



Matter Materiality

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Matter and materiality are inherent to the conception, production, interpretation and conservation of artifacts in all cultures across all periods of time. In recent decades these notions have given rise to theoretical reflections, including a rethinking of the hylemorphic model (form/matter opposition). A world is open to us in which matter is no longer fixed and inert but in motion, in the grip of infinite transformations, a world of flux (G. Deleuze, T. Ingold), where vital matter is endowed with agency (J. Bennett). Materiality, resulting from the effect produced by the properties of matter, is grasped within environments and contexts of reception that are also changing and have nothing fixed or definitive.

The material conception of works of art confers complementary properties and values upon the resulting objects. These properties are manifested through the effects of texture, surfaces, weight, extension in space, format, gestural traces, and material effects. The concept of materiality therefore refers to the fact that the artifacts which concern art history are composed of materials and, at a theoretical level, to all the processes – technical, cultural and social – that undergird the realization and the material perception of works of art.

It is in this spirit that the theme chosen for the 36th CIHA congress is intended. Our theme thus provides an opportunity for fruitful intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue on questions that promote a transversal perspective at the intersection of approaches and methodologies. And conservation

While Art History has been one of the disciplines participating in the renewals at once theoretical and epistemological, characterizing the social sciences and humanities over the past few decades, its efforts have clearly been oriented more towards the visual than towards the material aspects of art. Embracing the Visual Turn of the 1990s together with the concepts of the *Pictorial Turn* (T. Mitchell) and the *Iconic Turn* (G. Boehm), the History of Art broadened its questioning to include the realm of images and their growing omnipresence and roles in our societies, while privileging the notions of vision and visuality.

On the other hand, the emergence of a Material Turn in the mid-1980s, opening up the interdisciplinary field of Material Culture, has mobilized scholars of Anthropology (D. Miller, T. Ingold, A. Gell), History (D. Roche), Sociology (B. Latour, A. Appadurai), and Archaeology, more than those of Art History.

Distancing from material approaches has roots in classical Western thought, in which the hierarchical opposition between Ideas and Matter (Plato) has served as conceptual matrix for theorists of art since the Renaissance. By affirming the superiority of the intellectual dimension of the creative act, to the detriment of the material and technical aspects of production, an enduring opposition was established between theory and practice, art and craft, liberal art and mechanical art, whose ideological and social repercussions have long structured the worlds of art. It is true that interest in the physical properties of materials and the role of materiality in our perception of artifacts has been apparent since the earliest writings on art (Pliny).

Nonetheless, the issue of materiality has recently made a remarkable comeback. Research programs, publications, and conferences have multiplied, sure signs of a field in boom. This shift in focus results from the intersection of new theoretical approaches and scholarly advances that invite art historians to rethink their relationship to matter and materiality (M. Yonan). It provides an opportunity to reflect on the boundaries of our discipline thanks to intensified dialogues with artists as well as curators, conservators, conservation scientists and architects.

The transnational opening of the discipline has accelerated the critique of the Western paradigm founded on the hierarchical opposition between ideas and matter while strengthening reflections on the cultural relativism of perceptions of matter. The material approach contributes to a global perspective for the study of the processes of materialization in which works of art are embedded. This perspective focuses on the different actors, objects and places involved; as well as the exchanges, collaborations, cross-fertilisations and spatial movements associated with each. Nevertheless, the notion of materiality varies according to cultures and times, and it would probably be more accurate to speak of materialities. The concept of “intangible cultural heritage”, recognized by UNESCO in 2003, reflects the growing importance of this perspective. The various practices and skills linked to the material analysis of visual artefacts provide researchers with the tools to contextualize both the hierarchies between different objects of artistic production and the asymmetrical relations between the world’s regions.

Anthropology invites us to reconsider the material world as an environment composed of medium, substances and surfaces in permanent transformation (J. Gibson) and in possession of agency, rather than as a world of substances that are inert and unchanging. It also proposes, beyond the prevailing notion of materiality of objects, the study of the properties of materials not as fixed attributes of matter but as process-dependent and relational (T. Ingold). This invites scholars to devote greater attention both to matter, materials and materialities of objects in processes of production, consumption, exchange, uses and circulation and to the transformation of their values according to their spatial and temporal trajectories. The physical properties of materials, their effect of presence, the material conditions of the presentation and the conservation of artifacts (formats, frames, pedestals) are also embodiments of esthetic, ideological, political, and symbolic values. The material performance of objects is considered in light of the social and cultural interactions they produce.

In the realm of the Cognitive Sciences, studies of perception, memory and emotions converge to demonstrate the importance of the haptic modality in sensorial experience, and the complementarity between vision (spatial perception) and touch (material perception) – paths previously explored empirically by Art History and Aesthetics (A. Riegl, G. Deleuze).

Based upon advances in the Science of materials, Technical Art History argues for bringing together applied sciences, conservation sciences, Archaeology and the History of Art. Cutting-edge technologies of spectral imagery and physicochemical analyses of matter considerably enrich the comprehension of the physical object, as regards its composite materials as well as the traces it bears of its history and avatars across time and space. The History of Science and the History of Technology are also able to provide art historians with valuable concepts, methodologies and data.

Finally, the Digital Turn has broadly contributed to facilitating exchanges between cultures, permitting people to communicate more rapidly and accelerating the distribution of images, subjects broached in previous CIHA congresses. Meanwhile, a series of upheavals in our practices has yielded contrasting effects on the perception of materiality. In the realm of digital art, tensions between the materiality of content and the physical realities of exhibition and presentation pose fresh questions about the materiality of installations and about issues surrounding sustainability and conservation. As regards research itself, while it is true that vast perspectives are opened up by the online accessibility of a growing mass of digitized art works, viewable on any type of screen, we must not lose sight of the limits, including the possibility of their materiality being overlooked, as well as the infrastructures and technologies involved in the digital world.

An awareness of the losses involved in the Digital Turn makes it all the more important to consider materiality not as an alternative to traditional visual approaches but rather as a perspective that is integral to the perception of all works of art. Nevertheless, the history of visual representations of materiality can be taken into account by an approach that is part of media archaeology. The development of extended reality techniques should encourage us to reflect on the status of the rendering of matter, between tangibility and intangibility, from immateriality to neomateriality.

The theme Matter Materiality therefore opens up to questions of acute currency that are in full evolution and in line with major societal, ecological and ethical issues. It provides the opportunity for a productive intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue around questions that encourage a transversal perspective, in time and space, and the intersection of approaches both theoretically and methodologically. It concerns artifacts of all kinds, from all times and from all cultural areas, and thus responds to the global turn initiated at the Melbourne 2008 Congress. It also resonates with the Nuremberg 2012 Congress, whose discussions centered on the “challenge of the object” and helped show the way toward the “Material Turn”.

While recent CIHA Congresses have approached questions of matter and materiality in an implicit and partial manner, the renewed interest and resurgence of research they have been stimulating renders them particularly pertinent as a unifying theme with the capacity to mobilize the entire international community of scholars in art history.