taken this into account. The company the *Geographer* keeps is specially chosen to make points concerning the character of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, and a hierarchy within it. The contrivance of such displays is one responsibility of curatorship. In exhibits, curators deliberately bring out particular aspects of things through positioning, mounting, juxtaposition, lighting, and the choice of wall colour and casework. The display centred on the *Geographer* in Frankfurt is an exposition of art historical ideas about seventeenth-century Dutch painting. But there are other ways of displaying paintings.

One collecting institution that stands out for its unusual mode of display is the Barnes Foundation, founded in 1922 in Lower Merion in suburban Philadelphia, but, since 2012, in a new downtown exhibition facility. Albert Barnes conceived of his collection as an

educational tool. He displayed his collection along lines directly inspired by the philosopher John Dewey, disregarding art historical considerations. Dewey dedicated his major aesthetic statement, *Art As Experience* (1934) to Barnes.⁷ This means that the dense hang intermingles major European paintings by artists such as Cézanne, Matisse, Renoir, Seurat, and Modigliani with New Mexican devotional paintings of saints (*retablos*), sub-Saharan African carvings, Pennsylvania Dutch painted chests, and European ironwork, such as keys and door hinges. As the Website states: ‘The ensembles created by Dr. Barnes combine art and craft, cosmopolitan and provincial styles, and objects from across periods and cultures.’⁸ This arrangement has long frustrated many conventional art historians who have longed to ‘liberate’ the great impressionist and post-impressionist paintings from what they dismiss as their surrounding ‘distractions.’ Yet such are the terms of Barnes’s will that the foundation’s new building in Philadelphia replicates the original galleries in Lower Merion almost precisely, and repeats its philosophically inspired hang in accordance with formal principles of line, space, light, and colour to demonstrate the supposed universalism of human expression.⁹

To suggest briefly that display radically affects how people apprehend things, let us focus not on a Seurat or a Cézanne, but on a New Mexican *retablo* of the kind sometimes characterized as ‘folk art.’ Many are dispersed among the other works in several of the galleries. Two among them are devotional images by Pedro Antonio Fresquís, who died in 1831: *The Virgin as Our Lady of Protection* and *Saint Rita of Cascia*. They flank an ensemble dominated by four paintings by Henri Rousseau, the most prominent being *Woman Walking in an Exotic Forest* (1905). The women in these three paintings may be approximately the same size and similarly oriented towards the viewer, but the two *retablos* have nothing further to do with the works of the self-taught French post-impressionist. We can compare this idiosyncratic use of such paintings with another use, still current, to be found in New Mexico churches, such as Nuestra Señora del Rosario (Our Lady of the Rosary), Las Truchas. Devotional paintings by Pedro Antonio Fresquís dominate its interior.¹⁰ The display of devotional images in this interior is no less contrived and purposeful than that in the Barnes Foundation. It would be a mistake to claim—as is often done—that the church is the proper context, whereas the museum is not. Rather, the museum proposes a recontextualization—in this instance perfectly ethically permissible—though such redeployments of culturally sensitive materials are not invariably legitimate. Certain northwest Pacific coast peoples’ masks, for instance, or Russian Orthodox icons, may not be appropriate items for museum collections given their inalienable sacred status.

Let us consider other instances of recontextualization. Some involve the use of reproduction, such as the perfectly legitimate pairing of reproductions of the Vermeer *Geographer*

and *Astronomer*. Many art historians create such displays of reproductions, rather than consider the actualities available to them in a variety of settings, including museums, as in the case of the *Geographer*, or in churches such as Nuestra Señora del Rosario. Indeed, some art historians who have never worked in a museum ‘believe that the aims and constraints of display lead it almost invariably to be a clog on alert, adaptable, and radical thinking,’ as I expressed it on a previous occasion.¹¹

Why this hostility to the display of things in the world on the part of so many art historians? They claim to seek to attend to individual works, but since the days of Heinrich Wölfflin, have instead contrived their own displays of reproductions with slide projectors, and latterly with PowerPoint, producing fantasy pairings irrespective of the physical character—most obviously the size—of the things reproduced. As a second example, following the Vermeer *Geographer*, we can take one painting isolated in reproduction as a slide: the *Assumption of the Virgin*, begun in Florence by Filippino Lippi, and completed after his death by Pietro Perugino in about 1506. I can project it side-by-side with Titian’s painting of the same subject of about ten years later, and make art historical points about differences between Florence and Venice, *disegno* and *colore*, and so on. But—and this seems vital—my wholly artificial display of reproductions can give the viewer no idea of the actual existence of these things in the world. Furthermore, whereas in my earlier example there is plentiful evidence that the two paintings by Vermeer were once treated as a pendant pair in actuality, in the case of the two *Annunciations*, the paintings have nothing to do with each other conceptually—other than theologically—or physically. Any art historical points I make by drawing the comparison concern the differences between these two paintings, not any association between them. The *Assumption* by Lippi and Perugino is in the Chapel of the Assumption of the Basilica della Santissima Annunciata in Florence, a quite different kind of space from that occupied by the Titian, which is over the high altar in the apse of the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. Furthermore, whereas the Titian retains its physical integrity, the Lippi and Perugino is but one element of a polyptych that was long ago dismembered and dispersed. It is a repurposed fragment. This is not to say that nothing of value can be claimed by making the kind of contrived comparison I have described, but I want to stress that the display of actual things in the world, rather than reproductions, invites different forms of attention: attention to each thing as part of a greater physical whole, a greater physical whole that can change radically over time, but that remains an element of actuality.

Each and every work is sited—is displayed—and has its being in particular circumstances more or less controlled by humans for a period sometimes of minutes, sometimes of decades, centuries or millennia.

⁷ Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 1934. He had earlier collaborated with Barnes to produce Dewey and Barnes et al., *Art and Education*, 1947 [1929]. ⁸ See: <https://www.barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/collection> (last accessed 23 October 2017). ⁹ Gaskell, ‘The Museum of Big Ideas,’ 2016, pp. 70–71. ¹⁰ See: Hayman,

‘Hidden Gem of the Taos High Road,’ *ColonialMexicoInsideandOut* (3 July 2017): <http://colonialmexicoinsideandout.blogspot.com/2017/07/new-mexican-gem-of-taos-high-road.html> (last accessed 23 October 2017). ¹¹ Gaskell, ‘Museums and Philosophy,’ 2012, p. 80.

Staging Belief:

Immersive Encounters and the Agency of Religious Art in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Religious art, perhaps more than any other category of artwork, has phenomenal potential to act upon its beholders. From depictions of saints that inspire devotion, to objects that actively perform miracles for the faithful, art's ability to affect exists somewhere in the relationship between the object and its beholder. But in the churches and ecclesiastical spaces of eighteenth-century Paris, an object's potential was often artfully amplified through external conditions. Framing devices, controlled modes of encounter, intentionally orchestrated viewpoints, and dynamic displays of choreographed objects all served to imbue artworks with a powerful agency. Indeed at their most dramatic, these spaces could be designed to incorporate the beholder, drawing them into immersive phenomenological experiences where they might encounter the supernatural happenings and complex mysteries of the Catholic faith.

This essay explores the agency of objects and the mechanisms of such interactive strategies in three eighteenth-century spaces: the refectory of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, the Dominican church of the Jacobins (now Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin), and the parish church of Saint-Roch. Each space presents different kinds of objects and strategies of display, from single artworks activated by their site-specific locations, to multiple objects staged in diorama-like settings, or multimedia installations where art and architecture work together to invite viewers to activate the scene. But despite their differing modes of operation,

¹ Research for this essay was funded by The Leverhulme Trust through an Early Career Research Fellowship held at Queen Mary University. Thanks to Caroline van Eck, Johannes Grave, and Valérie Kobi for their valuable comments on this essay. My explorations in this essay are drawn from a larger project investigating the role of material culture in religious experience in a book provisionally entitled *Art and Religion: Inside the Parish Churches of Eighteenth-Century Paris*. For important re-engagements with the vastly underexplored terrain of eighteenth-century French religious art, see: Schieder, *Au-delà des Lumières*, 2015 and Gouzi and Leribault (eds), *Le baroque des Lumières*, 2017. ² On the physical alterations to the canvas, see Gouzi, *Jean Restout*, 2000, p. 225.



Figure 1:
Jean Restout, *Pentecost*, 1732, oil on canvas, 465 × 778 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

what these spaces share is their creation of a situation that changes the way objects work. Drawn together here as case studies of 'framed' or 'displayed' objects, these religious spaces are also intended more generally as three examples to think with, that is, three examples through which to engage with the broader methodological imperatives of this book. How can frames and displays change the meaning of objects? And beyond even that, how can these external conditions give inanimate things active and performative roles, allowing them to enact ideas and create experiences for, and with, their beholders?¹

Pentecost in the Refectory

Jean Restout's *Pentecost* (Fig. 1) was painted in 1732 for the refectory of the Abbey of Saint-Denis. Long since removed from its original setting, the *Pentecost* hangs today in the Louvre, where—magnificent as the grand format painting remains—it is difficult for any museum-goer to grasp its full effect. On one hand, this is due to later physical alterations, the canvas having been cut down and reshaped; but on the other hand, it is because the object has been unwittingly broken by its display—broken in the sense that it no longer 'works' like it once did.² Now displayed at eye-level on a museum wall, hanging opposite windows that plunge it into raking light in the afternoon sun, Restout's dramatic illusionism is lost and with it the simulated phenomenological encounter that it once promised.

For its 'engaged spectators' (to borrow John Shearman's term), those residents of the Abbey of Saint-Denis for whom the artwork was originally intended, Restout's painting

worked not so much as an illustration of the Pentecost, but as a vision of it.³ It did not simply depict the events of the Pentecost as described in the Acts of the Apostles, but rather simulated something of the experience of this event: not only conveying what happened, but also triggering comparable feelings of awe, unease, surprise, and even fear.⁴ Designed to be hung high on the refectory wall, Restout's illusion worked by making the viewer look up.⁵ With single-point perspective constructed around a hidden vanishing point, existing somewhere beyond the picture plane, Restout conjured a plunging cavernous space, unfathomable from where we stand below. But with *di sotto in su* architecture and foreshortened figures, he established spatial continuity between this pictorial realm and ours, a continuity reinforced by our shared imagined encounter with its figures. Like the Apostles in the foreground, we witness the scene from below, involuntarily emulating their strained dizzying actions of looking up towards the dissolving ceiling.

How Restout's illusion worked is best understood by imaginatively returning the painting to its original setting in the refectory of Saint-Denis (Fig. 2). Housed in the southern wing of the cloisters beside the basilica, the hall still serves as a refectory, though now for the private girls' secondary school, the Maison d'Éducation de la Légion d'Honneur. Restout's *Pentecost* was painted for the arched space at the far end of the refectory, which, as is evident from the doorways beneath, was over two metres from the ground. This already offers some sense of the beholder's corporeal condition—how the body had to be in order to see the *Pentecost*: whether standing or sitting, the neck would be craned, the eyes directed aloft, and perhaps a foot or a hand would be placed behind to support the backwards tilt of the body. The beholder would, in other words, be forced to share the corporeal condition, and so something of the bodily experience, of those painted witnesses within the scene.

Envisaging the *Pentecost* back in its refectory arch, it is clear that the bodily experience of the painting's actors and spectators is not all that was shared between the world-within the painting and the world-without. Imaginatively reconstructing the painting in that hall, we find a continuity not just between the bodies, but also between the spaces. At one level there is an inherent functional resonance in this site-specific location. After all, the Pentecost supposedly took place in the Cenacle or Upper Room, an upstairs space in Jerusalem frequented by the Apostles, which in Christian tradition is also the location of the Last Supper. Given the Upper Room's association with the act of sharing meals, the Pentecost, like the Last Supper, is an entirely concordant subject to adorn the wall of a refectory (most famously in the case of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in the refectory of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan).

³ On Shearman's notion of the 'engaged spectator' and displays of religious art that address, embrace, reposition and are completed by their intended viewers, see: Shearman, *Only Connect*, 1992. ⁴ The events of Pentecost are recounted in the New Testament in Acts 2:1–31. ⁵ For further exploration of this mechanism of immersion designed around encouraging the viewer to look up, see: Williams, 'Witnessing Illusion,' forthcoming.



Figure 2:
Original location of Restout's *Pentecost* in the former refectory of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis, Maison d'Éducation de la Légion d'Honneur.

At another level, there is also a marked visual resonance between the space within the painting and the space in which the canvas resides. That resonance echoes both in materials and in forms: from the bare smooth stone that constructs both the ledge and columns of Restout's Upper Room and the walls and ceiling of the refectory; to the recurring architectural elements, like Restout's line of columns that repeats the refectory's window embrasures, or the corbels supporting the refectory's vaulted ceiling that find a formal corollary in the corbels supporting the stone ledge upon which the Virgin stands. Almost in the spirit of a *trompe l'œil*, Restout pushes his illusion to the edge to merge the space of the beholder with that of the scene beheld. In its original state, moreover, that merging would have been even more complete. Before the later alterations, the canvas was not only larger but also shaped to fit its arched space. And in its shady refectory niche away from the window, Restout's illusion was safe from the raking light that might threaten to rupture its depth as it does now in the Louvre. Filling its wall, framed by the ceiling itself, Restout's *Pentecost* would have blended almost seamlessly with the room around it, extending the space of the hall through the wall, like a vision through to the Upper Room, where the ceiling was breaking open for this dramatic event to occur.

In terms of its display strategies, Restout's *Pentecost* mobilizes the simplest mechanism of the three examples offered here: a single painting designed to hang in a large, relatively

empty hall.⁶ But the simplicity of the strategy certainly belies its effectiveness. Through its site-specific location and those bodily and spatial continuities between the object and its setting, the framing devices and mode of encounter set up an illusionistic relationship, moving the painting beyond merely addressing the beholder to instead actually implicate them in the scene depicted. Standing in that space, looking up at Restout's *Pentecost*, the inhabitants of the abbey would have found themselves in the path of those rays of light descending as tongues of flame, craning upwards to see for themselves what the Apostles saw, and perhaps even sensing an inkling of what they felt. What was created in this installation in the refectory of Saint-Denis was no mere decorative adornment, but rather an encounter with an empirically unknowable moment, a chance for the faithful spectator to *almost*, if not quite, experience what it was like when the Holy Spirit descended to earth.

Transfiguration in the Chapel

In 1723, François Lemoyne painted the *Transfiguration* on the ceiling of a Jacobin chapel just off Rue du Bac. Now the parish church of Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin, re-designated as such following the diocesan reorganisation during the French Revolution, the church is unusually small and architecturally simple for a Parisian parish church, due to its original function as a chapel for this French branch of the Dominican Order. When first constructed in the seventeenth century, the building comprised only a short nave, a transept, and a tiny choir, but in the 1720s an additional chapel (now the Chapel of Saint-Louis) was built as an annex behind the choir to make more space for the growing order. It was on the ceiling of this chapel that Lemoyne painted his *Transfiguration*, which, thanks to the large aperture at the back of the choir, is visible from the nave of the main building (Fig. 3).⁷

As an example of an object activated by the framing devices and modes of encounter of its architectural situation, Lemoyne's *Transfiguration* is in some ways similar to Restout's *Pentecost* at Saint-Denis: an installation revolving around a single painted surface. But this time the architectural setting is more elaborate—not an empty hall, but a set of interlocking spaces with multiple viewpoints—and far more is demanded of the beholder to make the *Transfiguration* work in its entirety.

Understanding how the display strategies of Lemoyne's *Transfiguration* worked does not in this instance require any imaginative reconstruction, for the work is still in situ and the building has undergone no significant changes. Any visitor to the church of Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin is thus able to experience the work in much the same way as it was

⁶ Restout's *Pentecost* originally had a pendant, *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law*, hanging at the other end of the refectory. This painting is lost and was possibly destroyed during the French Revolution. With no sketches or reproductions, it is now impossible to reconstruct the effect the two works may have had together, but from the brief descriptions that remain, it certainly seems that it would have provided a comparable illusion at the other end of the hall. On Restout's *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law*, see: Gouzi, *Jean Restout*, 2000, p. 224. ⁷ On Lemoyne's artistic practice, see: Bordeaux, *François Lemoyne*, 1984.



Figure 3: François Lemoyne's *Transfiguration of Christ* (1723) seen from transept looking through to Chapel of Saint-Louis in the former church of the Jacobins. Paris, Church of Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin.

originally intended. This encounter begins quite soon after entering the church, when, from the start of the nave, the *Transfiguration* can first be glimpsed. At this point, all that can be seen is the very base of the mountain and the feet of the Apostles, but this is just enough to pique interest and draw the beholder onwards. As the beholder walks along the nave towards the choir, more and more of the illusion is gradually revealed. By halfway, the bodies of the three Apostles are almost entirely visible, the colours of their garments iconographically identifying at least two of them—Peter in his customary blue and yellow, John in his customary pink and green, and James in white and purple. By three-quarters of the way along, the Apostles are fully resolved and it is clear from the glimpse of the trailing garments of the prophets that something is happening above their heads. Then finally, upon reaching the transept and the edge of the choir, the full *Transfiguration* is revealed with the shimmering body of Christ flanked by the prophets, Moses and Elijah.

In this space, where the painting changes constantly as the beholder moves through the church, viewing Lemoyne's *Transfiguration* feels more like attending a theatrical performance than looking at a painting. The ambulation required to activate the scene gives the experience something of the embodied liveness of the theatre, or perhaps more accurately, it is like an inversion of a magic lantern show: instead of a series of static images

Ready-Made Eye-Opener: Models, Functions and Meanings of the Ironwork in Albert C. Barnes's Displays

The Barnes Foundation is both famous and infamous for the way in which it displays the works of art collected by Albert C. Barnes. The displays were designed by Barnes himself and for some commentators, they express the collector's idiosyncrasy and amount to great art being held hostage to a rich man's whims.¹ For others and especially for Barnes's collaborators, his disciples, and the students of the Foundation, they are the instruments of a veritable school of seeing.² Another controversy surrounding the Barnes Foundation concerns its location. When it decided to move from suburban Merion, where Barnes had established it, to downtown Philadelphia, opposition resulted in the courts authorizing the move only on condition that the displays be recreated in the new building, which itself replicates the dimensions and disposition of the rooms. A positive outcome of this turn of events is that a greater amount of scholarly and public attention has since been devoted to the displays as such. *Masterworks*, the catalogue written by Judith F. Dolkart and Martha Lucy for the reopening of the Foundation in 2012, and the didactic apparatus included in the new presentation explicitly discuss Barnes's ensembles, the mural compositions that he arranged and rearranged until 1951, when his death and his testament made them final.³

Signs on the Wall

A particularly odd aspect of Barnes's displays is the inclusion of ironwork on the walls alongside the paintings. It never fails to strike visitors but remained unstudied until very recently.⁴ Yet in relation to the question of display and the agency of objects, this aspect

¹ See for example: Greenfeld, *The Devil and Dr. Barnes*, 1987; Anderson, *Art Held Hostage*, 2003. ² See: Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 2004. ³ See: Dolkart and Lucy, *The Barnes Foundation, Masterworks*, 2012. ⁴ See: Wattenmaker, 'In the Light of New Material,' 2015. In her preface to this catalogue, Judith Dolkart estimates the number of objects concerned at 'nearly nine hundred' and lists them as 'hinges and hasps, locks and keys, door knockers and latches, dough cutters and surgical saws' (Cathelineau and Dolkart (eds.), *Strength and Splendor*, 2015, p. 7). Wattenmaker considers that it is 'one

is of particular interest, since it raises the issue of what the ironwork does to the paintings, what they do together to the spectators that the paintings alone could not do, and whether the wrought iron pieces are *parerga* to the paintings, or *erga* in their own right, or play roles that are mutable and exchangeable. The oddity lies in the disregard that their combination manifests toward taxonomy and hierarchy, mixing as it does paintings by the likes of Cézanne and Matisse with anonymous appliances, fine art of the greatest symbolic and financial value with specimens of the so-called decorative and applied arts, which may be beautifully crafted but are much less prized. How should one account for this unusual yet intentional feature of display?

An answer came to me during my first visit to the Foundation in Merion, on 30 January 2009, by way of observations I made and photographs I took, in response to the question itself.⁵ What dawned upon me after a while and became a crucial element in the experience of my visit was that there exist meaningful and consistent relations between the paintings and the ironwork, relations that one could call resemblances, analogies or (metaphorically) rhymes, and that the pieces of wrought iron point to characteristics of the paintings. The iron fittings placed on top of Charles Demuth's *Masts* and of Henri Matisse's *Reclining Nude* in Room 18 (Fig. 1), for example, parallel the respectively vertical and horizontal formats of the two pictures and emphasize their contrasted compositional structure: the geometric, almost orthogonal skeleton provided by the mast and yards in Demuth's painting is further abstracted by a hinge topped with a keyhole escutcheon; the same process is applied by a serpentine hinge to the sensuous arabesque of Matisse's odalisque, while the centrality of the nude's belly is wittily underscored by a sixteenth-century *repoussé* plaque in the shape of three intertwined crescents.

Such analogies, once their possibility has entered into one's consciousness, prove to be too systematic to be accidental. Their existence also finds a confirmation and an expansion in echoes of the same kind noticeable among the various paintings as well as between the paintings and other objects, such as pieces of early American furniture or ceramics, the presence of which also tends to confuse visitors used to the purist aesthetics of the white-box displays of modern art. In Room 23, for example, a chromatic, formal and directional analogy connects the nude boy carrying a vase on his head in Pablo Picasso's *Young Girl with Goat* (1906), the red tower of an eponymous painting by Giorgio De Chirico (1913) and an oversized candle, placed side by side.⁶

There is a special quality in the experience of noticing such relations oneself, without being alerted to their existence, and of being at first unsure of discovering or inventing

of the outstanding collections of wrought iron objects in the United States,' with works coming 'mainly from America, France, and Germany, but also [...] by Spanish, Italian, Netherlandish, and English smiths,' while 'the origins, nomenclature, and dates of fabrication often remain imprecise' (Wattenmaker, 'In the Light of New Material,' 2015, p. 26). ⁵ My thanks to Martha Lucy for welcoming me at the Foundation and authorizing me to take and reproduce photographs of the displays. ⁶ Reproduced in Gamboni, "'Musées d'auteur,'" 2011, p. 199.



Figure 1:
Barnes Foundation, Room 18, detail from the East wall: *Masts* (1919) by Charles Demuth and *Reclining Nude* (1923–1924) by Henri Matisse, topped by ironwork.

them. Writing about the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris, André Breton thus spoke in 1960 of the ‘intersigns fluttering’ between two paintings, and of dreaming to ‘intercept’ them, ‘exactly half-way between the external eye and the white-hot inner eye.’⁷ Nonetheless, I was thrilled to find quoted in *Masterworks* an unpublished letter from Barnes to the American painter Stuart Davis in which, on 1 April 1942, the collector explained the inclusion of ironwork in his displays:

‘First—the motives, such as arabesques, patterns, etc., discernible in a picture have their analogue, sometimes a very close one, in the iron work. Second—we regard the creators of antique wrought iron, just as authentic an artist as a Titian, Renoir, or Cézanne. This is not to say that what they express is of equal importance or magnitude, but that they do express something of their own experience.’⁸

Since then, Richard J. Wattenmaker quoted two other letters in which Barnes gave similar explanations: on 29 December 1936, Barnes wrote to Kenneth Clark, then director of the National Gallery in London, that he was on his way to show ‘that there is no essential esthetic difference between the forms of the great painters or sculptors, and those of the iron-workers of several hundred years who made such commonplace objects as

hinges, door handles, locks, etc.’; and on 5 March 1948, he wrote to the antiques dealer and scholar Charles F. Montgomery that he intended to prove his case that ‘the great artists of all time’ included ‘workers in the so-called useful arts like wrought iron, pewter, glass, pottery, etc.’ by ‘putting pieces of wrought iron next to some of the best paintings covering the period from the 13th to the 20th centuries.’⁹

The disregard of taxonomies, therefore, corresponded to Barnes’s anti-hierarchical attitude, also expressed—not without contradictions and unintended results—in his way of granting or refusing access to the collection, which privileged workers and black Americans at the expense of collectors and art historians. Barnes was not alone in his convictions and a 1937 article by his close collaborator the philosopher John Dewey, entitled ‘The Educational Function of a Museum of Decorative Arts,’ called for ‘the breaking down of the walls that so long divided what were called the fine arts from applied and industrial arts,’ and hailed the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in New York for arranging its objects ‘on the basis of community of design rather than by historic periods,’ since ‘for the purpose of learning to see the design in virtue of which an object has esthetic form, grouping together a chair, a rug, a ceramic object and a piece of iron work may be much more effective.’¹⁰ This purpose fitted the fact that ‘artist-designers’ occupied a central place in the public of such museums and of the schools associated with them: ‘To learn to see for artistic purposes is to learn to detect organizing design, whether the object seen be a statue, a picture, a tapestry, a pitcher or a roll of wall-paper.’¹¹

This aim corresponded to the first reason given by Barnes in his letter to Davis, in which he employed the notion of ‘motif’ in a formal rather than iconographical sense, as the examples of ‘arabesques, patterns, etc.’ make clear. Dewey spoke of ‘plastic design’ and indeed, we can consider that Barnes prioritized the ‘plastic sign’ over the ‘iconic sign’—using the semiotic distinction proposed by the Belgian Groupe μ—without defining them as mutually exclusive.¹² This could suit the art of Stuart Davis, who included iconic references but abstracted elements such as buildings, trees, boats, windows, etc. to the point where they composed a vocabulary of quasi-pictograms, combinable in colourful patterns. There are no works by Davis in the Barnes Foundation, but many objects attest to the collector’s preference for abstracted shapes and some of them are very similar to the silhouettes of the ironwork on the walls, for example a bronze statuette in an orant position labelled ‘Persian / 8th century B.C.’ and animal figures painted on Native American earthenware containers.¹³

Barnes did not collect ‘non-objective’ art, and the kind of abstraction he enjoyed was indebted to the post-impressionist, ‘decorative’ ideal of a depiction emancipated from the ‘servile imitation of nature.’¹⁴ His explanation to Davis can thus be compared to Maurice

⁷ Breton, ‘Gustave Moreau [1960],’ 2002, p. 363. ⁸ Quoted after Dolkart, ‘To See As the Artist Sees,’ 2012, p. 26. The letter is quoted more extensively in Wattenmaker, ‘In the Light of New Material,’ 2015, p. 33. ⁹ Quoted in Wattenmaker, ‘In the Light of New Material,’ 2015, pp. 30 and 25. ¹⁰ Dewey, ‘The Educational Function of a Museum of Decorative Arts,’ 1937, p. 98. ¹¹ Dewey, ‘The Educational Function of a Museum

of Decorative Arts,’ 1937, p. 98. ¹² See: Groupe μ, *Traité du signe visuel*, 1992. ¹³ See: Dolkart and Lucy, *The Barnes Foundation, Masterworks*, 2012, pp. 344–345. ¹⁴ Gauguin, ‘Notes sur l’art à l’Exposition Universelle,’ 1889, p. 86. See: Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin*, 2014, pp. 33–40.



Figure 2:
Vincent van Gogh, *The Postman (Joseph-Étienne Roulin)*, 1889,
oil on canvas, 65.7 × 55.2 cm, inv. BF37. Philadelphia, Barnes Foundation.

Denis's famous dictum that 'a picture—before being a warhorse, a nude woman or telling some other story—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern.'¹⁵ Another expression of the same ideal in Barnes's collection is Vincent van Gogh's portrait of *The Postman Joseph-Étienne Roulin* (Fig. 2), in which the model's bust is shown in front of an ornamental imaginary wallpaper. The arabesques of the vegetable motif echo those of the postman's bifurcated beard, and Barnes, who could not but notice such a device, may have been inspired by this fictional wall to provide his real ones with metal ornaments—he did not dress the walls of his galleries in patterned fabric or paper, as did the collectors and museum founders of the Gilded Age, nor did he paint them white, like the modernists, but he used jute cloth, a choice consonant with the primitivism of a Gauguin and a Van Gogh. The further abstracted forms of a later generation, for instance

those of Georges Braque and Joan Miró, brought the analogies between picture and neighbouring ironwork close to an identity of outline, as if picture and ironwork coincided midway between figuration and ornament.

Antecedents, Models and Parallels

Barnes's inclusion of ironwork was exceptional in the context of art displays, but not in the broader one of collections and museums at large, where precedents and possible models can be found in the realms of the decorative and applied arts and of ethnography. A local antecedent is the Mercer Museum, a vast collection of early American tools and everyday artefacts assembled by Henry Chapman Mercer, an archaeologist close to the American Arts and Crafts Movement, and displayed on a grand scale in a 1908–1910 concrete building in his native Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 27 miles north of Philadelphia.¹⁶ Further away, but internationally famous, was the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles in Rouen. Devoted to all objects made of iron, from Gallo-Roman antiquity to the present (Fig. 3), collected by the painter and photographer Jean-Louis Henri Le Secq Destournelles and his son Henri, it was installed in 1921 in a disused medieval church after partial presentations at the 1900 Universal Exposition and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.¹⁷

Barnes started collecting ironwork in the spring of 1936, after visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Musée Le Secq des Tournelles.¹⁸ His interest in such collections may seem surprising, since the focus of his own collecting activity until then had been modern painting, but it was connected to his social origins and concerns.¹⁹ Although he had become extremely wealthy, Albert Coombs Barnes was born in Kensington, a working-class neighbourhood to the north of Philadelphia. His father was a butcher, probably of Quaker origins, and his Methodist mother was descended from the German immigrants who had colonized a large part of the State. Barnes also collected Pennsylvania German furniture and utensils; their presence is relatively discrete in the galleries of the Foundation but they occupy pride of place in his country house Ker-Feal, a 1775 stone farmhouse in Chester County which he purchased in 1940 and arranged as a small museum of popular art.²⁰ In the realm of wrought iron, Barnes demonstrated a preference for simple, straightforward objects of everyday use, whereas Le Secq had searched for complex masterpieces.²¹

¹⁵ Louis [Denis], 'Definition of Neo-Traditionism,' 1890, pp. 540–542. It may be worth noting that Barnes, being born in 1872, belonged to the generation that Denis (born in 1870) called 'of 1890' and which comprised his fellow Nabis. ¹⁶ See: *The Mercer Museum Guide*, 1957. ¹⁷ See: Cathelineau, 'The Musée Le Secq des Tournelles,' 2015, pp. 11–24. ¹⁸ See: Cathelineau, 'The Musée Le Secq des Tournelles,' 2015, pp. 25 and 30. ¹⁹ See: Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 2004. It must be added that Barnes did not only include ironwork in his displays but also, as Wattenmaker summarizes, 'works as diverse as African masks, examples of Chinese painting and calligraphy, New Mexican retablos, and dazzling Navajo rugs' (Wattenmaker, 'In the Light of New Material,' 2015, p. 25). ²⁰ See: Dolkart and Lucy, *The Barnes Foundation, Masterworks*, 2012, pp. 23–25. ²¹ See: Wattenmaker, 'In the Light of New Material,' 2015, pp. 25 and 38.

Death by/Life by Wall Label¹

In *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida reflected on the relationship between what he called ‘*ergon*’ and ‘*parergon*.’ While the former term refers to the work itself, the latter describes its accompaniments, which are neither part of nor distinct from the work. Within this category, he placed such details as clothes in pictures, or columns in architecture, but also picture frames. Following a long art-theoretical and philosophical tradition, he studied their interconnectedness as well as the ways in which they struggle for the viewer’s attention. This breakout from the domain of the work and the outreaches of the *parerga* to neighbouring structures such as frames or museum walls, and thus the shifting conflict between ‘work’ and ‘accompaniments,’ have also drawn the attention of other scholars, such as Gérard Genette in literature and Joseph Grigely in art exhibitions.² The particular *parerga* of interest in this volume are precisely those whose exhibitory purpose is to mediate artworks in museums for their viewers. This includes material elements such as frames, pedestals, vitrines, and presentational aspects of gallery setup such as lighting, and informational accompaniments such as catalogues and pedagogical resources. A number of these powerful means for staging artworks have repeatedly been the subject of debates around the question of displaying art for the past thirty years. Among these, the wall label in its most reduced form, i.e. as a pure object label—on which I focus here—seems hardly spectacular, and appears to be nothing more than a mere bureaucratic, and in most cases very inconspicuous, addendum. This seemingly ‘pure facticity’ might be a reason why, in contrast to what we observe with their larger, pedagogically motivated, relatives (i.e. fully-fledged explanatory or interpretation-guiding wall texts), object labels have thus far not drawn much scholarly attention.³

In most cases, object labels consist of only a few lines, giving such factual information as the name of artist, the title of object, the date, and—definitely—the owner. Occasionally, there is additional information on the material, size, and remarks on the work’s

provenance. And yet, in museum and exhibition practices, their status is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, an object label can be seen, as Derrida put it, as an element whose ‘traditional determination [is] not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.’⁴ On the other hand, the *added* effect the label bestows on the artwork obviously ‘is threatening’ in two senses.⁵ Firstly, it disrupts viewers’ aesthetic experience of the artwork, and secondly, it jeopardizes the survival of the artwork through its potential to undermine its status as perceived from various angles: objects, viewers, and curators.

With regard to their epistemic status, wall labels in art galleries can be compared to labels for plants such as those found in herbals.⁶ Both are among the ‘material constants’ of their disciplines;⁷ both provide information in a condensed form (the plant labels only include name, location, and date); and both primarily serve as a means of identification. Moreover, as is the case with systematic organization in botany, art displays, too, are dedicated to designating the presented objects accurately. Indeed, correctly identifying objects is the foundation of practically all areas of art history. Despite these commonalities, there is some difference in the value traditionally attributed to either form of identification with regard to their relationship to the actual object. While the botanist who headed for the fields with pencil, paper, and vasculum was ‘scoffed at’⁸ in the nineteenth century, art history, on the other hand, has, for the last two hundred years, caricatured the museumgoer who ignores the artwork in favour of thoroughly studying the label or the catalogue.⁹ Isaac Robert and George Cruikshank’s etching *A Shilling Well Laid Out* is one example of this kind of mockery (Fig. 1). The picture shows an exhibition room of the early nineteenth century crowded with visitors who are all busying themselves with sophisticated chit-chat or at best glancing at the catalogue, but no-one actually engages with a painting. This is highlighted even more as an absurdity by the fact that many of the works are portraits. It seems that these visitors are quite ignorant of the proper behaviour in the presence of art as they absurdly overestimate the significance of the accompanying written material. This illustrates the precarious status of exhibition catalogues, collection guides and labels throughout their history.

And yet, their function as the identifying markers of art objects turns out to be perennial. Not only are objects without labelling just as confusing in a museum as wall labels next to empty showcases. The value of the minimal version of the wall label also remained undisputed during the heated debate that took place in Germany in the 1970s about the question of the museum as ‘Lernort contra Musentempel’ (place of study versus temple

¹ Many thanks to Regine Ehleiter, Mario Kramer, Marc Naroska, Jeffrey Saletnik, Barbara Segelken, for hints, comments, a text, a photograph from a US-american museum display, and an interview; to the participants of the workshop *Collections, Displays and the Agency of Objects* (Cambridge, UK, 20–23.9.2017); and to Ruben Bieker for his translation. ² Genette, *Paratexts*, 1997; Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics*, 2010. ³ Art history as well as museum studies and interest in museum didactics has thus far addressed only the pedagogical/elaborate version of wall texts and labels. The only work from which

the present essay was able to take some examples is Voss, *Hinter weißen Wänden*, 2015, pp. 17–27. ⁴ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1987 [1978], p. 82. ⁵ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1987 [1978], p. 56. ⁶ On labels in herbals see: te Heesen, ‘Beschriftungsszenen,’ 2008, pp. 106–115. ⁷ te Heesen, ‘Beschriftungsszenen,’ 2008, p. 108. ⁸ te Heesen, ‘Beschriftungsszenen,’ 2008, p. 114. ⁹ Voss, *Hinter weißen Wänden*, 2015, pp. 18–19, see also for the following example.



Figure 1:
Isaac Robert and George Cruikshank, *A Shilling Well Laid Out*, 1821, hand-coloured etching and aquatint, 15 × 23.6 cm.

of muses).¹⁰ Interestingly, it was precisely the disagreements about wall labels that sparked the debate. There were voices such as Erich Steingraber's—then director of Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg—who at the annual conference of the Association of German Museums 1974 called wall label a 'destruction of art.'¹¹ However, such positions were primarily directed at the interpretive object explanations, and did not intend to question the validity of the bare label. Beyond the polar opposition of information and explanation versus aesthetic experience, the question of how a museum understands its pedagogical duty is still subject to negotiation. The worry that the *parergon* might override the *ergon* is still present among those concerned even with object labels.

¹⁰ See the volume Spickernagel and Walbe (eds.), *Das Museum: Lernort contra Musentempel*, 1976.
¹¹ Quoted in Steen, 'Ausstellung und Text,' 1995, pp. 46–62, especially p. 47. ¹² Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics*, 2010, p. 7: 'I use the critical term "exhibition prosthetics" to describe an array of these conventions, particularly (but not exclusively) in relation to exhibition practices. Perhaps out of habit, we seem decidedly inured to the experience of conventions like these. They are a part of the machinery of exhibiting—we read titles, labels, and catalogues because their authority establishes for the artwork a sense of place. In this respect, moving closer to the artwork involves moving away from the artwork—to look closer at fringes and margins and representations, and ask what seems to me a very fundamental question: to what extent are these various exhibition conventions actually part of the art—and not merely

Labels make a contribution to the myth of the 'pure' artwork since they are instructive about what significance is to be attributed to the work (a Picasso? a copy?), and in doing so they suggest certainty. They seem to be so closely interlinked with artworks that they can be included in what Joseph Grigely described as 'exhibition prosthetics.'¹² Grigely, an artist and a theoretician, wrote, 'a prosthesis remediates—it fills, it extends, it supplements. But it does not do this without also becoming a part of, not a part from, the body that it fills, extends, and supplements.'¹³ '[W]e read titles, labels, and catalogues because their authority establishes for the artwork a sense of place,' Grigely states.¹⁴ Empirical observations of museumgoer behaviour have shown that 85.1 percent of the visitors observed actually read museum texts.¹⁵ It can be assumed that many more read labels. After looking briefly at the object, viewers—as has also been observed by another author—turn to the object label to cross-check the visual against the linguistic information.¹⁶

Because of their often temporary materializations as well as their replaceability, labels are ephemera by nature. Detached from the object, they are placed not only in the above-mentioned tension between information and aesthetics, but also in a tension between 'fact' and form. In what follows, I am going to investigate further the power and the association of object labels as well as the tensions and conflicts which characterize them.

'Death by Wall Label'

In his 2008 essay, 'Death by Wall Label,' the artist and media-art curator Jon Ippolito polemicized against the dominant norms of object labels' content.¹⁷ Ippolito was opposed to the practice of ascribing a single artist's name, title, date, or definite specifics on material and media or dimensions to a piece of media art, and thus fixing it in a way which is in most cases impossible to preserve. To his mind, media art crucially depends on its variability, i.e. the possibility of modifying most of these features if necessary. The wall label, for him, was the symbolic representation of the obsolete urge for an original:

'The gravest threat to the cultural survival of new media art may very well be its wall label. Few manacles on creativity have been as ubiquitous [...]. [T]he reductionism of the wall label [...] threatens to obliterate digital culture. For new media art can survive only by multiplying and mutating. From computer-based installations to video multicasts, digital collaborations are the rule rather than the exception, and a work often undergoes

an extension of it?' ¹³ Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics*, 2010, p. 8. ¹⁴ Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics*, 2010, p. 7. ¹⁵ McManus, 'Oh, Yes, They Do,' 1989, pp. 174–189. ¹⁶ Tyradellis, *Müde Museen*, 2014, pp. 117–118: '90% of all visitors first look at the exhibit, then look at the wall label. It is a cultural reflex of ours that sensory experience immediately strives to be cancelled out conceptually, which in everyday life takes care of itself (in that we attribute the correct terms to everyday objects without much prior thinking), which is achieved, though, in the artificial context of the museum through the textual authority of the standard items author and title. Both indications represent knowledge which helps deprive the object of its disquieting strangeness.' ¹⁷ Ippolito, 'Death by Wall Label,' 2008, pp. 106–132.

changes in personnel, equipment, and scale as it diffuses across new media festivals, exhibitions, and Web sites. Like a shark, a new media artwork must keep moving to survive.¹⁸

In the subsequent passages, Ippolito examines each of the constituent data of object labels in turn. I shall describe here only a few examples. Firstly, re-creators who may be obliged to adapt software or re-install works in exhibition spaces and thus make consequential decisions, are often not named at all. Secondly, in the development of media art works throughout successive festivals and exhibitions, changes are often made to titles, but objects' biographies are not traceable because older titles are normally not included in the information on labels. Thirdly, given the phenomenon of media obsolescence, it is impossible to fix the material and media of a piece to one specification.¹⁹ In short, Ippolito saw in the wall label the model and the metaphor of a static attitude and a reductionism which is in dire need of reform, because of its falsifying nature. To go even further, he claims that his observations are applicable not only to media art, but to installation art in general and at least in part also to pieces of performance and process art. Moreover, in museum jargon, the exhibit label is commonly referred to as 'tombstone.' While Ippolito does not address this peculiarity, it seems that in his view, the label can be said to accomplish its task.

The extent to which alterations to object labels are representative of a status loss is seen most distinctly in adjustments of ascriptions that are discovered to be incorrect. This kind of 'death by wall label' is perhaps the most feared in museums—the object is not what it pretends to be. It is an imposter that has sneakily intruded on our attention and deceived us into granting it our admiration. In other words, the experts have failed us with an incorrect statement—the Emperor is not wearing any clothes!—and the authorities are exposed along with the object.

One example of a long-postponed label adjustment is the bust of *Flora* kept in Berlin, which Wilhelm Bode attributed to Leonardo. Indeed, soon after Bode purchased the sculpture in 1909 for the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin (today the Bode-Museum) as a hitherto undiscovered masterpiece, some claimed that the piece was in fact not a Leonardo, but a work by the British nineteenth-century sculptor Richard Cockle Lucas. However, against all critical voices, Bode stood by his initial ascription, claiming that the bust had been heavily restored in the nineteenth century and thus made the conflict one of the most long-lasting ascription and dating debates in art history.²⁰ Indeed, the provenance and age of the piece remained contested long after this initial challenge partly because of

¹⁸ Ippolito, 'Death by Wall Label,' 2008, p. 106. ¹⁹ As additional possibilities to be considered in the case of media art, he names the year of conception, of the first implementation, of a refabrication, or later variations. See: Ippolito, 'Death by Wall Label,' 2008, p. 114. ²⁰ Up until the mid-1930s alone, more than 700 articles on the subject had been published. The entire history is thoroughly traced in Wolff-Thomsen, *Die Wachsbüste einer Flora*, 2006. See: Kobi (ed.), *The Limits of Connoisseurship*, 2017. ²¹ I thank Dario Gamboni for pointing this out. ²² Geimer, 'Das falsche Original,' 2010, pp. 23–39, here p. 23. ²³ Van de Wetering, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings VI*, 2014. ²⁴ See Geimer, 'Das falsche Original,' 2010, p. 36.

Bode's influence and his power to suppress doubts and opposing evidence, and partly because scientific studies on the material produced ambiguous results. Until the late 1990s, the bust was displayed as a piece from the Renaissance, albeit without the direct ascription to Leonardo.

In a similar way, our perception of *Man with Golden Helmet* in the Berlin Gemäldegalerie might be altered given that, since 1986, the painting has no longer been considered 'a Rembrandt' but a work of his studio or 'circle' (Umkreis), as its object label indicates. Put forth as a prime example of depreciation through re-attribution, the piece is shown as a framed painting hanging on a museum wall on the title page of an exhibition catalogue entitled 'Wertwechsel: Zum Wert des Kunstwerks' (Value Changes: On the Value of the Artwork). The catalogue was published by the Cologne Museum für Angewandte Kunst to accompany the 2001 exhibition of the same name. The painting also played an important role in the exhibition, with the curators allegedly having added a wall label to say that they would have neither requested, nor received this loan piece if it was still considered a Rembrandt.²¹ Looking at the evolution of the research on Rembrandt, we find what may be the most remarkable, and certainly the most well-known fluctuations in the recognized scope of an oeuvre: as Peter Geimer reminds us, Wilhelm Bode had originally identified 595 paintings as 'Rembrandts'. In 1909, Valentiner counted only 558 pieces, while Abraham Bredius, in 1935, extended the scope to 630 pieces, of which 56 were removed again by Horst Gerson in 1969.²² In 1968, at the beginning of the Rembrandt Research Project, many more pieces were discounted; however, in the resulting 2014 publication, Ernst van de Wetering re-evaluated the question of what would have to be considered a 'Rembrandt' under the conditions of the artist's workshop practices in the seventeenth century (336 paintings).²³ Just like expert statements, the work directories resulting from research efforts represent an authority that object labels more or less willingly follow along with. Consensus cannot always be reached, with owners sometimes refusing to accept that their masterpiece is in fact a forgery.²⁴

Object labels suggest certainty—or at least they represent the received expert view, which sometimes is verified by the results of latest scientific studies on the objects. Thus, they are a kind of certificate of identity as, for example, official accreditations. The trust in the processes of authentication and in the museum system is considerably damaged when labels are changed. However, it is of course also the case that incomplete or ambiguous labels point to unresolved art historical problems and the porousness of expertise.²⁵

²⁵ Two examples are a casket and a trestle table at Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum, labeled 'Italy, 16th and 19th century' and '16th and 19th century' respectively. It is uncertain whether these objects are sixteenth-century pieces heavily renovated, amended, or copied in the nineteenth century, or whether they were made in the nineteenth century with sixteenth-century materials—we are instantly reminded of the problem of the *Flora*. Art trade in the nineteenth century, for lack of originals, brought forth a large number of such compounds.

The display of artefacts always implies an external mediation that influences, and often codifies, the reception of the exhibits. Objects are manipulated, restored, appropriated, staged, in short displayed, through various representational strategies that include pedestals, labels, and showcases. These elements, that we could define as *parerga*, are often ignored because of their utilitarian function. Yet, they play an important role in the history of the artefacts and define the setting in which the objects can exert their agency. They not only shape their meaning, but also determine the effect that these artefacts have on their viewers. Framing devices create the conditions for interactions between the individual and the object to take place. This publication aims to explore the relation between artefacts and viewers as they are manifested in framing devices, and to develop a new theoretical framework for thinking about the power of objects on display.

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