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TEMPTATION, RESISTANCE, AND ART OBJECTS: ON THE LACK OF MATERIAL THEORY WITHIN ART HISTORY BEFORE THE MATERIAL TURN

In the painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1390–1400) by the Florentine master Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, Saint Anthony is depicted during his sojourn as a hermit in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.[1] In the picture, Saint Anthony is seen escaping a trap in the form of two great heaps of gold encountered while travelling through the desert.[2] As he is raising his hands and moving his body away from temptation, his gaze is instinctively drawn to the gold.[3] Since dedicating one's life wholeheartedly to asceticism and spiritual enlightenment is seldom an easy task, the devil sets out to tempt the monk and test his faith in God by assaulting him with numerous temptations, aiming to seduce and lure him into the delights of sin and earthly pleasures. In essence, it shows a man in conflict, struggling to follow his higher morals, while at the same time repressing his desire to succumb to and willingly welcome the gift that the devil has sent his way (Fig. 1).

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[1] Previous literature on this painting include M. Salmi, "Lorenzo Ghiberti e la pittura" in: *Scritt in onore di Lionelli Venturi*, I, Rome 1956, p. 225 et. seq; M. Boskovits, *Pittura Fiorentina alla virgilia del Rinascimento 1370–1400*, Florence 1975, p. 415. The theme of Saint Anthony being tempted has featured in both art and literature for centuries. It was explored in an exhibition at the Bucerius Kunst Forum in Hamburg 2008, see *Schrecken und Lust: die Versuchung des heiligen Antonius von Hieronymus Bosch bis Max Ernst*, eds. M. Philipp & O. Westheider, München 2008. I would like to thank Minna Hamrin and Francesca Mattei for offering their expertise on this matter.

[2] Note that one of the piles of gold in the painting has lost its gilding.

[3] For historical perspectives on the aura of gold, see P. L. Bernstein, *The Power of Gold: The History of an Obsession*, New York 2000.

1. Niccolo di Pietro Gerini, *Temptation of St. Anthony*, tempera on wood, 22 cm × 32 cm, Old Masters Collection, Croatian Academy of Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia

The painting differs in the use of gold leaf as decoration compared to other Christian paintings of the same period, since the application of gold leaf as decoration to denote the sacred, as in transcendent luminosity through the glow of Antonius's halo and the holy light from heaven, was widespread, whereas the material iconography of the pile of gold was not. Here, the gold has both religious and secular, monetary value. It represents both good and evil, aura and simulacrum, both holiness and an accumulation of deceptive matter through the shining heap of gold. While the paint and spatial design offer the illusion of depth – as a window into another reality – the gold leaves are applied on the surface of the painting as another surface. The gold is not just added to the painting as a layer of paint as a representation of something else, the gold is truly present; it becomes a bridge between pictorial space and the real world, since it is the very object that it represents.

As a reflection on the seductive nature of shiny objects, the painting works as what W.J.T. Mitchell has described as a metapicture.[4] The painting com-

[4] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*, Chicago 2015, pp. 18–19.

ments upon its ontological status through both the motif and through the relationship it establishes with the beholder. The seductive glimmer from the heap of gold catches the attention of Saint Anthony, but it is also trying to seduce and attract the attention of the beholder of the painting. It represents an object of desire, but it also acts upon the beholder as an object of desire, as does the entire painting. All in all, the painting is an evident illustration of the tradition of Neo-Platonic discourse that has informed the Christian ideal to strive towards higher, spiritual realms while mentally guarding against the alluring and treacherous nature of the material culture that makes up the phenomenological world our bodies inhabit.

Michael Yonan, a well-known proponent of a material turn within art history, has argued that art historians need to get "out of Plato's cave" and that much of the art-historical scholarship has to a large extent adapted a Platonic way of thinking when looking at images as simulacra on the wall. Like shadows, art has been treated as simply the representation of other things, ideas and ideologies, rather than structured entities composed of matter and form in accordance with Aristotelian philosophy. According to Yonan, Platonic and Neo-Platonic tendencies have, to a significant degree, characterised art-history writing within the discipline before the material turn.[5] It might be easy to find exceptions to this claim since, naturally, the material characteristics were examined in texts about art even before the so-called material turn. However, forerunners and traditions in art history that also provide thorough and in-depth theoretical reflections on the materiality of artworks and the surrounding world of objects are harder to find.[6] Instead, art historians who, in the

[5] Even though Yonan claims to be considering Anglo-American art-historical writing specifically, his arguments also hold true for countries outside of the US and the UK where Anglo-American art-historical writing (especially new art history and visual culture studies) have been embraced as injections to revitalise the discipline, and still have this function today. M. Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies", *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 2011 18(2) pp. 232–248; M. Yonan, "The Suppression of Materiality in Anglo-American Art-Historical Writing" in: *The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts. Proceedings of the 33rd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), Nürnberg, 15–20 July 2012*, eds. G.U. Großmann & P. Krutisch, Nuremberg 2014. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has put forth that a similar lack of an Aristotelian worldview also explains the exclusive status of interpretation within the humanities (before, of course, the material turn helped by his writing). H.U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford 2004.

[6] There are of course notable exceptions that have been re-valued by art historians today, such as G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven 1962. Hans Christian Hönes has however argued convincingly that Kubler's "History of Things"

wake of the material turn, began to explore aspects and consequences of the physical qualities of art have turned instead to philosophy, new materialism, and to scholars with other disciplinary backgrounds.[7] The question is thus not *if* this is so, but rather *why* there was a lack of material theory developed within the discipline prior to the material turn?

The aim in this essay is to explore approaches of art history to materiality before the material turn by discussing two opposing directions within art history writing and practice that have taken the material aspects into consideration: the tradition of connoisseurship, and the critique of the fetish within the theoretical apparatus of new art history and visual culture studies from the 1980s and 1990s. My argument is that the discipline of art history has been marked by a complicated love-hate relationship to the materiality of its objects of study, similar to Saint Anthony, who is both attracted to and repelled by the shapeless mass of gold that Lucifer tempts him with.

CONNOISSEURSHIP AND THE TEMPTATION TO LOVE ART

Object-based approaches within art history are first and foremost represented by connoisseurship as a research tradition in museums and in the art trade. It is well-known that this kind of meticulous, empirical, visual analysis of artwork, in order to assess authorship and to distinguish originals from fakes, gained strength from an empirical turn within the humanities during the second half of the 19th century, although the traditions of connoisseurship can be traced back to the 17th century.[8]

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continues in a tradition of neo-Romantic Platonism. See H. C. Hönes', "Posing Problems: George Kubler's 'Prime Objects'", *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 2016, 15(2–3), pp. 261–269.

[7] Such as Alfred Gell or Martin Heidegger. Besides "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1961), Heidegger offers a theory on things in his published lecture "Das Ding" (1951) in M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen 1954. Alfred Gell and his *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998) have been an important reference point for Caroline van Eck in her innovative *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, Leiden 2015. On new materialism, see W.E. Connolly, " The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 2013, 41(3), pp. 399–412; J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010; K.M. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham 2007.

[8] A comprehensive overview of this topic, as well as an extensive discussion on previous research, can be found in S. Muthesius, "Towards an 'exakte Kunstwissenschaft'(?) Part II", *Journal of Art Historiography* 2013, 9. See also *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, eds. M.B. Frank & D. Adler, Farnham 2012.

The history of the discipline has often tended to be regarded by art historians as a set of principles expressed in the tradition of art history writing, where the methods, texts and personas of a few early predecessors — Giovanni Morelli, Bernhard Berenson, Max Friedländer — have come to dominate the discourse on connoisseurship.[9] One problem with studies on art historiography, moreover, is that for the most part they have been dominated by a text-centred approach, reflecting a need to consider art historiography as intellectual history in order to distinguish theories and methodological concepts. It is, however, not sufficient to describe the methodologies of connoisseurship limited to a mere visual analysis of *what* is usually analysed (style, manner, and quality). A different approach to understanding the history of the discipline and of connoisseurship can be found in studies on the history of science since the turn of the present century, most notably represented by Bruno Latour and Lorraine Daston. Here, the development of scientific knowledge is not primarily regarded as an intellectual history of ideas featured by a given set of significant thinkers and text, but rather as the outcome of a long tradition of empirical and material practices, part of a symmetrical network between humans and things.[10] That this perspective on the relationship between art history and its objects can contribute to a valuable understanding of connoisseurship and its methods can be easily confirmed by evoking the image of curators leaning over a canvas and, relying on their intuition and accumulated first-hand experience of the objects and materials, performing intimate examinations of the materials, the brushstrokes, style and painting techniques.[11]

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[9] This is how connoisseurship within art history is presented in e.g. one of the basic introductions to art historical methods, see chapter "Connoisseurship" in: *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, eds. C. Klonk & M. Hatt, Manchester 2006 or the seminal C. Gibson-Wood, *Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship from Vasari to Morelli*, London 1988.

[10] A comprehensive overview of the turn towards things in the history of science is offered in A. Guerini's, "The Material Turn in the History of Life Science", *Literature Compass 2016*, 13, pp. 469–480. Standard references are B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005; *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. L. Daston, New York 2004; *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. L. Daston, Chicago 2000.

[11] There are similarities between my understanding of the object-based aspects of connoisseurship and Michael-Ann Holly's way of exploring art history as a discipline subconsciously affected by the material objecthood and presence of its artworks. Whereas Holly sets out to present art history's melancholic connection to the past through the historical objects of art as an alternative to critical art history's reluctance to "attribute a soul to mute objects", and the inclination towards interpretation, representation and meaning. My

The technical side of art history that has gained a foothold in museum-based research tests the limits of how close to an object a connoisseurship practitioner can come. The incorporation of technical methods, such as the use of autoradiography, infrared technology and x-radiography, have made it possible to pierce the surface of a painting and the layers beneath in order to learn about how it was made, where, and by whom more effectively than any trained eye performing the Morellian method. Analyses of pigments and dendrochronological analyses of panel wood are more effective in establishing the period in which a painting was created than Heinrich Wölfflin's stylistic analysis, as outlined in *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriffe* (1915). Modern, scientific approaches to art may seem to offer the most detached, matter-of-fact knowledge on the enduring, material existence of the artworks of art history that in the end is "presence" in its most literal sense. Regardless of the method, however, the history of art history is characterised by a conflicted approach to the practices of connoisseurship. An early example of this is Anton Springer, one of the early proponents of art history as a scientific discipline, who, in "Kunstkenner und Kunsthistoriker" (1881), identified his contemporary connoisseurs as ruled by Mammon. Springer expressed a still familiar critique of how the expanding art market and swiftly rising art prices were a threat to the principles of independent art history, tempting his contemporary connoisseurs to be led by money instead of more pristine motives.[12]

The reasons behind a conflicted approach to connoisseurship within the discipline could help to explain art history's love-hate relationship with the materiality of artworks. One cause is the commercial art market. In comparison with other humanist disciplines, the art objects that art historians deal with are more lucrative as commodities than the objects other humanists are concerned with, such as books or archaeological artefacts. Commercial aspects may in part clarify why it has been more appealing to hold on to the history of art as a linear history of innovative breaks, rather than to describe it as an unruly history of quantities of objects. Another reason would be the literally "object-oriented" approach that constitutes a difficult-to-reconcile hybrid between traditions. While the practices of connoisseurship are connected

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purpose is instead to elevate the empirical insight of connoisseurship as a symptom of art history's contradictory approach to materiality. M. Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, Princeton 2013.

[12] A. Springer, "Kunstkenner und Kunsthistoriker" in: *Bilder aus der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Bonn 1867, pp. 377–404. On the history of the conflict between art history as a scientific discipline and connoisseurship, see also C. Wedepohl, "Bernard Berenson and Aby Warburg: Absolute Opposites" in: *Bernard Berenson: Formation and Heritage*, eds. J. Connors & L.A. Waldman, Florence 2014.

historically to the scientific practices of empiricism, such as the practice of intimate, visual observation where the unattached scientist is role model, connoisseurship also necessitates a passion based on a "love of art".[13] Positivism within art history is, in a sense, enabled because of the seduction and attraction of the very objects under scrutiny. It would of course be possible to claim that the traditions and practices of connoisseurship in fact fetishize art, as well as the materiality of the artwork and the notion of artistic genius expressed through artistic style. However, doing so would mean following the habits of critical thinking that have cultivated fetish and fetishism as metaphors for objects, interests and practices considered exaggerated and to be resisted.

FETISHISM AND CRITICAL DISTANCE WITHIN VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES AND NEW ART HISTORY OF THE 1980S AND 1990S

Fetishes, as W.J.T. Mitchell and Bruno Latour have reminded us, are contested objects in Western modernity, since they reveal our own fears, beliefs, and the inherently irrational aspects of the Enlightenment project.[14] As animated objects they are the equivalent of religious icons: some wrongly assume fetishes to be animated by spirits, while others cherish their own ability to resist being manipulated by dead matter.[15] Fetishism is then, in the traditions of the Enlightenment and Western colonialism, considered a foolish belief held by others. Whenever a scornful attitude towards fetishism is articulated, it would, according to the manner in which Mitchell and Latour have come to redefine the critique of fetishism in Western thought, also expose an anthropocentric fear of a lack of self-discipline in encounters with images and objects.

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[13] Compare with *Histories of Scientific Observation*, eds. L. Daston & E. Lunbeck, Chicago 2011.

[14] Mitchell, *Image Science*, pp. 74–75; W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005, pp. 145–168; B. Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Durham 2010.

[15] Main references on fetishism and the fetish as a concept are A. M. Alfonso Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism*, Basingstoke 2016; H. Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture. A Different Theory of Modernity*, Berlin 2014; *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. E. Apter & W. Pietz, Ithaka 1993; W. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1985, 9, pp. 5–17; W. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1987, 13, pp. 23–45; W. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman's Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1988, 16, pp. 105–124.

Of course, such notions would not have been successful were it not for Marxism and psychoanalysis. Karl Marx famously claimed commodities to be the fetishes of the masses, whereas Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of sexual desire of specific objects helped to articulate the "perversity" of fetishism. From having been wholly focused on the idols worshiped by the colonised tribes at the end of the 18th century, the detrimental, alluring objects of Western civilisation also came to be known as fetishes during the 19th century, making fetishism a core concept describing unsound human-object relationships. During the 20th century, its application expanded further so that not only physical objects but also immaterial concepts and experiences ran the risk of being "fetishized", which meant displaying the characteristics of a wicked object. Adorno's essay "Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens" (1938) is a significant example. When Adorno criticized how music had come to characterize fetish when assimilated into the system of the culture industry, every aspect of the music industry that he chose to attack was labelled a fetish or fetishist. His issue was not just with popular music, such as the famous example of jazz music, but that everything, including composers like Tchaikovsky or Schubert, as well as for instance the voice, instruments, and the conductor, took on the character of a fetish within modern capitalist society.[16] Everything and everyone could be suspected of being a fetish in disguise. Alfonso Maurizio Iacono has pointed out that when Adorno is writing about fetishization, he is basing his line of argumentation on the notion of substitution, meaning that what Adorno is criticising is the tendency to improperly replace what is genuine and authentic with an *Ersatz* – a stand-in for something else.[17] This means that although Adorno not only referred to physical objects as suspected fetishes in disguise (as Marx does when he referred to commodities as fetishes), he also articulated which features he considered characteristic of objects specifically when discussing their so-called fetish character. According to Adorno's line of thinking, immaterial concepts and experiences transformed into objects are considered deceptive since, as substitutes for what is real, they only *appear* to offer immediacy and intimacy.

For the sake of argument, it is not necessary to delve deeper into Adorno's writing specifically. Suffice to say, the first version of critical theory from the 1930s that his text represents is also characteristic of an attitude towards objects and the trap of reification (in German *Verdinglichung*, *Vergegenständli-*

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[16] T.W. Adorno, "Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens", *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1938, 7, pp. 321–355.

[17] Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism*, pp. 5–7.

chung or *Versachlichung*, literally, "turning into a thing") that continued to be repeated with shifting connotations in writings on art and culture throughout the 20th century. Ernst Gombrich for instance, claimed, in his introduction to *The Story of Art* in 1950 that "Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and fetish", as a warning of the mystification of art and of a misdirected appreciation for what in reality should be considered hype and hollow, overshadowing more authentic artworks.[18] Thus, when looking at the critique of fetishism, it is worth remembering that it is not only the objectifying agent that is criticized but also the object itself, since it is the fetish that is assumed to hold the power to possess someone with enchanting sensory pleasure instead of a real aesthetic experience.

The content of new art history and visual culture studies, which began as loose umbrella terms, became firmly settled during the 1990s when various different readers and introductions for study at undergraduate level were published.[19] These two intertwined fields focused on vision and visuality, the gaze, spectatorship, representation, discourse and the production of meaning, embracing elements from the Frankfurt School, critical theory, cultural studies, Marxism, post-structuralism, semiotics, feminism and postcolonial

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[18] E. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London 1950, p. 5.

[19] Such as, on visual culture studies: N. Bryson, M. Holly, & K. Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, Hanover 1994; *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, eds. J. Bird, M. Mash & T. Putnam, London 1996; S. Chaplin & J.A. Walker, *Visual Culture: An Introduction*, Manchester 1997; *Visual Culture: The Reader*, eds. J. Evans & S. Hall, London 1999; N. Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge 1999; M. Sturken & L. Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford 2001. On New Art History: *The New Art History*, eds. A.L. Rees & F. Borzello, London 1986; W.J.T. Mitchell, "Editor's Introduction: Essays toward a New Art History", *Critical Inquiry* 1989, 15(2), p. 226; L. Korenic, "Inside the Discipline, outside the Paradigm: Keeping Track of the New Art History", *Art Libraries Journal* 1997, pp. 12–18; J. Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, London 2001; The history and theoretical frameworks of visual culture studies and new art history of the 1980s and 1990s are explored and commented on in *Farewell to Visual Studies*, eds. J. Elkins, S. Manghani & G. Frank, Pennsylvania 2015; K. Jõekalda, "What Has Become of the New Art History?", *Journal of Art Historiography* 2013, 9; M. Dikovitskaya, "Major Theoretical Frameworks in Visual Culture" in: *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, eds. I. Heywood & B. Sandywell, London & New York 2012; *Visual Culture Studies: Interview with Key Thinkers*, ed. M. Smith, London 2008, pp. 1–17; M. Dikovitskaya, *The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, Cambridge 2005. However, with the exception of *Farewell to Visual Studies*, which is broader in scope, these publications focus on particular aspects that have been explored more widely, such as the emphasis on vision in visual culture studies, differences implied by the names "visual studies", "visual culture" or "visual culture studies", and the egalitarian notion of culture put forth by both new art history and visual culture studies.

theory. Even though the different schools of thought mentioned above are familiar due to their being part of the discipline, it is nevertheless important to historicize their influence on art history in order to separate their legacy and influence today from the early stages of the 1980s and 1990s. This reference to *schools of thought* in fact describes a blend of thinkers, texts, and traditions found under several of these categories. They were, we should remember, connected by a shared vocabulary of concepts and modes of thinking – some of it still very much in use – while some, it should be noted, are seemingly outmoded today.

As part of the academic vocabulary of the new art history and visual culture studies of the 1980s and 1990s, it was still common to follow in the footsteps of a modernist scepticism of fetishes, represented here by the critical theory of Adorno, by criticizing how objects, images and phenomena were "fetishized". Everything and everyone existing within western capitalist society would run the risk of taking on the character of fetish and being exposed as fetishes in disguise. Many examples can be found in texts representative of this otherwise postmodern paradigm: for instance, modernism could be considered moulded from "the fetishism of presence"; the notion of the artist could be considered fetishized; and so could the spectator, the artwork, and the gaze.[20] Of course Laura Mulvey's influential "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) epitomizes this mode of argumentation, since it transformed the concept of "objectification" into a prevalent part of the repertoire of critical thinking.[21] By originating from a pre-supposed subject-object dichotomy, objectification is seen as the way for patriarchal power to dehumanize women by reducing them to objects, causing dehumanized images of women to generate a particular fetishist fascination. The threatening aspects of fetishism, however, seem not only to be that they occur as a reaction to objectification's symbolic murder of women, but also the assumption that the audience would be unable to turn their gaze away from the body that has been objectified. When Mulvey's text is read as object theory, rather than as a feminist criticism of power, it becomes symptomatic that the object itself exists on the surface of the image. It is a fictive, flat and mediated object lacking the kind of characteristics (volume, weight, etc.) that can be expected of a physical object.

In addition to building this line of argument by pointing out habitual anti-fetish critique inherent in critical theory of the 1980s and 1990s, which

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[20] This tendency is well exemplified in J. Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, London & New York 2001, p. 50, 201, 282.

[21] L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 1975, 16(3), pp. 6–18.

should be noted as a point that has also been made by Bruno Latour and subsequently criticised by Hal Foster[22], it is also necessary to ask which aspects of the first generation of new art history and visual culture studies that the so-called 'material turn' has been a turn away from, and for what reasons? First of all, it should be reiterated how much of that which was characteristic of new art history and visual culture studies also built upon theory that lingered between academic writing on art history and contemporary art criticism. Just as postmodern art and art theory defended contemporaneity and conceptualism as a reaction to essentialism and predominant, modernist notions of the ontology of the artwork,[23] the paradigmatic shift that occurred within the discipline also meant a break with the disciplinary tradition of historical studies and the predominance of artworks as the given objects of study. But did the critique of essentialism mean that material aspects and empirical grounding by necessity had to become methodologically obscure, replaced by theories that would reveal the ideological underpinnings of the production of meaning in the society where the artwork was made? Or rather that the theory absorbed into the discipline made materiality an even more uncomfortable aspect of artworks to deal with?

Implicit in the first question is the familiar assumption that thinking critically and analytically would be an intellectually more demanding and inherently more radical task than the *ars mechanica* of managing documents and objects in archives and museum depositories. It also suggests that the quest of demystifying and deconstructing notions about the artwork, the artist, and about artistic creativity and geniality would make it harder to also consider and explore one of the few things that, after all, is certain – the material existence of artworks. It reflects a tendency to treat all kinds of artworks, irrespective of genre, of period and of geographical area, as concepts or hermeneutical operation devices. But even if conceptualism has indeed been crucially significant for art, art is still never just an idea. It comes with some kind of material support.

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[22] B. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry*, 2004, 30, pp. 237–243; H. Foster, "Post-Critical", *October 139*, 2012, pp. 3–8. R. Felski has also convincingly written about critique as methodology in R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago 2015. On Anglo-American Art History before and after the material turn, see also V. Thielemans, "Beyond Visuality: Review on Materiality and Affect", *Perspective: Actualité en histoire de l'art*, 2015, 2, pp. 1–7.

[23] As described in L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, London 1973; B.H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October*, 1990, 55, pp. 105–143 or T. Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London 1998, p. 14.

Another fallacy would be to equate artworks to images.[24] Looking at theoretically informed descriptions in the wake of new art history and visual culture studies of what an artwork is does seem a departure from the way images were usually analysed as reflecting and producing meaning. In Jonathan Harris' *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (2001), art objects are defined as made of "literal and conventional signifying materials" considered as "representational structures", part of the larger linguistic sign system otherwise known as society.[25] As dry as such a description may seem, it is of course an attempt to alert the reader to be aware that the meaning of an artwork is never an ontological essence but always a representation.

The fallacy of juxtaposing the act of thinking with the practice of manual labour is not a new one in western intellectual history. It echoes the kind of Platonic thinking that would motivate a hermit to refrain from the temptations of piles of gold, or any other kind of devilish temptations encountered on his path towards spiritual enlightenment. The question that has occupied me, however, is why the material, artisanal, spatial and temporal aspects of artworks, and what is referred to as visual culture, have been so absent in new art history and visual culture studies, if there has been no doubt as to whether objects are in fact unable to harbour metaphysical essence or substance – whether termed content, meaning or *idea*. It is also significant that, despite demystifications of the Benjaminian concept of aura and the critiques of biography-based interpretations supported by the reception of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969), it still seemed difficult to consider artworks as independent entities or objects in and of themselves – as a material presence detached from an absent author. Why else would it seem so hard to discuss objects and artworks in terms other than as images and surfaces, as hollow shells or blank screens reflecting meaning, if they did not run the risk of being exposed as vessels literally containing and actively generating the kind of seductive meaning sometimes referred to as aura. What was stressed as the production of context-based meaning of artworks would then be yet another expression of the need to critically distance oneself from real objects, in order to resist being captivated by animated fetishes in disguise.

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[24] I am referring here to the kinds of multiplied images part of visual culture that have often been discussed as existing detached from material support. See also the discussion on meaning and images in chapter 6, "Image, Meaning, and Power" in *Farewell to Visual Studies*, eds. Elkins, Manghani & Frank.

[25] Harris, *The New Art History…*, p. 194.

GOLD NUGGETS

Thus far I have addressed the question of art history's love-hate relationship with the materiality of artworks as expressed within two opposing methodological and theoretical disciplinary traditions – the realms of connoisseurship and the paradigm of new art history and of visual culture studies. To be in a love-hate relationship could indicate being at odds with certain aspects of something or someone that one also feels passionately about, or it could be a fitting description of the kind of close relationship that can develop over time like an aging couple or between two family members. In any case, it cannot be explained without taking into account the different kinds of feelings that bind it together.

Previous attempts to explain the lack of material theory that developed within the discipline before the material turn, however, tend to neglect affections, relationality and the agency of things in their analyses of disciplinary blind spots. In his defence of a material turn within the discipline, Michael Yonan has argued that there are two historical reasons for the lack of an ontological and methodological interest for the materiality of artworks: the separation between "fine art" and "decorative art"; and the methodological tradition of visual analysis, spanning from Wölfflin and Panofsky to visual culture studies. This has had the result of prioritizing painting over other categories of art in art historical writing as paintings are, after all, valued both as "high art" and easily represented by two-dimensional images in books and slides.[26] Both W.J.T. Mitchell and Horst Bredekamp base their critique on the limits of language. Whereas the difference in meaning between "image" and "picture" in English is like the relationship between "idea" and "form" in Aristotelian philosophy, the meaning of the German word "Bild" incorporates both "picture" and "image". This would explain why Anglo-American visual culture studies have been suffering from a lack of material theory, whilst the tradition of German art history as a *Bildwissenshaft avant la lettre* has not.[27]

However, even though I agree with Yonan, Mitchell and Bredekamp, arguments such as theirs tend to fall back into the habit inherited from cultural history and from cultural studies, that of criticising older categorical and linguistic distinctions and exclusions, and of defending the idea that certain previously neglected categories of art and artefacts be included in art history. My

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[26] Yonan, "The Suppression of…".

[27] Mitchell, *Image Science*…, p. 30; H. Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft", *Critical Inquiry* 2003, 29(3), p. 418.

aim, however, is not primarily to defend or debunk the negligence of material aspects within art historiography, and to remind of the fact that our discipline is empirically anchored in the unruly, deep sea of objects commonly known as "the history of art". It should definitely not be confused with the masked, methodological version of the age-old plea that art historians not forget to experience works of art in the original and take heed of the physical properties of art. Rather, it is an attempt to reflect upon the fact that art history is, after all, a discipline dominated by a canon of iconic artworks that it could not do without. Art history cannot easily be compared to the history of other disciplines, since artworks are generally quite expensive and unique commodities, and it may well be argued that this has had the paradoxical effect of drawing the interest of art historians away from developing methodologies and theory about materiality as an act of resistance.

A conflicted approach to artworks considered as objects is especially evident when it comes to painting, since paintings are commodified artworks by their very nature. They are material, mobile, and easy to use as interior decoration. Some of them are like rare gold nuggets, others like sticky bonbons, and some are like old postcards that someone decided to send and another felt obliged to put in a box and save, though neither the motif nor message ever felt that important or genuine to anyone. Most of the older ones have, like the Gerini painting mentioned above, lived a long life as mobile commodities shifting between owners. It is well worth remembering that what Michael Fried terms "objecthood" first became a characteristic of painting when medieval painters went from wall paintings on commission from the church and the aristocracy to, as a response to an increasing demand, the development of new techniques and painting on new materials (panels and linens) in order to produce objects that could be sold on speculation for a growing open market. At times, this resulted in spectacular increases in the number of paintings produced in the commercial centres of Bruges, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Florence, Rome, and Paris.[28] It should also be taken into account that the Dutch Golden Age began as vast quantities of inexpensive paintings flooded the market. Paintings would probably never even have been such a success were it not for capitalism, but despite this, it is still not possible to explain art his-

[28] As described in e.g. E. J. Sluijter, "On Brabant Rubbish, Economic Competition, Artistic Rivalry, and the Growth of the Market for Paintings in the First Decades of the Seventeenth-Century", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 2009, 1(2); J. J. Bloom, "Why Painting?", in: *Mapping Markets for Paintings in Europe, 1450–1750*, eds. N. De Marchi & H. J. Van Miegroet, Turnhout 2006. M. Fried, "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum*, 1967, 5(10).

tory's historic problem with the material aspects of paintings any clearer than that it reproduces a fear that art and capital may become "entangled."

At Documenta 14 (2017), Niccolò di Pietro Gerini's painting "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" was exhibited in the opening room at the *Neue Galerie*, a venue that the chief curator Adam Szymczyk and his team proclaimed to be the "historical consciousness" of the Documenta.[29] On the opposite side of the room was a sculpture depicting a hooded figure made by Ernst Barlach in 1907 entitled, "Russian beggar". With an outstretched arm, curled position and covered face, the beggar, along with the motif of the tempted Saint Anthony, formed the centrepiece of the room. According to the wall label, the curatorial intention of putting these works on display together was to "raise socio-economic reflection, addressing not just the entanglement of art and money, but the necessity of its 'shunning' on a planetary scale". The message that is illustrated by the combination of artworks and texts is easily recognisable, and in alignment with the political and critical aspects of the curatorial idea as whole that might be summarised as: "capitalism is continuing to threaten the independency of art, since the present state of the art market – dominated by those who because of their homogeneity, wealth and privilege, would not be able to identify genuinely interesting and novel art even if it jumped up and hit them in the eye – prevails. The commodity fetishism of the art market should be resisted." Quotation marks aside, one cannot deny that this critique is valid and important – it could easily be argued that the distance between capital and art is one of the most important questions for the contemporary art world, especially since it is an impossible quest. As I see it, however, it is a symptom of how art as idea, intervention, social commentary or image has tended to be separated strategically from material aspects, both within art theory and art historiography, in order to avoid fetishizing artworks by treating them as objects. Recognizing this lacuna would confirm that art history is messy and disparate, made up of quantities of objects bought, exchanged, mediated, hailed, neglected, and always in a state of decomposition.

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[29] The painting by di Pietro Gerini was not the only Renaissance painting on display depicting gold tempting Saint Anthony. The mid-15th century painting "Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by Gold" by Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi was exhibited next to the painting by Gerini as well. For the sake of this argument however, the painting by di ser Giovanni Guidi is left out here.

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TEMPTATION, RESISTANCE, AND ART OBJECTS: ON THE LACK OF MATERIAL THEORY WITHIN ART HISTORY BEFORE THE MATERIAL TURN

Summary

Niccolò di Pietro Gerini's painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1390–1400) serves as a point of departure for this essay. It depicts Saint Anthony during a lapse of self-control as he attempts to resist an alluring mound of gold. Since the mound is in fact made of genuine gold leaves applied to the painting's surface, it works both as a representation of temptation as well as an object of desire affecting the beholder. The aim of this essay is to explore different approaches to materiality before the material turn within the art history discipline by examining two opposing directions within the writing and practice of art history: the tradition of connoisseurship; and the critique of the fetish within the theoretical apparatus of new art history and visual culture studies of the 1980s and 90s. As an expression of positivism within art history, it is argued that connoisseurship be considered within the context of its empirical practices dealing with objects. What is commonly described as the connoisseur's "taste" or "love for art" would then be just another way to describe the intimate relationship formed between art historians and the very objects under their scrutiny. More than other humanist disciplines, art history is, with the possible exception of archaeology,

an object-based discipline. It is empirically anchored in the unruly, deep sea of objects commonly known as the history of art. Still, there has been a lack of in-depth theoretical reflection on the materiality of artworks in the writings of art historians before the material turn. The question however, is not *if* this is so, but rather, *why*?
In this essay, it is suggested that the art history discipline has been marked by a complicated love-hate relationship with the materiality of which the very objects of study, more often than not, are made of; like Saint Anthony who is both attracted to and repelled by the shapeless mass of gold that Lucifer tempts him with. While connoisseurship represents attraction, resistance to the allure of objects can be traced to the habitual critique of fetishism of the first generations of visual culture studies and new art history. It reflects a negative stance towards objects and the material aspect of artworks, which enhanced a conceived dichotomy between thinking critically and analytically in contrast to managing documents and objects in archives and museum depositories. However, juxtaposing the act of thinking with the practice of manual labour has a long tradition in Western intellectual history.
Furthermore, it is argued that art history cannot easily be compared to the history of other disciplines because of the simple fact that artworks are typically quite expensive and unique commodities, and as such, they provoke not just aesthetic but also fetishist responses. Thus, this desire to separate art history as a scientific discipline from the fetishism of the art market has had the paradoxical effect of causing art historians to shy away from developing methodologies and theory about materiality as an act of resistance.

Keywords:
Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, the material turn, art historiography, connoisseurship, visual culture studies, new art history, fetishism