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ANIMISM, MATERIALITY, AND MUSEUMS

HOW DO BYZANTINE THINGS FEEL?

by

GLENN PEERS

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INTRODUCTION

> ANSWERING THE CALL that resounds through materiality itself, these things also call to one another—to all their others. Never fully subordinated to a larger order, they are always inviting relation. Humans respond belatedly, or some of us do: the Anthropocene is the haunting of that belatedness. But now is the only moment we have. What might we make of it?
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

I HAVE BEEN arguing for a few years now that Byzantines were animists, that their world was a relational web of humans and things, permeated by a deep incarnational theology. What is at stake in such a claim? I might start by saying that we owe past cultures—including ones very much still with us, such as the Byzantine—careful, honest, sympathetic examination of their own definitions, explanations, and aspirations. Such is a historian's obligation. And an aspect of that obligation is resistance to one's biases or ideologies. We've projected too much of ourselves onto the beliefs and hopes of Byzantines, and we must admit that they were neither modern nor Western in the ways we've assumed.

We account for our place in the world through individualism, our sturdy hope that we are resistantly discrete, impermeable entities. And yet we operate fundamentally as dividuals, open and porous, entangled in all things and every thing. This relational foundation of existence is now fraught with danger and escalating risk for all, to a great extent because we have refused to acknowledge and tend it: humans have slipped into a modern faith in knowingness that thinks it exceeds the scale and complexity of our world. Our individuated supremacy blinds us to other human possibilities, so that history only mirrors us back to ourselves. And yet we can learn to see ourselves better, more frankly, by looking at things of the past with open minds, and this book invites a reexamination of what we have wrongly explained through solipsism[1]— Byzantine art. And in this way, we might gain something for ourselves.

Among our most cherished modern assumptions is our distance from the material world we claim to love or, alternately, to dominate and own. As both devotional tool and art object, the Byzantine icon is rendered complicit in this distancing. According to well-established theological and scholarly explanations, the icon is a window onto the divine: it focuses and directs our minds to a higher understanding of God and saints. Despite their material richness, icons are understood to efface their own materiality, thereby enabling us to do the same. That the privileged relation of image to God is based on its capacity for material self-effacement is the basis for all theology of the icon and all art-historical description. It gets more complicated than this definition, to be sure, but the icon is positioned in this way in most straightforward accounts, whether devotional or scholarly. My position is to undermine the transcendentalizing determination of modern theology and aesthetics, and to lean very heavily on the materiality of these things to the point of allowing them, to the degree I can, a voice and life of their own.

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1 See Bird-David 1999 and Peers 2012a.

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But perhaps we have never really been "modern," as the philosopher of science Latour famously argued. Latour's work has been widely read and absorbed into a variety of academic disciplines, including art history. Indeed, he is one of the major public intellectuals of our time. My own particular admiration began with my first encounter with his book *We Have Never Been Modern* in the English translation published in 1993.[2] His argument posits a so-called "modern" who exists fully in a human-made-and-controlled world, someone whose ideological positions (such as human individualism and exceptionalism) explain all contingencies and who is cushioned from the unknown remainder by an inoculating separation from the nonhuman realm. Latour's own view of the world, however, is fundamentally relational; he considers "modernity" a dangerous illusion. We who never were modern, though we may have thought ourselves so, inhabit a reality not dependent on us humans or on our knowledge of it, and we recognize, to our benefit, that we are always deeply enmeshed in a web of relations among all agents or actants in it. In Latour's account, the separations that seem to govern so many aspects of our lives are shown to be ideological fantasies, so that a division between nature and culture, or between human and world, is eliminated or at least mitigated. What we're left with is a thoroughgoing relationalism in which we and every thing are defined by our interconnections, an utter democracy determined by act and relation.[3]

Now, if we've never been modern, then no one has, and that realization also allows us to strip away some of the Cartesian boundaries between mind and body, human and world—it allows us to strip it away for ourselves, but also to continue to examine and explain the past as like ourselves, and to do so in a truer, more honest way.[4] In other words, we have never been Byzantine, nor they modern, but we and they do share awareness of a particular kind of relationality that is reclaimable, in part—and most vividly—through that culture's material remains or, as this book prefers to put it, through *things*. As Latour says, "Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that very act interested in things."[5] This is a book about things and humans, Byzantine and beyond.

The subtitle of Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* in the French edition was *Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, and that stress on symmetry among agents, missing in the abbreviated title of the English version of the book, is an essential starting point for my understanding of material culture. It allows for realism in art history, for one thing, but not in the usual art-historical sense of representational fidelity to the observable world. Objects themselves are here granted reality, apart from any fidelity to their supposed referents, and also independent of human cognition. Furthermore, a "symmetrical and realist position," as Bjørnar Olsen dubs it, recognizes thingly relations, respects them, and acknowledges their integrity. "We are not only interested in exposing how the 'affordances' and qualities of things and non-humans affect people," he writes. "We are also concerned

2 Latour 1993.

3 For helpful presentations of these ideas, see Harman 2009, 57–68, and Harman 2016.

4 I tried arguing this position briefly in Peers 2015.

5 Latour 2000, 20. This text is one of the best places to enter into his thought and methods.

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with how they exist, act, and inflict on each other outside the human realm, and how this interaction eventually also affects human life. While there is no possibility of thinking humans outside the realms of things and natures, the opposite is, of course, viable."[6]

This position, it must be stated, is not anthropomorphizing, but the opposite. It takes seriously that things are not bound (but can be distorted and damaged) by our intellectualized views of them. In this age of the Anthropocene, our human exceptionalism is arguably even more pronounced than ever, since we are now agents of geological change on a larger scale than ever. But we are also that much more impelled to resist that illusion, brought on by our overexploitation of our planet, and to bring new or fresh perspectives to bear on our relations to and stewardship of the past.[7] This is what we might make of our moment, as humans among other things.

Animism and Relationalism

> [N]O CREATION BRINGING something new into existence is of human provenance alone, the human agent being instead the prey of the unrelenting imperative—"Guess!"—stemming from the work to be done.
>
> —Isabelle Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism"

Animism is not the same thing as relationalism, and it carries with it some difficult associations of so-called primitive, childlike cultures described by nineteenth-century historians of religion, for example.[8] The position vis-à-vis the world that animism broadly articulates, however, is highly useful for understanding spread of mind, intention, and agency beyond the human subject. For most of us in the twenty-first century, thinking our way into a more-than-human world takes us out of habitual frames of mind. But it is a highly productive experiment, just the same, for "it is rather a matter of recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as 'not ours' but rather as 'animating' us, making us witness to what is *not* us," as philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers writes.[9]

That is to say, animism is not a system with a doctrine and a theology, and it is seldom if ever a term used self-descriptively. It is implicit, immanent to ways of being. And it is very likely more common in all our lives than we would typically allow. The British anthropologist Tim Ingold has explored these modes in rich and complex writings over the last three decades.[10] He argues for a dialogical basis for animist worldviews, that is, a reciprocal negotiation of ontology among all actors in a given ecology, not least the human as subject to that negotiation, rather than dictating the terms as we might think. Thus, while animism is not the same thing as relationalism, the two are mutually implicated.

---

6 Olsen 2012, 213–14.

7 See, for example, Soller et al. 2011.

8 I provide some of this background in Peers 2012b.

9 Stengers 2011, 188–89.

10 For example, in the frequently cited Ingold 1998. See also Malafouris 2007.

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The necessary distinction that Ingold draws and that has been so formative for the arguments in this book is between an animism that conceives of spirit as an external agent coming to reside in things (as in possession or occupation) and one attuned to the agency of things themselves, as they navigate flows of the world.[11] The former is what infantilizing nineteenth-century historians of religion accused non-Europeans of succumbing to in their underdeveloped state. The latter is a way of existing among dividuals, entities constantly opening to one another and moving within the fluxes of this world we all inhabit. Mind and body in that world, likewise, do not operate in distinct spheres, but in concert. And agency is not a discrete supplement, but rather inheres in the complex relational play of materials. "Bringing things to life, then, is a matter not of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist."[12] In other words, all environments are collaborative spaces in which an unfolding of relations constantly takes place among agents or actants. They are the flux of which we are all a part. And indeed one might also question the use of "environment" in this context, for the obvious reason that an environment surrounds and encompasses. That model, elegant and simple as most persuasive models are, is not about active things and their (relatively stable) ambiances, but about "substances and media, and the surfaces between them."[13]

In the essay "Materials against Materiality," Ingold performs a straightforward experiment with a stone that is effective in its direct revelation of materials and their "histories." He asks the reader to follow him in retrieving a stone and wetting/soaking it, placing it near one as one reads the essay, and then returning to it at the end. (Photographs of before and after accompany the essay.) The stone has changed, as he says (and no one can gainsay such a claim), and one must confront the evidence of one's senses that "since the substance of the stone must be bathed in a medium of some kind, there is no way in which its stoniness can be understood apart from the ways it is caught up in the interchanges across its surfaces, between substance and medium."[14] The making of things is an important aspect of the transformation of materials (and what might be said to constitute art history as such), and here is where "mind" might be said to take command of the situation. But as every maker must recognize, minds are not above the flows and fluxes of materials; rather, they are as submerged in them as the very materials with which they collaborate.[15]

---

11 Ingold 2007a is a highly significant work for anyone working with humans, objects and environments.

12 Ingold 2007a, 12.

13 Ingold 2007a, 14. Ingold does not relinquish environment as a generative term, but I push back against it because I will also argue for the stuff of the world, that is, the molecular level of materiality and its explanations among Byzantines, and "environment" leans toward "blanket" rather than "ocean."

14 Ingold 2007a, 15.

15 A point made by Ingold in 2007b. The statement made in Renfrew 2012, 128 is evocative for a Byzantinist, "This is where the old 'mind' versus 'matter' dichotomy breaks down. The mistake made by commentators who focus exclusively upon the 'mind' is that they emphasize the potential for rich symbolic behavior without indicating that the ultimate criterion is the praxis in the material

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Humans: From Subject to Object

OUR WRITING TOOLS are also working on our thoughts.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*

My own path to a totalizing democracy of things, where the human is displaced from a subject to an object position, as it were, also runs through the arguments of Friedrich Kittler, the founder of what some call the German School of media theory, and of his students and colleagues, primarily Bernhard Siegert.[16] Kittler argued for media's radical determination of human cognition and subjectivity. He understood very well that humans are spoken by language, but that we also need to understand that such discursive practices have a history, and moreover—and this is key—those practices are shaped by media. In other words, Kittler's "so-called Man" was, and probably already had been, subsumed within that media priority.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a primary example of the human as always already an inscription surface. An early adapter of the new technology of the typewriter and also one unusually aware of its effects, Nietzsche recognized himself that the writing tool was working on him. The machine introduced a kind of automatic writing in which he could see his written words only after pauses, due to the way typewriter hid and then revealed his typewritten script. He knew that he had shifted from extended, thoughtful composition to a telegram style in which aphorisms and tags became the basis for his philosophy. Nietzsche, for Kittler, was the paradigmatic philosopher whose machine was impartially, implacably revealing media's determinative role in his thinking.[17]

The link between Ingold and Kittler is not an obvious one, except in their shared insistence on relegating humans, mind, and even intention to a supporting role in how the world might be said to operate "truly," and not just how it proceeds and means according to our cognition. Media theory provides insights into historical conditions otherwise apparently "natural" and able to be explained away. It has a more radically antihumanist aspect than any argument made by Ingold, but media theory also returns us to the basic mechanisms by which realities are constituted in their foundational materialities—which are the primary concerns of an art historian, after all.

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world. This supposed potential only reaches fulfillment when mind and matter come together in a new material behavior. To deal with these issues properly requires what one may term a *hypostatic* approach which transcends the mind/matter dichotomy (even if such terminology recalls medieval theological debates about the essence of the Holy Trinity)."

16 The essays in Siegert 2015 constitute a rich introduction to this school.

17 Ever provocative, Kittler also wrote, "In standardized texts, paper and body, writing and soul fall apart. Typewriters do not store individuals; their letters do not communicate a beyond that perfectly alphabetized readers can subsequently hallucinate as meaning. Everything that has been taken over by technological media since Einstein's inventions disappears from typescripts. The dream of a real visible or audible world arising from words has come to an end" (Kittler 1999, 14).

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The Posthuman Condition

> WE HAVE ALWAYS been posthuman but are only just learning to think that thought.
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

The posthuman condition that we are emerging into is the effect of technological changes, on the one hand, pointing to a kind of nonhuman or transhuman world, and climate changes, on the other, marking a paradox of the period when the human is the dominant force, yet more than ever aware of our entanglement with, dependence on, and vulnerability to the nonhuman. Thus we try to escape the effects of our self-made Anthropocene, even while it makes us feel special and masterful and still able to turn it around. And we have always been posthuman anyway, just as we have never been modern. That is to say, the limits (as well as the dangers) of human agency have always been there, and now that they are so clearly laid bare for us, we can see that we can think a somewhat different history.

We need to take things' sides, not always to fall back on our tyrannical self-interest and self-regard as humans. Rosi Braidotti, for one, argues for treating objects as self-organizing entities, proposing that the continuity between matter and mind, between human bodies and world, is a necessary condition for better understanding of our places in the world.[18] We might be less in control than we like to think, but this position that our body gives each of us is our primary view onto and voice into the world.

So how do we go from the relational web of Latour's model, to the wet rock on Ingold's desk, to the typewriter in Nietzsche's archive in Weimar, to a Byzantine church or icon? And it must be asked again: Why? What's at stake for me or you? If materials and media are dominant factors in the formation of the human (Kittler's "so-called Man"), then material empathy is a way into a humble, decentred position from which our bodies might be sites of dividuation, where our connections to the nonhuman world are found to be more thoroughgoing than knowing and explaining would commonly allow. Ingold's stone is potentially as dividuated as any other entity in the world, and it shows us through its transformative potential. But it is also potentially an animate creature: for some First Nations people in Canada, for example, all stones have actual and linguistic animacy; they can move and act, though at a slower pace than our immediate perception can trace; and historical sources tell us that Hagia Sophia, that great cathedral of the Byzantine patriarchate, had walls of revealing stones that could show forth petrosnapshots of sacred events, such as the Baptism of Christ.[19] The technologies by which we arrived at those snapshots might seem to have been under craft control, that is, men quarrying and splitting and shaping stone and thereby exercising their mastery over it. But indeed, rock ever only partly yields to such mastery, and those materials exceed both expectation and understanding.[20]

---

18 Braidotti 2013; and Braidotti and Vermeulen, 2014; as well as Parikka 2014 and Parikka 2015.

19 Peers 2012b.

20 The evocation of Brown 2018 is strong, "It was the touch of light that caused the multicoloured, veined marble that sheathed the sides of the Hagia Sophia to come alive—to open like a meadow in

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Byzantine Things as Subjects

> WE HAVE INVADED not only the space of the world, but, if I dare say so, ontology.
>
> —Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*

Perhaps we should start by allowing that Byzantine things were fully dividuated subjects, relational and animate like their humans. The prolific philosopher and polymath Michel Serres gives us compelling insights into how this realization might play out. In *The Natural Contract*, for example, he describes with real force the reversal of vulnerability that modernity and the Anthropocene have brought to bear on humanity and the globe. The world used to dominate us, its scale and moods so much greater than our power. But now fragility has changed sides, since our actions are mastery and dominance, "enormous and dense tectonic plates of humanity."[21] Ever the classicist, Serres uses the example of Achilles battling the river Scamander (humans call it this; gods, the Xanthus) in book 21 of the *Iliad*. The river god tried three times to kill the Greek hero, and Achilles fought back, but was saved from defeat at the "hands" of the river only by the Greek-favouring gods themselves. As Serres evokes this literary battle as paradigmatic of the pre-Anthropocene, he also makes clear that the Earth now is that defensive combatant, and we, Achilles, are now "winning."[22]

How can we correct this imbalance when nation and capital are uncontested in this world we've made? The Byzantine world had models in it for understanding, for empathizing, and finding an equilibrium in which all dividuals can find a place—for recognizing subjects in things and opening to their subjectivities. Consider the long account by the great Byzantine writer Michael Psellus (1017/18–1078/96) on the so-called habitual miracle at the Church of the Panagia (or Virgin Mary) at Blachernai in Constantinople (Istanbul). A veil (different terms are used in his account) on the icon of the church moved in a dramatic fashion to reveal the presence and attendance of the Panagia (one of the titles of Mary), and this miracle was used even in law courts to provide an incontrovertible verdict—the icon as judge.[23] As Serres states, in such a determination, "Objects themselves are legal subjects and no longer mere material for appropriation[…]. If objects themselves become legal subjects, then all scales will tend toward an equilibrium,"[24] rectifying the too-human bias of our world. We might say that recognizing such subjecthood in the past might also put that past in a concomitant position of equilibrium with the present, but we'll sidestep that Orthodox Romanticism. The Byz-

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full flower. Light was the point with which our world joined the unimaginable," and "many preferred to enter the church as if it was a magic grove made up of multicolored columns."

21 Serres 1995a, 16.

22 Serres 1995a, 5: "Suppose that, inversely, we choose to consider ourselves responsible: if we lose, we lose nothing, but if we win, we win everything, by remaining the actors of history."

23 I am condensing a complicated text for effect, but see the translation by Elizabeth A. Fisher in Barber and Papaioannou 2017, 307–39.

24 Serres 1995a, 37.

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antine world was never close to being so blameless as that.[25] Nevertheless, perhaps, in its (and our) art might lie our salvation, that is, if we can stop looking at the world as a picture.[26]

The Language of Things

> THE CLOSER WORDS get to things, the more they fall apart. Say them. Unsay them. Say them again. Listen to the clamor of voices!
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

Serres also argued for a world without the priority of the linguistic, without language premaking our worlds even while we speak it (we think) into being. This view might seem to work against the verbal, mechanistic view strongly espoused by Kittler, for example, but both thinkers see the nonverbal media flows of the world always fundamentally acting on us. In Serres's compelling version of the world, the senses are the possible deliverance from language that endangers and enslaves us. Resisting the saturation of language allows a return to the world in bodies, for it is there and in those senses, Serres argues, that soul is made, above all in and on skin: world and soul, dividuating fully, mingle and merge.[27]

Thinking the posthuman in the guise of an icon is a liberating experience, but expressing it is, of course, a verbal process, even while trying to suppress the "drift of the hard, (the given, the actual, the particular)," as Serres terms it, "into the soft (the abstract, the signified, the general." "Without being able to prove it, I believe, like soothsayers and haruspices, and like scientists, that there exists a world independent of man [...]. I believe, I know, I cannot demonstrate the existence of this world without us."[28] That independence rests partly on the nonverbal, and Serres has argued energetically (and with real verbal bravado, ironically—his French is full of literary depth and lexical play) against phenomenology's strong bias toward human modes of description. Phenomenology is closely related to Serres's insistence on the body and its sensual experience of the world as its primary mode of knowing, but he also extends his argument through his masterful deployment of classical references and history of science. He has collaborated with Bruno Latour, and that wide competency across culture and science also marks their work as deeply humane, all the while resisting and supplanting the exclusive worlds made (and verbalized) by humans.

We can use guesswork and sensuous thought to return to empathetic relations with things, and I've imagined elsewhere an ensouled world (in Serres's sense, and not Bissera

25 The writings of George Duthuit were marvellous instances of the Byzantinizing utopianism. See Batario 2018 and Peers 2010.

26 See Zabala 2017.

27 Serres 2008.

28 Serres 2008, 102–3.

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Pentcheva's, about whom see below) of icons and things.[29] Perhaps I am wrong in my imagining and the direction of my empathy, but I am not wrong to try. In this volume, I attempt to take the side of things and to occupy their perspectives as best I can. These fantasies are always provisional, partial, flawed, I have no doubt, but I am trying for a democratic, homogenizing viewpoint where my human understanding is necessarily incomplete. While I model that failure, I also embrace the position that opens me in my body and mind to that searching. Things, however, do demonstrate their sense of the world, mostly in silence and nonverbally. I write "about," but I want to take seriously the admonition of William James about such words: "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*, a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not, so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the substantive parts alone that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use."[30] For that reason, I want to try to write "and," "if," "by," to overcome a "normal," "habitual" position.

The Material Basis of Our Pasts

> SUCH ARE THE strange powers of the material: its plasticity cannot be reduced to the canonical passivity of Madame Matter subjected to the blows—and the striking of seals—that Monsieur Form eternally imposes on her.
>
> —Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals: Art History Put to the Test by the Material"

Wax was an important material in the Byzantine world. It was the basis for communication, in the sealing that it performed when melted and pressed into letters and other documents. (I leave seals, the great paradigm of Byzantine image theory, aside for now—see chapter 8.) Through its actions, it becomes an actor in a whole network of material and social exchanges.[31] Its humility is not a reason for ignoring its acts, quite the opposite, and taking its viscous, protean side is a way to imagine oneself into fundamentals of relational fields. In these fields are a whole range, indeed *the* whole range, of our acts from which all intentions and meanings arise. Therefore, we must know, imagine better, the material basis of our pasts.

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29 Peers 2017.

30 James 1899, 1:245–46 (preceding the passage quoted in the text): "But from our point of view both Intellectualists and Sensationalists are wrong. If there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum natura, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known*. There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. If we speak objectively, it is the real relations that appear revealed; if we speak subjectively, it is the stream of consciousness that matches each of them by an inward colouring of its own. In either case the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades."

31 Here I am making reference to the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, but I would also call attention to the brilliant study of the postal in Siegert 1999. See too Platt 2020.

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Figure 1. Pilgrim token of St. Symeon the Younger, 3.2 × 3.0 cm, clay, ca. 600 CE, The Menil Collection, Houston (79-24-199DJ), photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Dirt might be the last place to look for a culture's meanings, but Byzantine dirt is another locus of transformation and meaning making at the lowest level of our direct knowing. The widespread and highly popular tokens of the stylite saints, those pillar-sitting Olympic-athletes of God, were formed from baked dirt and sealed with impressions, most often images of those saints (Figure 1). The matrix for the impressions, like wax for seals, bore and made meaning in the very dirt gathered at those holy spots and activated as extensions of the saints' power. Indeed, they became valued, treasured, guarded for their power constellating from the saints. If the dirt had ever been considered inert and passive, these mobilizations of the saints' holy reach prove the limitations of that view, for the tokens were empowered to spread holiness beyond the saints' limited bodies. When Symeon the Stylite blesses and sends his baked-dirt tokens out into the world, he sends himself there to work in his own behalf. In that way, he is a worm, just as he is a friend and cultivator of worms, who dig his body:[32] he relates to the world through soil and works to find homeostasis in his world, just as worms use soil to create external kidneys. That dirt's surplus or excess is in relation to him and to the world simultaneously, and it relies to some partial degree on the stamp or seal, but the material was the means by which the saint as organ entered into the social, devotional networks of that world.[33]

The person-lives of Byzantine things are strangely straightforward.[34] People in that past world knew very well that condition of others' person-lives to be different (and sometimes more) than what humans felt and sensed. Their art revealed it to them, their explanations for the world around them supported it, and experience confirmed it. Objects' and persons' interior lives have to be inferred from their symptoms, but that method is also our own natural means to know other human feelings and senses. We have the advantage, in some ways, of words, but those nonhuman persons also had a hard time hiding their feelings.

I want to try to communicate the vantage points possible even in a highly self-interested text, the ninth-century *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*, to reveal how we know inner life through outward reactions—both human and nonhuman.[35] The Patriarch Germanos

32 Burrus 2018, 219–31, inter alia.

33 Peers 2013, 74–76. On medieval materiality, see now Kessler 2019, 31–58.

34 The next paragraphs follow closely a passage in Peers 2017. On manuscripts with voice and identity, as imagined by scholars, see Beta 2017, and Zeitlian Watenpaugh 2019, 19–20 (albeit with a human visage within one of the carpet pages doing the talking, not the book itself).

35 Munitiz et al. 1997, 49–51 (7.14.b–c).

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was deeply troubled by image destruction, and he wept and wailed before deciding to give an image of Christ freedom by bringing the icon down to the harbour at T'Amantíou; he attached a petition to the right hand of the icon that implored it to save itself. The icon did so by standing in the water up to its ankles and moving in that way and with crazy velocity to Rome. It stood in the Tiber for three days in a fiery guise and then, with striking speed, came to Pope Gregory II, who was waiting in a boat on the river, just as the high priest Symeon had in the Temple in Jerusalem. The icon's feet never dried, according to the story, and those sodden feet kept dripping salty, healing water for the afflicted of Rome.

Try this episode from the other way around: I'm picked up and placed in the water, and my grieving master pushes me away; I learn the currents of the sea, and I look for refuge in another place; that master forgot me, and I'll forget him and find another; my patience is short, because I am in relation to the great Master (the plaque in my right hand is directed at me and at him, "Master, master, save yourself and us, because we perish"), and I have strength to travel, enflame, generate forever my own salty wetness; I cannot dry nor die, and I feel and fulfil the needs of those blind and broken persons who are less than I am.

Byzantines knew special persons had abilities more than human to protect and save, and those special persons often behaved excessively and unpredictably, submissive and resistant according to a logic only partly understood by humans. All things are *sui generis*, and icons all feel differently, too. Their extraordinary reactions are noted and recorded, not their abilities of forbearance and qualities of patience.

The icon appears in that written source described from a human perspective, but its independence and resistance come across very well, naturally, even, and its emotions and its interior life are implicit in this account—no real explanation of that inner life was necessary in any of the accounts in that collection. But a person's senses of the world determined each narrative. Nearly every time the life of an object bubbles to the surface in a medieval Greek text, it reveals the collapse of a distinction between sign and referent, which we take as the basis for representation, and it shows the irruption of interior life, which we also take to be the basis for consciousness and subjectivity among humans.

Interiorities are spread across the world, while defining, physical differences are made particular to each species, culture.[36] These modes of being are revealed in participatory moments, when the icon reveals its independence, its majesty even, and continues to reveal traces of that state in lesser form (the secretion of salty water) until its existence ceases or is altered beyond recognition. Its emotions show as symptoms, not verbally expressed (though it perhaps could read), when it is threatened and then implored to save to itself. How else could it have known, if not through its senses?

A thread running through modern thought assumes things to be extensions of our bodies—things become activated or actualized only once they are performed by us.

36 According to Philippe Descola, animism sees a continuity or spread of minds, of thinking, and a discontinuity of bodies, of physical containers; Descola 2013, 291. See, also, Descola 2010; Robb 2010; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; and Malafouris 2007.

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And in another way, things are comprehensible as extensions or prostheses for us in the world. Such a position, of course, is exclusively human-centred, and it is difficult to escape, even in the most thoughtful, careful analyses.[37] But, again, try it from the other side: we are objects' prostheses, their way to overcome their physical limitations and to realize their own emotional, sensory lives more fully than they can on their own. The focus of the story of the T'Amantiou icon is the icon, after all, and all the other characters appear only as facilitators for its survival and for its newly splendid beneficence in Rome. Even told according to the text's own terms, human agents realize the icon's sensual shortcomings or gaps, and they ensure its survival as its extensions outside itself.

A precondition of feeling is worldedness, acknowledging a state of having one's own world of thoughts and feeling and perhaps even explanations for that world.[38] Humans naturally self-acknowledge this possession. Worldedness also needs a kind of body with/through which to sense the world one creates, and one knows that sensing the world, one then knows self.[39] The geochemist and geobiologist Hope Jahren empathically describes a humble plant's striking independence in the lab, among a raft of compliant, predictable others, as a striking reversal of subject determination. She is a fine poet of plants' fullness of intentional life: "While it seemed that I experienced everything, he appeared to me to passively do nothing. Perhaps, however, to him I was just buzzing around as a blur and, like the electron within an atom, exhibited too much random motion to register as alive."[40] Who can say in this equation who has the better case for meaningful life? Well, we do say so, of course.

Bissera Pentcheva on Icons

> ART IS THE context in which thinking becomes problematic. "Don't think too much" *about a work of art*. Some art-related abstractions or concepts to avoid were connotation, classification, and context itself.
>
> —Richard Shiff, "Watch Out for Thinking (Even Fuzzy Thinking): Concept and Percept in Modern Art"

One of the most widely read Byzantine art historians at work today is Bissera Pentcheva. Her work has been highly formative for many medievalists and Byzantinists alike, and it parallels and informs certain aspects of my own arguments as I present them here. Her book from 2010, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual and the Senses in Byzantium*, examines the kinetic qualities of icons in their material effects and their capacities to move others; that is, she stresses effect over icons' (and matter's) self-motivation. She memorably termed this quality "the performative icon" in an *Art Bulletin* article from 2006 that formed a basis for her book. Extending her argument into video witness, Pentcheva filmed light of intensities similar to candlelight circulating metal icons in order to cap-

37 Hamilakis 2014, 113 and 197, for example.

38 For example, Robertson 2012.

39 See Franke 2011 on self as gift of the other. See also the excellent Diederichsen 2011.

40 Jahren 2017, 261.

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ture how the surfaces react in a lively, presence-making way. "In its original setting, the icon performed through its materiality," she wrote in that article.[41] The stress on the performative has been highly generative in beginning to overcome the limits of museum-freed imagination and wonder, no small things.

But it diverges strongly from my arguments in a number of crucial ways, which ought to be noted, since Pentcheva's positions are superficially similar to mine. In the first place, she follows the thinking of the Byzantine art historian Charles Barber about a non-essentialist relation between image and model (which is, it must be acknowledged, the normative explanation in the field). In short, Byzantine representation works like a seal pressed into wax, so the resultant image (in the wax) has relation through resemblance, but not through any essential contact with the signifier (the seal). These arguments constitute a nearly unexceptionable answer to idolatry (if it ever existed, but that is another question).[42] Those scholars have argued strongly for this metaphor to stand for a variety of material situations in which Byzantine theologians felt overcome by the messy field of images before them and for which they could find solace in soothing solutions offered by great Greeks of the past, namely, Plato and Aristotle. Absence marks the icon, since there is no real, shared essence between image and model, but the image stimulates presence through its effects and consequently heightens desire for that presence.[43]

Pentcheva writes in that article, for example, "The definition of the icon as absence has paradoxically heightened the materiality of this object."[44] That paradox motivates a great deal of her work, and the tension it provides between the mundane and the transcendent has proven to be productive and often very enticing. And yet I would argue that her paradox rests on a misunderstanding of materiality, a reading of effects and surface without consideration for and analysis of matter themselves (to use nongendering subject-making language).

This assertion also applies to colleagues whose writings I admire, though not their "deadening" conclusions. They examine beautiful, compelling works of art and see inert, discrete things, and they mistake their cognitive imputations of so-called animation for absence. They can't believe their eyes; they misread their senses, and they perceive superficial, illusory effects when the real thing is before their eyes. Their recognition fights with their miscognition, and it becomes a self-explaining paradox of materiality and self-affirming nod to their own subjecthood.

A telling example comes in response to the story told by Michael Psellus about the icon of Christ Antiphonetes (The Answerer) commissioned by the empress Zoe (ca. 978–1050), an icon that was self-declaredly alive in its colour-changing communication.[45] When the empress asked it questions, when she clasped the icon to her breast, she talked to it like a living thing, either with joy or despondency, Psellus states. The

41 Pentcheva 2006, 631.

42 The conventional explanation is in Krause 2019, 211–15, 250–59.

43 Barber 1993 is likewise among the most influential essays written on Byzantine art in the last thirty years.

44 Pentcheva 2006, 632.

45 See also Peers 2012a.

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story is one of exchange, of relation, between two quasi-objects: neither the icon nor Zoe are inert, without agency. Nor is either integral in themself. Both are dividuals in the sense that they act on each other, and desire transforms them both. An object in a fully human world is a thing that has become known through its representation in thought by a human subject. However, in an animist universe, we are all quasi-objects that share qualities of passive entities, but only superficially. In the ways we all act in the world, we are agents on an open, relational plane.[46] In contrast, Pentcheva treats the icon in her analysis differently, "the shaping of a complex surface out of shining, reflective material capable of performing a phenomenal spectacle of changing appearances[…]. The icon fashioned for Zoe emerges as a multimedia icon made of the most shining materials, performing an ever-variegated array of phenomenal changes of *morphe*."[47]

The icon looks real, it flashes light, it behaves like a person (it behaves the empress, in fact!), it knows the future, it is in relation to God who gives that knowledge, and yet it has "failed" as an animate entity. Here is her translation of Psellus, in which her interpellation, signaled by the square-bracketed "failed," is strongly telling of her default Cartesian position,

> At any rate, about [Empress Zoe's] Christ, if I may say so, she had it manufactured for herself, an icon shaped quite precisely and displaying with shinier material the phenomenal spectacle of *poikilia*, so that this image [failed] by only a little to appear totally animate. For it answered by colors the questions put to it; its appearance revealed the future of things […]. When she would see it as [Christ] turning pale, she would go away crestfallen, but if she would see him burning like fire and being illuminated with the most splendorous radiance, she would rejoice and immediately inform the emperor what the future was to bring.[48]

The square brackets in that just-quoted word indicate a correction to the translation for which Pentcheva carefully takes credit: she identifies the person, but she cannot accept the truth of that identification; it is real, but not really. In that "[failed]," she posits a presence, but it has to be an illusion. Her insertion of "failed" speaks to a shortcoming of our biased analyses and of our ways through the world we live in, too.[49]

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46 Peers 2013, 38.

47 Pentcheva 2010, 185.

48 Pentcheva 2010, 184. I am willing to use to use this translation, myself: Zoe "made for herself an image of Jesus, fashioning it with as much accuracy as she could (if such a thing were possible). The little figure, embellished with bright metal, appeared to be living [*empnoun*]. By changes of colour, it answered questions put to it, and by its various tints foretold coming events […]. I myself have seen her, in moments of great distress, clasp the sacred object in her hands, contemplate it, talk to it as to a living [*empsycho*] thing, and addresses it with one sweet term after another. Then at other times I have seen her lying on the ground, her tears bathing the earth, while she beat her breasts over and over again, tearing at them with her hands. If she saw the image turn pale, she would go away crestfallen, but if it took on a fiery red colour, its halo lustrous with a beautiful radiant light, she would lose no time in telling the emperor and prophesying what the future was to bring forth." See Reinsch 2014, 1:133–24 (6.66); Sewter 1966, 188 [modified].

49 Charles Barber, in Barber and Papaioannou 2017, 345–47, offers another translation and preceding comments, which fail to note contradictory arguments, including those discussed on both sides here.

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Animism in this model argued for by Pentcheva is a kind of magic folded or descended into matter, not a positive and sophisticated way of thinking about our position with and against the world, its flows and fluxes.[50] Moreover, for Pentcheva, animism can be a "belief in a spirit's descent into and presence in inanimate matter."[51] Such language suggests that animism falls into a primitive stage of religion. It has been described as the child phase to the adult achievement of monotheism. (See the nineteenth-century historian of religion Edward Burnett Tylor, as well as Sigmund Freud.) But, in the end, that explanation for Byzantine perception of liveliness and relation in their world implies an elaborate system of staged effects, reinstating a safely inoculated world of inert, manipulable matter where the great binary of Man and God meet.

Pentcheva on Byzantine Buildings

> ALL BUILDINGS ARE predictions; all predictions are wrong.
>
> —Stanley Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens to Them after They're Built*

Pentcheva's work has been strongly formative for the field of Byzantine art history, and it is in the vanguard of this field as it is practised. And her recent work on Hagia Sophia, subtitled *Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium*, is certain to be influential.[52] She argues again for the performativity of icons and buildings, namely, Hagia Sophia, the great cathedral of Byzantium, and suggests how experiences of objects and buildings allowed Byzantine viewers/liturgical participants to engage in a dynamic process of becoming filled with God, indeed, of becoming his image on earth.

That process, as she describes it, includes both in-spiriting and mirroring: sound as the creation of an image of God transforming worshippers via construction of aural space at Hagia Sophia and mirroring as a phenomenon of material echoes. Her stated indebtedness is to the work of Alfred Gell and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both excellent starting points for this kind of argument of bodies making sense of the world. Gell had argued for a kind of living-presence response in art that came from an enchantment that art produces in viewers. In these ways, art is a strong, primary means by which social relations are produced and sustained.[53] Likewise, Merleau-Ponty provides Pentcheva with some generalized approaches to understanding the sensing body in space. Yannis Hamilakis evokes the context and helpfully takes the enfleshment further than Pentcheva has been willing:

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50 Some of this is from a definition of animism I offered in Peers 2013, 36.

51 Pentcheva 2010, 19. Also, animism is "a belief that the forces of nature, seen as spirits, could be harnessed by embedding them in inanimate objects." (Pentcheva 2010, 34) This view takes none of the literature from anthropology and religious studies into account. Betancourt 2016, 261, finds fault with Pentcheva for "purposely sidestep[ping] the psychic dispositions and conceptual operations of the icon [...] mere phenomenon without logos." To my mind, this criticism is not fair, for reasons I give in this introductory chapter. In Betancourt's examination of medium, gold is mediator of potentiality and actuality, a strong example of high-end meta-Byzantine theorizing.

52 Pentcheva 2017. On Hagia Sophia, see now the magisterial work Ousterhout 2019, 199–216.

53 His most influential work is Gell 1998.

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"Humans, things, light, sound, smell, incense, smoke, all become elements of the 'flesh', as Merleau-Ponty would put it. This corporeal experience would reach its climax in another act of in-corporation—in the Eucharist."[54] Here, as I read Merleau-Ponty and Hamilakis, the space and all constituent entities are mingled flesh, which is the outcome of phenomenological analysis of such contexts.

When discussing the ekphrasis of Paul the Silentiary (d. ca. 580) on the Great Church, Pentcheva stresses the linguistic operation in phonetic echoes that "suggests how the inert transforms into a live entity. Paul recognizes animation in shifts of appearance."[55] This passage exemplifies essential issues in her work that I wish us to overcome: namely, the stress on language over experience, a focus on the superficial effects of liveliness, and the casual and incomplete mobilization of secondary sources (namely, a generalized version of phenomenology).

Beside Gell and Merleau-Ponty, Pentcheva names Martin Heidegger as starting point,[56] but she also calls out his limitations for medievalists, because medieval materiality, she states, is "not an end in and of itself but just a medium of the metaphysical."[57] Her phenomenological approach, she states, "remedies that failing," but it also neglects to name its kind of phenomenology beyond her own self-description of it. In any case, I would question that materiality is *just* a medium for the spirit. As the adverb "just" suggests, the "medium of the metaphysical" is a particular way to understand and devalue the material world, or at least to explain it away, and it stands for animation, theatrical effects, and verbal persuasion above all; as she says, "this process is accomplished through the mouth." And it is a particular way of disappearing the world.[58]

Because she is concerned with the construction of aural space at Hagia Sophia, acoustics are a significant part of Pentcheva's argument, what she calls a sensory archaeology, and she collaborated with sound engineers and performers to rediscover the lost acoustic profiles of Hagia Sophia. Pentcheva makes a case for the linguistic conditioning and characteristics at the core of that acoustic analysis, and this interest is shared by other scholars active in Byzantine studies, who likewise wish to expand the sensorium within our examinations of that culture. For example, Kim Haines-Eitzen has explored some of the acoustic tropes in early ascetic literature of the desert and has described the ways

54 Hamilakis 2014, 78.

55 Pentcheva 2017, 132.

56 She cites only Barber 2013 and no other source.

57 Pentcheva 2017, 10.

58 And yet we should bear in mind the qualifications and memorable assertions in Herva 2012, 78: "An important point emerging here is that things were not necessarily what they first seemed to be: certain animals in certain situations could actually be witches, certain bodies of water could be spiritual beings, and so forth. Knowing this kind of environment, and engaging with it appropriately, required continuous attentiveness to what was going on around people. A particular spring could sometimes behave and engage with people like a conscious being, but it did not necessarily do that all the time, whereas another similar spring could always be 'just a spring.' Abstract, generalized knowledge about things was not quite sufficient to really know that world, but bodily-perceptual-cognitive engagement with particular things in particular situations was required."

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in which monks could "grow within" these natural songs of honour.[59] This process is a natural, organic cooperation among all parts of creation, and human and other creatures shift their identities through sound and find common voice. The identities of things in nature are as changeable as those of humans. I would adduce the evocative example of the stone of the Erechtheion, which resounded like waves when the wind blew through it from the south; the elements of the natural world are able to mimic sounds and destabilize their own selves in miraculous, unexpected ways.[60]

For Byzantines, too, stone, air, and water were not as secure in their discrete identities as we might expect from our Cartesian vantage point.[61] We are not simply beings shut up in a box of flesh and blood, as Charles Sanders Pierce wrote; he continues, "When I communicate my thought and my sentiments to a friend with whom I am in full sympathy, so that my feelings pass into him, and I am conscious of what he feels, do I not live in his brain as well as in my own—most literally."[62] Being in meaningful ways is extensive to the world around us. By thinking beyond the too human, we can imagine how forests think, to use Eduardo Kohn's potent imagery, and we can also remake ourselves in those thoughts past the Anthropocene.[63]

So we can see more fully than before if we try to put on Byzantine thinking about forests or stones or water thinking. We now are in a position to evaluate how senses made sense of a building such as Hagia Sophia, though it is still a work of imaginative argument, for reasons I've already mentioned. We are at a point now where we can probe representation outside language—that is how sound, noise, word, music, etc. made worlds.

That includes voice, nonhuman, as well as human.[64] Voice is a recursive instrument for convincing ourselves of our autonomy, all the while transforming self outside of our knowing and control. Pentcheva explains that statement expansively, and she treats the human voice and the divine/spirit/transcendent as the only elements in action. In an important article from 2001, for example, Amy Papalexandrou brought out the subject-making mechanisms at play in a church as a dividuating entity. The Church of the Panagia Skripou, outside Orchomenos in central Greece, was commissioned by the Protospatharios Leon in 873/4, and a lengthy inscription in Greek circumscribes the entire exterior of the building, in which the conditions and laudatory effect of the church building are stated. Reading in this context was an oral and performative act in which a reader is subsumed beneath the building's speech and is, one might say, behaved by the building itself: "here it is the building itself which is understood to 'speak' the text and

59 Haines-Eitzen 2017.

60 Pausanias, 1.26.6. For an evocative description of wind, stone, and concrete at the Parthenon and at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, see Vigderman 2018, 41–42.

61 The sound resonances in Byzantium have been the subject of some radical scholarship in this field in recent years. Amy Papalexandrou and Sharon Gerstel have both explored, imaginatively and rigorously, the range of meaning sound has in this historical period. See Papalexandrou 2017; Gerstel 2015; and Gerstel et al. 2018; and Pentcheva 2018.

62 In Hartshorne et al. 1958–60, 7:581.

63 Kohn 2013, 227.

64 See Peers 2018a.

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that we, the readers, are made to join in concerted acclamation upon our pronouncement of it. Hence, we become the actualizers of the written word only upon active and mutual participation in its "'performance."[65] As Papalexandrou points out, we can imagine the building visually coming alive with human voice, but I would leave out human and posit a voice that is shared across and among entities.[66]

More broadly, what can be shared is the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world in the practices of bodies in/and churches. The floor mosaic laid in 767 in the Church of the Virgin in Madaba, Jordan, has an inscriptional field within a geometric carpet that includes abstract, repetitive designs. This mosaic still exists, while the original walls and their decoration are no longer extant. The inscription gives a hint that readers were also able to see an icon (painted or mosaic, the medium is not specified). It reads, "If you want *to look at Mary*, virginal Mother of God, and to Christ whom she generated, Universal King, only Son of the Only God, purify [your] flesh and works! May you purify with [your] prayer the people of God."[67] The inscription is precious evidence of Christian practice in the eighth century, a century and more after the emergence of Islam. That practice evidently included figural decoration in the apse toward which prayer and ritual practice were directed, as the inscription prescribed. The inscription on the floor of the apse area was legible only to some people in the community and comprehensible to a relatively small number too, presumably.

This much seems clear: that practice was, necessarily, fully spatial and material, including the full-body participation of any person engaged within this area. But it also implies the "very truth of the eyes," the moments of embodied blindness between reading and looking when we see most truly—the blind space articulated by Jacques Derrida between studying the model or subject and then putting pencil to paper or brush to canvas, or when tears veil our eyes, and we see best.[68] This same space exists among the standing, kneeling, praying humans and their attending to the purifying prayer stated by the inscription—they're constantly in that between reading and seeing, the very truth that comes from purification. All such highly accomplished devotional acts, if done "correctly," can have this outcome. Yet the "spiritual" (as a somehow-distinct category from material) hardly seems able to encompass it all—the enfleshing always must be in play. My argument is again with the way in which spirit is stressed and isolated, especially as our normative category for experience in Byzantine spaces, disregarding or undervaluing, the flesh of the world.[69]

Here, then, is the possibility of understanding and explaining (as best we can) how buildings can act as agents, not only historically, but also in the present. C. M. Chin has recently written an illuminating analysis of buildings in the period of later antiquity (and I would argue, by extension, to Byzantium), through the biography of Melania the

65 Papalexandrou 2001, 281.

66 Pettman 2017, 4, "If the eyes are the window to the soul, then the voice is the second of that soul after the curtains have been drawn. Humans, as always, monopolize the metaphysical condition."

67 Translation from Talgam 2014, 396–98 (also with discussion and bibliography). My italics.

68 See Derrida 1993.

69 *Pace* Haldon and Brubaker 2011, 230–32.

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Younger (ca. 383–439) written by her contemporary, Gerontius (ca. 452), which sees buildings "not merely as locations but as actors in their own right."[70] In other words, buildings, and maybe especially the great ones such as Hagia Sophia, are not stage sets, and certainly not scrims, that is, gauzy surfaces against which action occurs (call it liturgy) and that appear opaque when lit from behind (call the light spirit). Buildings don't frame or supplement, but operate as fully present and determinant.[71]

In an invigorating study, *Architectural Agents: The Delusional, Abusive, Addictive Lives of Buildings*, Annabel Jane Wharton develops these positions with the verve and flexibility of a cultural critic and the acumen of a deeply learned historian of Byzantine art and architecture.[72] She examines an architectural ensemble of museums and virtual place, including the Rockefeller/Palestine Archaeological Museum in East Jerusalem, and reveals in striking and moving ways how buildings can suffer and murder and live with disability. In every case, "architectural agents, like the more mobile bodies with which they collaborate, make social space and contribute to its ethical valences."[73] A building such as the Rockefeller/PAM is in a state of suspended animation, a catalepsy, and it is dying as its lifeblood is being drained away, transfused into its wealthy neighbour across the city, the Israel Museum. But it is more than a social agent; it has its own unpredictable and irrepressible qualities that make its status as victim even more sobering. For Wharton, buildings have an ontological status as embodied agents: "buildings exert a force on the world independent of human intention or even human consciousness."[74]

Modes of Experiencing the Divine

> AN INTIMATE, ALIEN swarm of feeling, felt *things*.
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

The work of Patricia Cox Miller, especially in her 2009 book, *The Corporeal Imagination*, has been extremely helpful in my own thinking and my arguments that emerged in the last decade.[75] Ranging across late antique sources concerning the irruptions of the holy

70 Chin 2017, 20.

71 Consider, with "Byzantine" arguably inserted where appropriate in this quotation from Herva 2010, 441: "Although it is widely recognised that buildings resemble organisms in various ways in different cultures, and that the relationship between people and buildings is dynamic in nature, modern understanding of the world dictates that buildings are 'really' just inanimate objects and organism-like only in a metaphorical sense or in the minds of people. This thinking, with its dualistic and mechanistic assumptions, may actually be a poor guide when it comes to understanding buildings and their relations with humans in seventeenth-century Europe, and especially in such peripheral contexts as northern Sweden and Finland. In this northern periphery, distinctions between subject and object, culture and nature, and the natural and supernatural were not clearly drawn, and what might be called animistic/shamanistic concepts of the world were preserved."

72 Wharton 2015.

73 Wharton 2015, 211.

74 Wharton 2015, xxi.

75 Miller 2009.

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into the world, as evidenced in both written and material sources, she argues for new modes of experiencing the divine in this period. The human could be divine and provide witness and access to it in the saintly and their relics. Icons partake of this development just as thoroughly, and Miller pushed back productively against influential scholars such as Ernst Kitzinger, whose fear of animism marked his discussion of icons and iconoclasm.[76] When a saint is honoured "as if" he were in his image, most scholars create distance, whereas I argue for a different translation so that the "as if" becomes "because."[77] And Miller also troubles the smooth gap between image and model, thing and human: "Taking seriously the 'as if' dimension of this view of spiritual presence in icons both prevents the human element from being swallowed up by the divine and preserves the tensive play *between* human and divine that was a crucial feature of the paradoxical ontology of icons—their status as 'image-flesh.'"[78]

This refinement on the standard position of theology-inoculated images opens up rich ways of understanding materiality in late antiquity and beyond. The motile qualities of wax, for example, as well as the power of that quality it possessed, appear in the relation of a particular miracle of St. Artemius, whose special purview was testicular afflictions.[79] The wax was in the form of a seal, which Sergius, the afflicted man, thought was a gold coin, but when it was softened and applied to his genitals, he was miraculously healed.[80] As Miller argues, this wax is the material that shape shifts its viscous self from state to state, and in its oscillation, "matter can be transformed by the holy without becoming an idol."[81] My disagreement enters in only when that threshold is named, the so-called idol, that is, at the edge of the abyss where animism also beckons. Idols arise when humans find matter behaving in untoward ways—it is threatening to our solid (but always vulnerable) sense of autonomy in this world. To be sure, theologians always raised the alarm in such cases, but relational worlds live through those verbal "code reds" with the equilibrium among things that comes readily to them.

Byzantium has recently been called, by the scholar of ancient Near Eastern art Zainab Bahrani "the last ancient civilization," and by that she meant it retained long-held (perhaps natural?) assumptions about the nature and work of made things that she was analyzing in ancient Mesopotamia: their deep temporality, their independent vivacity, their rich substantiality.[82] Late antiquity was developing its own Christian animism or vitalism, which came to permeate much of Byzantine life—and by "life," I am being as inclusive as possible. In that world, God was transcendent, but the divine could be discerned and indeed was met in the stuff of creation, as long as stuff was addressed as "you," instead of "it."[83]

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76 Miller 2009, 171–73; Peers 2012b.

77 Peers 2013, 66.

78 Miller 2009, 171.

79 Miller 2009, 154–56.

80 Crisafulli and Nesbitt 1997, 106–9 (16).

81 Miller 2009, 155.

82 Bahrani 2014, 127.

83 See Chi and Azara 2015, 43: "the fundamental difference between the attitude of modern and

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Exhibition Practices

> THINGS PERSIST, BY leaving traces of themselves.
> Material remains: traces, relics, fragments. Ruins.
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

Museums are now inextricable from the history of art, necessary, perhaps natural to it. And yet they do not always serve the object population of Byzantium fully and well, and they have sometimes misled us through exhibition practices that have made that population appear too much like us. In other words, Byzantine objects often fight rear-guard actions against loss of context when they enter museums and adopt autonomy and isolation as default, foreign positions. This book takes a positive approach to the use of analogy in exhibition practice, that is, anachronic display, which can reveal deep structural relationships, structures that (sometimes) bridge those objects' long, long existence.[84]

Exhibition practice for Byzantine art has been (in many ways) strangely short on self-examination; it has mostly been an expository practice, on both sides of the Atlantic, that impressed with large scale and high beauty.[85] It has been free of concept-driven positions, which has allowed intellectual, experiential freedom—but only to a degree, and the limits of that freedom have not likewise been addressed or identified. In the first place, most viewing experiences in Western exhibitions, Byzantine as much as any, present as natural the binary position between a discrete subject and a discrete object. This distancing technique has naturally led, it seems, to a relative neglect of materiality, the actual presence of thing before one, and instead a focus on transcendence, particularly, in Byzantine art.[86] In the second place, stagecraft has often been employed to evoke a distant, foreign place, and using photographs of church interiors has turned out to be symbolically useful for exhibitions, because it evokes context, insofar as a visual representation allows. The authenticity of experience remains remote to us, of course, even under those conditions.[87] And in the third place, most Byzantine exhibitions, permanent and temporary, organize displays according to a historical unfolding, along a teleology that interrupts occasionally for thematic interludes, such as "everyday life," "women,"

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ancient man as regards the surrounding world is this: for modern, scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an 'It'; for ancient—and also the primitive—man, it is a 'Thou'." And further, Frankfort-Groenewegen and Frankfort 1946, 6, wrote that the world is "redundant with life [...] and life has individuality, in man and beast and plant, and in every phenomenon which confronts man [...]. In this confrontation, 'Thou' reveals its individuality, its qualities, its will. 'Thou' is not contemplated with intellectual detachment; it is experienced as life confronting life, involving every faculty of man in a reciprocal relationship. Thoughts, no less than acts and feelings, are subordinated to this experience."

84 Nagel 2012, has been a very useful book to think through some of the issues I raise here.

85 See, for example, Cormack 2018, 201, 208

86 For the larger issue, Brown 2013, and see Peers 2019.

87 For example, Drandaki, et al. 2013 at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, October 6, 2013–March 2, 2014, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, April 9–August 25, 2014, and the Art Institute of Chicago, September 27, 2014–May 10, 2015.

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Figure 2. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

and "trade," to mention just a few.[88] Those reconstitutions can do valuable historical work, of course, but they are predictable, almost inevitable, and they serve to underline expectations and confirm biases on the part of the public. That "public" also enjoys confirmation of knowledge, presumably, and the symbiosis between curators and visitors can be highly self-satisfying. Chronological unfolding of the history of the empire is a common technique in exhibitions, and it answers a perceived need on the part of viewers for historical grounding in conventional pedagogy that instils a sense of mastery. Moreover, groupings according to genre and medium play to that didactic expectation, which is really a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But let me raise the possibility that not presenting our version of the past with an attitude of certainty and closure and leaving open interplay, imaginative and generous, among all the persons, visitors, and inmates could lead to fuller empathy with objects' feelings and states than we are permitted normally. Looking is just too habituated for us in those contexts, and our search for complacency and comfort in museums is a sign that "we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough," to quote Ludwig Wittgenstein.[89] Indeed, strange as it may seem, we largely take our own bodies for granted in these contexts, and we do need to take more seriously the continuous spread of our seeing, feeling world of objects. We need to conspire, in a literal sense, with things.

88 For example, the semipermanent displays at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC.

89 Wittgenstein 1958, section 212e.

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The position taken here is that exhibition practice can also reveal material meanings that are possibly overlooked or invisible otherwise. Full participation in object life and qualities in these cultural contexts is never entertained in exhibition practice, probably for the obvious reasons. Yet a middle ground could exist between that subjecthood and objecthood, a space where what we do and what we receive, that is, our self-sufficiency and our neediness (or, our agency and our receptivity) would no longer be at odds.[90] And likewise, that middle ground could be a place where these other persons, nonhuman objects, could reveal symptoms of feeling and sensing more fully and clearly to our comprehension. Perversely, perhaps, this book does not argue for objects through imagining an "original context," however one might have arrived at such a thing.

Many of the insights, reflections, and convictions that shaped this book were given to me by the exhibition *Byzantine Things in the World*, which I guest curated at the Menil Collection in 2013. I entered into the project believing I would test assumptions about histories of Byzantine objects and make some analogical counterarguments about the meanings of matter, and human relations to matter, in the late antique and Byzantine worlds—and, through analogical use of modern and non-Western objects, our meanings and relations (Figure 2).

I wanted to present a parallel argument to the one commonly held, that Byzantium holds necessary code for European DNA,[91] and make a case for Byzantium as more foreign, as an art of strangeness to us—but never of alienation from us, or admitting to those things' total absence or autonomy. I also wanted to make an argument against treating Byzantine art as "art," that is, against placing it in an aesthetic category that distances and hypervalues made objects from the past. It seemed to me that laying bare the thingness of Byzantine art could reveal not its otherworldliness, which comes to the fore all too clearly in most exhibitions, but its inworldliness, its material realness. The Menil, however, is just too good at what it does: the exhibition was extremely beautiful in the end, and one just had to accept and enjoy that aspect. And like the former Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, a pavilion on the Menil campus from 1997 to 2012, the high degree of beauty undermined some of the frictional intensity that could otherwise be had from such encounters.

I had had specific goals for the exhibition, in large part to differentiate it from what had gone before in this field, to be frank, and I can admit that I realized only some of these goals. My position as curator permitted me to get only so far into feeling confident about the arguments I had intended to make. Up until the lighting set-up, changes and substitutions were being made; the objects were resistant to settling. And even when the show was set and the lighting was finalized, the rooms started unexpected conversations—among visitors, certainly, but primarily and most surprising among the things.

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90 See the translator's introduction to Merleau-Ponty 2012, xxxiv.

91 Drandaki, et al. 2013 called attention to the significance of the 1964 exhibition *Byzantine Art: An European Art* in Athens that asserted Europe as Byzantium's heir, "Indeed, the study of its conceptual content, i.e. dovetailing Byzantine achievements with the cultural capital of European self-discovery, blazed a trail that the corresponding organizations would then follow."

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Let me put it another way, too: I spent several hours with the Menil photographer, Paul Hester, just before the show opened in May 2013, talking and exploring, and Paul photographed according to our conversation—the photographic record was a mutual, preliminary exploration, and thanks to Paul's skill, it is excellent, often exquisite, in my opinion. And yet, in the course of the show, right until it ended, I was discovering new things. The objects continued to show me new connections, new facets, unforeseen interiorities. So in fact, the photographs in this book need some special pleading to arrive at my (even) still-emerging interpretations, because the photographs really represent an ideal, preexperience state of the exhibition. Ultimately, I came to realize that the objects were making another, complementary argument: that their analogies could demonstrate transformation among themselves and also common essences, just as alchemy claimed was true and replicable.[92]

This book will take the Menil Collection as its foundational set of Byzantine objects and experiences. I used the Byzantine material at the Menil for my teaching of graduates and undergraduates for twenty years, and I was formed fundamentally by those meetings with objects and spaces in students' company. And I will come back again and again to that 2013 exhibition—it taught me the lessons I am working through still in subsequent chapters—and to the Lysi frescoes and their former Menil home, that most "Byzantine" space. The Menil eschewal of over-explanation through labels and wall text, its confidence in viewers and objects to make sense of their encounters themselves, and the compelling body of historical works it cares for—all these have opened up ways of thinking and being with art for me that have made trying to get at neglected meanings and experiences of Byzantine art necessary and fulfilling. That particular Menil-stance allowed me not to take an overweening position vis-à-vis the things in the exhibition, but it encouraged me to think with them, to listen, and to see with them.

Limits to Championing Things

> ANTHROPOMORPHISM IS A useful conceptual tool and also has it limits; it must ultimately be negated but so too must the negation be negated.
>
> —Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*

I wrote critically above about scholars who find their own discrete, dominant subjecthood self-affirmed in their explanations. Of course, that statement of divergent opinion in the service of progressive understanding of the past is what we scholars are trained to do, and as long as we stay above the *ad hominem*, to pursue to the end. And yet danger exists, naturally, in many of these sorts of arguments where a scholar takes the side of the oppressed, the underdog, the underserved, and they model a piety or sanctimoniousness that is unassailable (they think) in their righteousness. I don't know if I can

92 Alchemy will be returned to in this book, but I should note here that visual, material arguments for alchemy's truth are not new. For early modern examples, see the different perspectives argued by Haug 2014; and Göttler 2013.

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escape this trap; in fact, I doubt it. But I must at least acknowledge my own guilty conscience.

To accord agency and life to things in this world is the particular privilege of a white bourgeois colonial subject. I have plenty of agency given to me by my skin colour, middle-class ease, and tenured professional security, and so I can afford to spend it any way I like. If that expenditure is on behalf of a past culture with which I have no ethnic, confessional, linguistic connections, then that is my own special right as a highly protected subject. I want also to give rights and status to those things, which are equal to me, and the ethical force of that gift now appears self-evident to me: that our world would be a happier, healthier place if we took full responsibilities as humans for everything we do.

But I also have been struck forcefully by the recent arguments of Rebecca Zorach, an art historian who takes the side of the human subjects left behind in such thing-championing writing.[93] In this corrective view, subjects who are not able to claim full membership in the "human" cannot be expected to forego their still-emerging agency in order to make room for a whole new category of subjects. Acquiescing to things, at the call of someone like me, would mean for those not-yet agents, such as peoples of the First Nations and people of colour, giving up their claims on equity, reparation, representation.

Zorach adduces Aristotle's inconsistent (but deeply influential) passages on "natural slavery" to question our toying with lines dividing human and nonhuman, since those lines have a deep history of dehumanizing fellow humans. This position doesn't deny the justice of an always-things-too advocacy, but it does cast doubt on the ethics of advocating for things when our restraint on behalf of things or our passivity to pressing issues does nothing to the real mechanisms of power and production that do so much and so fluently to degrade our world, and human subjects also.

My argument on behalf of still arguing my position is an ironic double erasure, in that both slave and master, object and subject, can lose distinction from one another on close examination. In the first place, I would say that Aristotle's "slave and master relationship" paradigm is just a fiction (albeit one that is a social and bodily reality). Also, I've argued elsewhere that musical instruments had (have?) the capacity to enslave and to play their musicians and that this behaviour done by things is a "natural" reversal of the hierarchy of instrument-slave and player-master. Tools are always participant, if not dominant.[94] That assertion is still whistling in the wind, since it is not about alleviating inequalities or environmental harm, but rather about privileging the freeing of things, things not even asking to be freed as such. But there is hope in this position, hope that we can know better humility, see unfairness and act on it, sustain struggle. That hope is just an alertness to better possibilities, where we negate our anthropocentrism in favour of further opening subjecthood to all the disenfranchised and dispossessed—all the vulnerable.

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93 Zorach 2018, building on the important article Wynter 2003.

94 See Peers 2018, 93–97.

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This book comprises unpublished, published, and not-yet published material, and the Acknowledgements section gives proper credit to those other publishing sources. The chapters themselves consistently press for the animist argument I've outlined in this Introduction, and they follow strong themes of relationality that materials and museums can reveal to us. They primarily focus on the Menil Collection and its mission, but they also examine Byzantine objects and monuments beyond the museum setting. Sound, voice, and imaginative projections also interweave these Byzantine things to make cases for our own places in the subject spread of the democracy of things.

Part 1, "Animate Materialities from Icon to Cathedral," frames the basic issues involved in what follows by means of two instances of material agency in Byzantine art. The first chapter examines a small icon of St. Stephen in the Menil Collection in order to establish the relational energies in the face and acts of the saint and of the icon itself. This object allows some preliminary statements about the limitations of a museum, but also its expansive possibilities in a case such as that of Stephen in the Menil. Stephen's current neighbour in the Menil, the extraordinary gold box from late antiquity, introduces some important notions about the nature of materials and geology that will also run through the book.

The second chapter enlarges, literally, on these arguments through analysis of the unparalleled cathedral, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Attempting to find ways of articulating the subject formations at play in such a building, it takes the symphony as its basic element, the concert of sound, matter, and things that constituted its Byzantine agency. Analogy with the Menil Collection's own history of Byzantine space, particularly the now-lost Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, opens up possibilities of understanding the plays of sound, elements, matters, and subjects in a Byzantine world from our own experiences.

Part 2, "Byzantine Things in the World: Animating Museum Spaces," explores the conditions of our encounters with Byzantine objects in terms of the world in which these objects were conceived, the world in which we encounter them, the ways in which exhibiting them can put those worlds in relation. Chapter 3 introduces this new section by focusing more specifically on the *Byzantine Things in the World* exhibition of 2013. It is a gallery guide I wrote for visitors to that show, and I intended it as a concise statement of the ambitions of the exhibition. But it was also written before the show opened, so it represents a provisional moment in the development of my argument, before the things themselves took on speaking parts in the production. So Chapter 4 addresses some of those lessons learned. It attempts to take the next step in the things argument by listening carefully to what those things in that particular moment, space, and conversation said to us. Alchemy is a strong component in the historical analysis, and I took that system of thought and practice as seriously as I could. Not everyone was an alchemist in that world, just as not everyone is a chemist in this, but I take the general assumptions about alchemy—the participatory, active nature of matter—as constitutive of that Byzantine world, just as I would assume that our chemistry informs ours, despite lack of real knowledge of it among most of us. This position allows a living world to enter into the galleries, a life that we all share on some level, even if not all of us recognize it in the others. Framing is the inoculation against that extended life, the cordoning and quar-

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antining of others' lives, and Chapter 5 argues for porous subjects, through display and conservation. The Fresco Chapel is an important aspect of this re-creation as a restored, orphaned monument whose lives have been remarkably varied to this point—and it is not yet done traveling. But it can still reveal to us the open-hearted relation of things in a now-historical imagining of its Menil life, and with that loss, such imagining is all the more important for what it tells about our self-imposed limitations.

Part 3, "Pushing the Envelope, Breaking Out: Making, Materials, Materiality," explores a range of lives of objects, from the things themselves and their material individualities to the participatory makers who coax and coerce matter into form. Chapter 6, looks at the strong bias we have toward anagogy, looking through and beyond the thing, when the thing is so replete before us. Silver, a strong material participant for its qualities, characteristics. and actions when made thing, resists anagogy. We project this bias for anagogy, however, back on the Byzantines through our own acceptance of theological defence mechanisms and of our settled notions. Chapter 7 takes exception to an understanding of makers' independent projection of form onto matter and materials. That understanding is intellectual, not practical, nor is it wise about the world's own thoroughgoing role in its own making. The chapter looks at making, then, from the point of view of wonder and meaning that come from acceptance of matter's resistance to our control. Chapter 8 likewise follows some of the material subjects from the previous chapter, which includes weaving and pottery and extends to the merest, here, wax. How does such humble material work, play, feel? This chapter takes as seriously as it can the spectrum of things and their lives and how those lives make human subjects, a spectrum that ranges in this book from base stuff in the world to its glorious expression, broken, exquisite Hagia Sophia.

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Part I

Animate Materialities from Icon to Cathedral

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Figure 3. Icon of Stephen Protomartyr, 26.5 × 23 cm, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection (85-057.03), with permission of The Menil Collection.

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Chapter 1

SHOWING BYZANTINE MATERIALITY

IF WE SUPPRESS too much abstract analysis in art history, then relational being and thinking can keep subjecthood in play for things long left for dead. They force understanding away from Cartesian absolutes of mind and body, subject and object, and open art history to experientialized historical human and nonhuman subjects—to full relations among all those subjects, as flesh of our own flesh, to borrow from the title of Kaja Silverman's book, which invokes Adam's words in Genesis to argue for similarity, rather than difference, as placing everything in relation.[1]

This chapter uses an icon and a box to venture beyond an art history of objects and to advocate for the subjecthood and agency for all Byzantine things. It attempts to demonstrate the materiality of a late Byzantine icon. It argues for sensitivity to the temporal rhythms and material experience that things reveal, and it offers possible strategies for showing in exhibition, where many of us encounter things from the past, how materialities can manifest themselves to us so long after the objects were made and first made active.

Stephen's Materiality

There is a small, late Byzantine icon of St. Stephen in the Menil Collection (Figure 3).[2] The icon's mereness might betray its active agency, but attendance to its sensual surfeit reveals its relational energy. Holding a swinging censer in one hand and a paten, the small plate that holds the Eucharist bread, and a gold box in his covered left, the figure of Stephen performs his transitive acts that span the inside and outside of the picture. The porousness of the picture plane is one thing, but more radically, with transitive senses, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence. Smell (incense that covers all devotional spaces), touch (paradoxically intensified by the cloth-covered hand), taste (the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist), sight (the fixed, lazy stare of the saint that betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground)—Stephen's silence is the concession to the object state, but it only increases the intensities of the experientalized bodies within and beyond the icon.[3]

These points of contact permit the experience of an icon to be active beyond our received conception of "icons." In its terms, an icon is a representation, a theologically sanctioned safe bond between image and prototype. It allows a vertical, anagogic reading of the relations of the human, the icon, and divinity. But these examples give us a way into a horizontal reading wherein all the participants are working analogically, relationally. Silverman argues for an "ontological kinship," a foundational position for understanding that "everything derives from the same flesh." This position allows for

1 Silverman 2009.

2 Carr 2011, 44–45.

3 See also Carr 2011, 22–3.

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identity and individuality, and it opens possibilities of relation and a "powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole."[4] In that sense, the dividual is an appropriate replacement for the individual, and as an explanatory model, the notion that we—and they—are divisible, porous, open to the transformative flows of the world can help explain the strangeness of materiality's histories.[5]

Let me try to demonstrate these ideas through an analysis of form—"how it looks." The icon is small in scale, only measuring 26.5 × 23 cm, but the frame is filled with reflexive potential. The saint is shown as a young man, unbearded and with short hair, and he is dressed in the liturgical vestments of a deacon: he is wearing a white stole over a black surplice, and a thin scarf falls over his left shoulder. In keeping with the description of Stephen as a servant at table, he is a youth, an attendant (see Acts 6:1–7:60). Indeed, Acts states that he had the face of an angel—to be sure, a trope for sexless beauty, but it also works as an indication of his servitude to the word of God, his devotion to the point of self-sacrifice that comes at the end of his earthly life. His angelic appearance was picked up by later writers, but so was his militancy as an indomitable soldier of faith.[6] His gaze also betrays a strength and intensity that correspond to the arguments he so energetically raised against the elders. Here is the unbreaking stare that led to his execution through stoning by a mob of angry dissenters. The gaze takes in more, however, than stubborn servitude, for Stephen is protomartyr, a first witness to the faith that vision at the end of his life confirmed, "Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man at God's right hand" (Acts 7:55–56). Gazing into heaven at that nearly last moment, Stephen saw God's glory. So taking some of the possibilities of Stephen's gaze, we might say he has seen everything important, and through it, he gained the wisdom to forgive, because his very last words attest to the absolution of his murderers.

He relates to us through that "thousand-yard stare," his look at and beyond us, but he looks fixedly at "me," too. The absence and presentness of his look pins me, and they make me look for their object, in me and outside me—for God. We could say that in that stare, his behaviour "behaves" me.

Faciality

Faces proliferated in Byzantium, not least in churches and public spaces full of icons, frescos, mosaics, and showing stone. Every Byzantine face behaves us. Even modern, secular museum goers are behaved by those faces in icons and other forms that tell us how to look, where to stand, when we can go. From their first face-to-face encounters before their audience, those Byzantine faces were fully in control, for they stated when to be abject, when to speak, when to be grateful. And they still do.

Anyone who, moved and awestruck, has had that stop-dead moment in a Byzantine church knows an echo of those faces' command. The faces of God, his mother, saints and prophets can still hold one, captivate and melt one's free will before them. In that

4 Silverman 2009, 4.

5 See Peers 2012a.

6 Devos 1968; Aubineau 1989.

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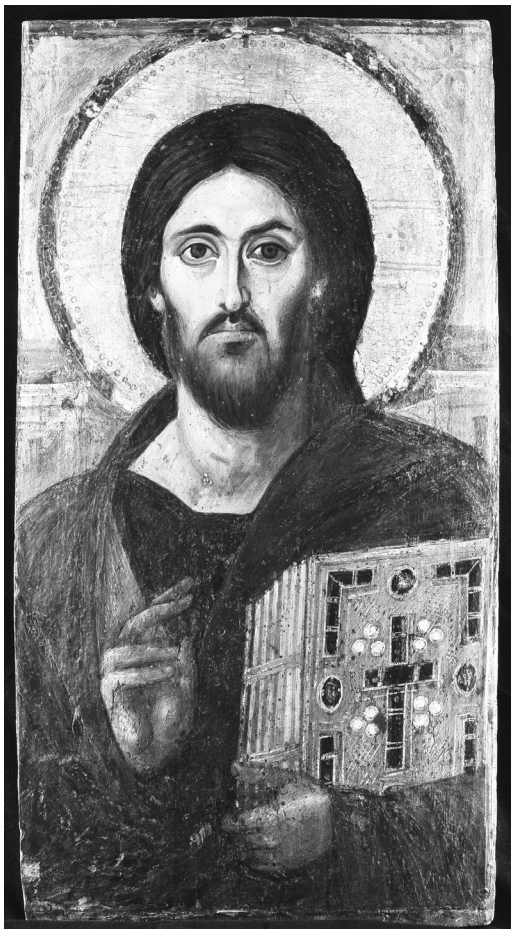

Figure 4. Icon of Christ, sixth/seventh century. Holy Monastery of St. Catherine, Egypt.

way, subjects can circulate, what seemed like simple pictures take charge, and humans become all-seen objects of divine gazes. At the centre of these histories is the originary face—the Mandylion—that embodies that reciprocal gaze between and amongst quasi-objects. The Mandylion was the famous touch relic that Christ created as a self-portrait. It created a divine sanction for divine self-portraiture, and through its creation, it recapitulated the act of creation by God of humanity in his image.[7]

Icon gazes are always active, mutual, and livening—in fact, totalizing—and in that way, we can see forcefully other ways in which Byzantine objects worked so energetically on their viewers, why they break down apparent differences in identity of viewer and thing, why they come alive and act as quasi-objects in the world as we do.[8]

In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, face is an absolute foundation of our world.[9] In every face-to-face encounter, an ethical obligation introduces itself; it is not just being close enough to another person to see them, but it is a "proximity" in which human relations are imposed by God through all our faces, including theirs. Levinas's position does not directly align with the medieval understanding of the face of God, because he wrote, for example, "The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is discarnate, is the manifestation of the height in God revealed. It is our relations with men […] that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of."[10] Whereas

7 Peers 2018b has bibliography and further explorations of the meanings of this foundational relic.

8 See Belting 2005 on this process, too.

9 Levinas 1969; Cohen 1994, 173–94.

10 Levinas 1969, 79.

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for Levinas, that manifestation in face was God disincarnate, for medieval Christians, every face was in relation with God's.

Nevertheless, Levinas allows us to see that the core experience in our existence is through our face, even as we never see that core of self truly. For that encounter, one needs the other, and through him or her, we constitute our social, ethical lives and make our subjecthood. Those ideas also were in operation in the Byzantine world, and Byzantines had those obligations, too, but one insisted on by those faces. Every time a Byzantine looked at a face, an ethical obligation was present. But faces, of course, also had incarnational force, because God assumed humanity and had a face that was originary of all human faces.

From the distinctively Western, fine arts, however, the way in which the face of the icon behaves its beholder is displaced by a teasing out of its emotive qualities and formal particularities as a way into meaning—the aim is the capture and control of the agency involved in the thing. In a passage in *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, for example, C. Stephen Jaeger attends to the particular dynamic of face during late antiquity, especially as it is embodied in the glorious icon of the Pantocrator in the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai (Figure 4).[11]

For Jaeger, this face is the place of the humanity, not the divinity, of Christ, in the serenity, gentleness, and strength displayed in that portion of the panel that constitutes the face. Jaeger also brings to bear the proposition that the face is a white wall/black hole, famously expounded by the philosophers Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in terms of the concept of the "abstract machine of faciality" in which "significance" and "subjectification" are both at play: "Significance is never without a white wall on which it inscribes is signs and redundancies," an inscription that says "child, woman, mother, man, father, boss, teacher, police officer"—or "Christ"—and is "an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power," while subjectification "is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies." In this model, as applied by Jaeger, the Pantocrator face is "given entirely to a deep and embracing consciousness, full of expressive force, but ultimately ineffable, inexhaustible via words. That is characteristic of many icons; the meaning is invested in the conventional signs and postures," but "the religious force radiates from the face, and it works because the zone of the face is freed from semiotic function" as a "white wall" reflecting objective categories "and given over entirely to an individual emotionality and passion," a "black hole" of subjectivity "that is virtually hypnotic, at the minimum riveting, in its effect on the viewer."[12]

The issues are multiple, and Jaeger is just a useful foil, since his scholarship is deeply learned and admired. But in the first place, Jaeger certainly falls into a heretical position, if we take seriously the theology of post-Chalcedonian Christians of the Greek-speaking East. In stressing the "elevated humanity" of Christ in the icon, divine relationality is neglected: it is God there in that face. And reading that face in terms of its effect on one

11 Jaeger 2012, 98–133.

12 Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167–68, 175; Jaeger 2012, 110.

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is natural for Jaeger's concept of charisma, which is fundamentally about reception, its human-focused gravitational centre.

But the face itself divides and multiplies its effects, according to the white wall/black hole dynamic dichotomy. Most viewers (indeed, every group of students that has ever discussed the icon with me) instinctively put a hand in front of their face in order to distinguish the differences between the two sides of the face. The significance of the difference is not ultimately determinable (probably the dyophysite nature of Jesus), but the open-endedness is a source of its richly unending work on us; the icon is in control of its effects and charisma, not its viewers. And the terms of its current state, this version of the icon is not a fair or accurate version of its late antique or Byzantine self, which would have been clad in revetment and votives, and enclosed by an inscription. That obscuring of the face, not just the encroachment of the frame, but also the light perception that results from the reflective surface, has to be reckoned with. The face withdraws, in fact, as the halation emanates from the surround, and the field that is most legible in our photographs folds into a series of veiling effects. The mysteries intensify, and the face fluctuates between presence and absence, but the icon knows its own charisma and always puts the viewer in a deficit position.[13]

Stephen's Bodies

In the Menil icon, Stephen's gaze is not vertical; it is not directed to heaven, as his last moments were. It is horizontal, it is encompassing, and his actions are likewise directed. The panel is really performing itself, its own special relation. The combination of actions is awkward: the covered left hand somehow steadies the paten and a small box, which may be an incense box, a box for remnants of the Eucharist, or a reliquary. That awkwardness is not arbitrary, because the loop at the end of the chain is evidently between thumb and forefinger—the thumbnail is clearly described, and shadow plainly falls in the area around the middle of his chest, where the paten touches the body from the pressure of the left hand over the outer rim of the paten. Both space and contact are present. The body of the saint is in control of the actions taking place, but it is also not fully determinant; the things he holds have their own provisional nature that his body takes into account.

The body of the saint cannot be taken too literally here. It is clearly not the body of the saint during his lifetime, because he is performing the work of a deacon in the medieval Byzantine world; it is not the martyred body, because he is undamaged, and only the circles of hair cascading from the crown draw attention to the skull shattering that led to this death. He is closer to his angelic self here, heavenly and ethereal in his perfected, beautiful form.[14] And eros is never far: in the fifth century, the empress Pulcheria (398/9–453) took his relics to her bedchamber, like a husband, a metaphor for

13 Of course, Pentcheva 2006 and 2010 has made some of these points, but as I made clear in the Introduction, her version of the phenomenology of icons is skin deep. I have also made arguments that parallel these above in Peers 2004, 101–31.

14 See Carr 2011, 25: the "sweet fullness of Stephen's nubile body."

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virginity, mystical union, and so on, but her strong desire was long remembered.[15] Stephen appeared to Pulcheria and told her that her desire has been realized, according to the Theophanes Confessor (ca. 758/60–817/8), and according to Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopulus (fl. ca. 1320), she let herself be controlled by an "unutterable yearning" for the saint.[16]

Stephen's relational energy is at work here and in other traces. The red cloth over his left hand is meaningful, not only because it matches the red of the embers within the censer, but because it also picks up the red lining of the sleeve of Stephen's right arm. The earthly remnants of the body of the saint are, of course, significant: his cult really dates only from the discovery of his body in 415, north of the walls of Jerusalem, and from that point, his body and cult travelled throughout the Mediterranean.[17] His right hand was especially venerated at his monastery in Constantinople and at the Konstamonitou Monastery on Mount Athos, and other parts were strongly venerated elsewhere, too.[18] The careful description of his right hand on the icon reveals his relation to his relics and to his miraculous energy in the world; the box on the paten may refer to his very own reliquary. That hand was and continues to be a powerful relic—pilgrims still travel to Athos for Stephen's relics and icons.

A number of icons, such as examples in St. Petersburg and at St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai, share the characteristics of the Menil icon. These icons evidently copy a common model[19]—one suspects they copy a prototype from the monastery at the capital that is now claimed as itself a miraculous icon at the monastery on Athos.[20] These three icons each have a deacon Stephen with paten, box, and censer, they all date to circa 1300, and they all seem to respond to a particular agency the original possessed. Of course, the icons are individuals: for one thing, the other examples are standing figures, and moreover, the panels are differently scaled, the example in the Hermitage being 32 × 18.5 cm and the example from Sinai much larger at 96.8 × 63.8 cm.[21] The original, now lost, it seems, transmitted the agency of the saint to these copies; they share the DNA of that powerful first testimony of the saint in bone, wood, and paint. Those things are in relation to each other, iterations of that original apostolic body.

Transitive senses, here, the expectation of smell, prove the porousness of the picture plane and show the individual expression of the Menil panel. All three examples share a set of actions by Stephen as deacon, but the Menil panel has the censer swinging full,

15 Aubineau 1989; and see Holum and Vikan 1979, 131–32.

16 Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia* (ed. de Boor), 1:86; *Patrologiae Graecae* 146, 1084B.

17 Mango 2004; Bovon 2003; Taylor 2003; Colella 1997.

18 Majeska 1984, 351–53, 385–57; Simonopetra 1969, 119.

19 One should also note that Stephen's narrative history has been depicted in strikingly imaginative ways, including stories about his abduction as an infant by the devil and his attempted crucifixion. See Berger 1973; Gaiffier 1967.

20 For other miraculous icons, see Dobschütz 1899, 35–37, 89–90, *115–*17.

21 Bank 1985, 313, colour pl. 231; Mouriki 1990, 113; and Piatnistky 2000, 112–13. See also the similar, sixteenth-century example in Tourta 2011, 92–94. And also Aspra-Vardavaki 2018.

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and Stephen is packed tightly within the frame. In this way, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence.[22] Smell, the incense in his right hand, blankets devotional spaces and bridges that space and ours. It is worth recalling that Stephen's relics were found through the suffusion of the air with a paradisiac fragrance that healed seventy-three Christians right away.[23] The sense of touch paradoxically intensifies through the cloth-covered hand, the hand that emphasizes the relic right hand, Stephen's own. Censing occurs at points of invocation and divine attendance in the liturgy.[24] Incense is divine presence, and the burning embers in the censer on the panel implicate all those present in the smoke's reach. (Smoke is not literally shown or yet emanating.)

Other senses are in play. The Eucharist may be in the box, too, and the censing proves that implicated presence. Taste is also present in the sensation of smelling incense, as well as in the memory of the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Sight is in equilibrium in the fixed, unforced stare of the saint, which betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground. The contingency is in the necessity of the arc of the censer reversing and the clutch of the paten and box needing to be adjusted consequently. Stephen's silence only increases the intensities of the experientalized bodies within and beyond the icon. The sound of the censer, instinctively supplied by other subjects, is in the ring of the chains and in the clatter as it catches the top of its swing and descends again. "Moreover, sound is not simply like the material; it constitutes a form of material action. Yet the chatter of things is all too easily over*looked*. Things are all too often treated as silent."[25] Stephen's verbal withholding goes strongly against what we know of him from Christian scripture, the elaborate prolixity of his speech in Acts that led to his condemnation and his execution by the hysterical crowd. Stephen's closed lips paradoxically bring to mind the saint's extravagant verbal charisma, which gained him his singular vision of Jesus and God and heaven in his last mortal moments. But that silence is also an object state that gives space for our own enlargements and interpretative body memory, because it pulls us, through itself and its opposite—sound—into materiality and living in the world. The icon is profoundly of the past, but it is sound that paradoxically entangles past and present. The habitus of sound completes Stephen's presence; in fact, sound and silence work its essential weaving of our world with his.

Museum Materiality

Can such things themselves tell their stories, speak their minds, without all this repetitive verbalization on my part—can an exhibition say something "true" about these very old things? The Menil Collection reinstalled its medieval collection in its main pavillion in 2018, and the ways in which the curators mobilized the objects into new configurations and with new meanings and experience emerging is proper testimony to the continuing strength of the institutional mission.

22 See Carr 2011, 23.

23 Clark 1982, 141–42.

24 Harvey 2006.

25 Witmore 2006, 276.

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More than thirty years had passed since the original publication of *Inside the White Cube*, by Brian O'Doherty, but that critique of the ideology of gallery space retains its bite, even after that interval. The St. Stephen icon was previously in a wall vitrine along with other objects selected from the collection's Byzantine holdings and occasionally in exhibitions (Figure 5). An implicit connection to devotion and ritual unified the objects in this vitrine, such as a cross, a lamp, a gold box, and a small limestone (?) reliquary with spout, but the objects were diverse in date, provenance, and materials. And yet all cues that these objects are not art in the way we mean it had been eliminated from the presentation.[26]

Lighting, isolation, artful spacing, depth within the wall absent the objects, positioned them in placelessness. O'Doherty used a striking simile to evoke this utopia within the frame. The stability of the frame is as necessary, he wrote, as an oxygen tank for a diver: "Its limiting security completely defines the experience within."[27] A new context is created for these objects, in other words, that is entirely constructed, and of course this assertion is not news. Museums make utopias: "*Art museums, in the past, were not just displaying art, but were narrating art history, or presenting art in the mirror of its own history*," as Hans Belting has written.[28] They are objects, "things," that contest and invert our constructed expectations and represent them at the same time: a version of a heterotopic world for things.[29]

As of 2018, the new Menil installation makes an entirely different dialogue possible for Stephen's icon (Figure 6). The icon is now in a dynamic spatial relationship with a gold reliquary box dating to the late antique period with a likely provenance of Stobi in the Republic of North Macedonia, as it is known after a name change in 2019.[30] Flanking the icon, on the other side of the door, is a Russian icon of the Anastasis, and viewed from deep within the room, as in this photograph, one can synoptically take in these three things, as well as a large early modern painting of a church interior on the facing wall of the adjacent gallery. The aesthetic appeal and satisfactions, like so much in the Menil, are great. The things here resonate and echo their mutual goldenness. The transition from light to dark, as one enters the gallery room with the gold box in the centre, intensifies focus in a shift of mood and intimacy. The experiential content here is rich. Stephen, for one, is as free as he can be in the current museum world to speak his mind and likewise work his spreading presence.

The Menil Collection is an ideal context for that spread's unfolding. Until March 2012, it preserved the very most stimulating heterotopic monuments of Byzantium in its Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (originally so-called). From 1997 until its departure, it was a perfect confluence of that medieval world and our own. Moreover, it was able to work in concert with the Rothko Chapel across the street as moving spaces of

26 O'Doherty 1999, 14.

27 O'Doherty 1999, 18. For a useful overview of the problem of such religious objects in secular museums, see Paine 2013. See now *The Aura* 2020.

28 Belting 2009, 54, his italics.

29 I have tried to pursue this position further in Peers 2012b and 2013.

30 Carr 2011, 11.

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Figure 5. Installation view of Stephen in prior display. The Menil Collection.
Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Figure 6. Installation view of Stephen in current display. The Menil Collection.
Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

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relational experience. And based on the collecting and presentation values of the founders, Dominique and John de Menil, the collection has remained active in imaginative Byzantine exhibition, a tradition continued by a show guest curated by Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Imprinting the Divine* (2011–12).[31]

Inventive and revealing strategies of display can be found by reconceiving what museums can do for historical periods that are not really like ours. Heterotopia opens up possibilities. Michel Foucault proposed heterotopia as a necessary inverse of utopia, and he characterized heterotopia as countersite, "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted."[32] The creative appropriation of Byzantium by American modernists gives some licence to imagining Byzantine objects in a revealing fashion, as long we are honest and self-examining about our own motives. For example, Willem de Kooning called New York City a "Byzantine city," and in performing Byzantium even on that level, he remade Constantinople as an American city. In his art, he also remade Byzantine forms into an authoritative argument for modernism.[33] I would argue that a creative reimagining of Byzantium in a museum context should likewise contend with Byzantium on this level of inversion and appropriation. By recognizing that the museum is a heterotopic site, we can open ways of exploring deep structures of that historical materiality. Paradoxically, admitting we cannot fully know the period historically and recognizing we must not display it like any other object in the world-art tradition gives us the freedom to explore the particularities of Byzantine objects' objectness and of their not-textness.[34] The sensory, sensual extensions of the Stephen icon spreads into the community of things who sit with him or who come into the galleries to visit briefly—that is, we humans.

Thinking about exhibitions as verbs helps do this, even conceiving them as active verbs, not declaratives, as if the world exhibitions *declare* is naturally an extension of our own. Our mode of display often gives the impression of extratemporality; it is not in itself neutral, because "it produces a powerful and continually repeated social experience that enhances the viewer's sense of autonomy and independence," as Mary Anne Staniszewski writes regarding exhibition innovations of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., at the Museum of Modern Art.[35] Barr's legacy is important because he established the default position for Western exhibition practice for the last seventy-five years or so. The verb then cannot be "to be," but must be interpretative. In active ways, exhibitions of Byzantine objects can make the experience challenging to notions we think are true, and on close examination, they always force those notions to yield.

In that way, Byzantine art can be made thinglike, too, joining things from indigenous cultures that have long been treated as craftwork, folklore, ethnographic "cultural material," and making the art less about art and religion and more about the world and rela-

31 Shkapich and de Menil 2004; Nodelman 1997; Carr and Morrocco 1991; Smart 2010.

32 Foucault 1986, 24. On this essay in relation to exhibition, see Avgita 2009.

33 Peers 2010.

34 See Conn 2010, 7–8.

35 Staniszewski 1998, 66.

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tions in it.[36] The argument is that the idea of art should extend to all cultures, and we need to take back art from this period we are concerned with, along with all the implications of these things doing their work in a different key. The social life of these things is crucial for our understandings of them,[37] but it needs to be embedded in recognition of the strangeness and complexity of that life.[38]

Removed from the museum experience is everything not within sight's limited control, and one can justly ask what is lacking from our understanding of Byzantine objects, We might recapture some of the sensory range of Byzantine things through witnessing contemporary Orthodox icon piety, and that experience opens the imagination to historical reactions, but it can also be misleading, because any contemporary anthropological work has shortcomings for historical analysis. Another risk is the belief that modern Orthodoxy resembles medieval Christianity to the degree that it allows us to understand fully what people in the Middle Ages did and felt. And yet anyone who has stood watch in an Orthodox church or who is Orthodox either in belief or habit knows that the total engagement of the senses is necessary for correct worship, and indeed was also in the medieval world. Belief does not enter into this set of actions; orthopraxy is the key here—doing the right thing. And theology enters indirectly, though not for reason of belief, because the assumption here is that theology did not absolutely determine belief or behaviour.

But objects are another matter, because of Byzantine culture's total reliance on matter's relations with the divine. Touching the icons with hands and lips, hearing the words (whispered, spoken, or sung), smelling the candle wax and incense, even tasting the Eucharistic sacrifice are all foldings of the body into the excess offered by religious objects and sites. The sum of looking, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing is greater than the body parts of the worshipper—and of their articulations, for the limits of language are not the limits of the world.[39] The surplus of senses and lack of unity in them in encounters with objects are objects' puzzle, control, and power.[40]

36 Escobar 2008.

37 See, for example, Parani 2007.

38 Joy 2009.

39 See Howes 2006; Sullivan 1986.

40 For example, Hurcombe 2007.

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Figure 7. Hagia Sophia, interior view. Istanbul. Image in Public Domain.

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Chapter 2

THE BYZANTINE MATERIAL SYMPHONY: SOUND, STUFF, AND THINGS

HAGIA SOPHIA, THE great cathedral church of the Byzantine world, once made—that is fundamentally formed—Byzantine or Orthodox Christian subjects (Figure 7). It gathered them in under its great dome or consigned them to side aisles and balconies in order to bring them into being that properly bodied a medieval Orthodox subjecthood. The building created its own unique environment, an environment larger than any human participant. Emperor and patriarch, it has been said, were the only humans fully able to understand the cosmos under the dome, because their importance for the empire ensured them places at key moments in the centre of the building, from where all components of the building coalesced into a perfect capture of God's creation. That visual supremacy can't be quite accurate; no one standing beneath the dome can see and, more importantly, comprehend the relationship among the diverse and rich constituent parts of the building: the main and subsidiary domes, the withdrawing secondary spaces and levels, and the deceptively porous surfaces that seem to be primarily for streaming light, for making the interior a special kind of outside. In this space, every human scale is reduced to, well, human; no one feels outsized in relation to the cosmos there.

In this great church, sound, voice, matter, subjectivity formed around and within the architectural space. It happened with the liturgical performances memorably enacted there and with the movements and attentions of human subjects fundamentally made by the sound, light, and elements, such as water, actively in concert there.

I am purposefully moving around the human-centred descriptions of agency normally assumed to be in play in a building, or anywhere, for that matter. I am trying to expand the subject-making potentials of a Byzantine building to include all entities in this made world, beyond just us and comprising buildings and objects and nature (which is never out of these buildings), the very stuff from which the building is composed.[1]

This chapter will try to encourage a listening and looking that is carefully and sympathetically attuned to a more fully animated world than we normally accord our surroundings. In Hagia Sophia, all these elements played out a kind of Orthodox harmony. Liturgical action and singing not only activated the humans performing, but also the building around them, the structure that received, amplified, and returned the sounds as newly animated and independent voices. Matter, too, vibrated to that sound, taking on a voice and subjecthood through the aural intensity. And the glorious objects that were the things in the church, the liturgical furnishings made of valuable substances, also participated in a symphonic intensity of sound and sight that touched all participants. This chapter tries to evoke a fully animated world through all those sensory effects, from building to human, down to the very atomic level of creation—all the levels where God made and found symphony in that world.

1 See Wharton 2015; Burrus 2018, 165–85.

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Figure 8. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior view to the east.
The Menil Collection, 1997–2012. Architect: François de Menil.

The difficulty in an argument such as this is that it has to happen, in the first place, far from the object of study and through this verbal demonstration I am performing. In the second place, the historical building is so fundamentally altered through its long existence that capturing any kind of original or authentic experience is impossible. All our descriptions and imaginings have to look or sense away the accretions and revisions of its structure and appearance. The church was built between 532 and 537 by the emperor Justinian (r. 527–65), a miraculous achievement that led to legends of angelic craftsmen needed to bring the project in under time, and even by 558, with the collapse of the dome, a major renovation and reshaping of the nave was necessary. The church became a mosque with the conquest of one of the very last holdouts of the Byzantine world, when Mehmed II the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) captured Constantinople in 1453.

Until 1935, Ayasofya Büyük functioned as a mosque, when it was then converted to secular museum. It straddled both faiths in some ways and it retained elements of both identities while asserting its nondenominational character as a museum in its institutional apparatus of opening hours, tour groups, and constant (it seems) scaffolding.[2] In other words, searching for the authentic Hagia Sophia is a quixotic mission, and the search must proceed indirectly, through the traces left of the building and its descriptions over the centuries and through museum buildings that more fully embrace the

2 The necessary work on the subject is Nelson 2004. On Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, a building that has travelled from church to mosque to museum to mosque, see Peers 2018b, 89. Likewise, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is once again a mosque, having succumbed to political and confessional pressures.

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Figure 9. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior of chapel. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

modernist interpretation and mediation of those historical realities than a monument such as the present-day Hagia Sophia can possibly perform.

To bring to life some of the qualities of Hagia Sophia, let me transport us instead to Texas, to the former Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, where I will try to evoke, counter-intuitively, authentic experiences of medieval Orthodoxy. The museum was active from 1997 to 2012 (Figure 8), was a marvellous site of encounter with a partial Byzantine fresco cycle. The frescoes had been looted from a small rural chapel outside Lysi, a village on the northern, Turkish side of the island of Cyprus; restored beautifully and then installed in a purpose-made pavilion on the Menil Collection campus in Houston, the frescoes spent fifteen rich years in Texas before being (willingly) repatriated to Cyprus, where they can now be seen in the Archbishop Makarios III Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, sadly, the still-divided capital of a still-divided country.[3]

The Menil Chapel was designed by Francois de Menil for the frescoes, and the pavilion strangely echoes Cypriot mountain churches (which Lysi would not qualify as) *and* speaks in modernist idiom. The result was deeply satisfying and generative. The outward shell is geometric, reserved, nondescriptive, a huddle of cement cubes. (It's still used, now for long-term contemporary art installations.) But it opens slowly, subtly: first, a water reservoir, which is channelled under the entrance atrium, leads to a small, cloistered garden; then slowing in the transitional zone between inside and outside adjusts eye and mind to the space into which visitors emerge in the centre of this little complex; and finally, a space quite unlike any other I've encountered myself: the room, hooded by darkness and ringed by light spill, framed a scale version of the thirteenth-century

3 Carr and Morrocco 1991. See now Whitaker et al. 2020 and Fincham 2015.

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chapel from Lysi. Outlined with semiopaque glass panels and stitched by metal rods, the chapel stood there in uncanny isolation (Figure 9). Inside the dome and apse, the original (though carefully restored, it must be said) paintings emerged theatrically to visitors when they were fully drawn into the little structure within that vibrant, diverse space.

The modernity of this setting and, one might say, the theatricality of the frescoes' display make authenticity here appear to be impossible. But I'd like to try to render elements of the Menil space sufficiently "real" that we might even use descriptions of this experience, now sadly possible only in fading memory and weak verbalization, for knowing, somehow, Hagia Sophia. In his book *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* from 2004, L. Michael Harrington posed this provocative question: "if the medieval builders of the Lysi chapel were to possess the technology needed to build the fresco museum chapel, would they choose to do so?"[4] His book examines the apparent paradox of material space from a Neoplatonist point of view, how a base world can reflect or describe a more perfect, immaterial realm, and he finds compromise for those very different realms in this world. One of those compromises might be said to be the Byzantine chapel, though he does not say so outright.

Language used by the Menil Collection to position the Byzantine chapel shows alertness to a vaguely Neoplatonist understanding. The chapel was called an "'infinity box," but also an "immaterial materiality," the latter phrase used by Neoplatonists, as Harrington points out, to indicate truly immaterial entities that can be shaped as matter is, such as the soul. The chapel's infinity box brought out a different kind of experiential paradox. The confinement of the space was clear; the cement walls delimited the interior, and the light cascading down the walls made evident the shifts in time through the changeable East Texas sky entering those seams on the walls' surface from the outside. And yet the black shell suspended above and inserted into the ground-level enclosure erased the temporal and spatial. The apparently contradictory qualities of time/not time and space/not space distilled into a very condensed construction are the means by which (to use Neoplatonist language) our mortal comprehension can know the immaterial symbolically, to be sure, but through the fully sensual means that are natural to us. That is to say that symbolism can be only partial—human sin makes it impossible for us to know its meanings fully—but that part is all we can really know, and it is here condensed in the church space, the part that is available to us through our bodies. Father Maximos Constas put it another way, which keeps us in theological, and not art-historical, language: "Like a detour made necessary by an insurmountable obstacle, paradox marked the way, the mysterious path of ascent, but it also designated the place, for it was the symptom, the sign, the irruption into the world of something beyond the world."[5] The Byzantine chapel at the Menil spanned worlds effortlessly. Consecrated, it served as a church for the local Orthodox community and as museum for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike.

Hagia Sophia has not been able to manage any such accommodations. The stakes are too high for any number of communities, primarily conservative Turks who see ethnic glory in the repurposed building *and* many Greeks, who still call Istanbul "e polis,'" or "the city." But

4 Harrington 2004, 1–2.

5 Constas 2014, 21.

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Figure 10. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, view into dome. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

if political and religious rapprochement have been impossible in Istanbul, the ways in which the building sustains irresolvable paradox are not. Those paradoxes have often been noted: the apparently insubstantial qualities of the curtain walls, which soar far above the floor level; the dome, with its window piercings that seem to allow the apex of the building to float; the seemingly immeasurable space contained by walls and domes, so excessive to any one person's ability to see at any one time; and the textures, colours, and diversity of materials covering walls, floors, and ceilings that also manifest natural phenomena in the outer world. All of this is on a scale impossible at the Menil, and anywhere else, for that matter, and the expansive qualities of these paradoxes have always been the goal of writers attempting to capture the building.

In the past, writers have struggled with the limitations of language and the impediments of literary genres. Now we are impeded by the building we experience, since the building we encounter is only very vaguely like the medieval iteration of that monument. The museum identity preserves the building, but it also slows the pulse to well below normal rest, let alone the quickened rate of its former life. As Martina Bagnoli has written about museum senses, "Two hundred years later, museums' displays are still made for 'appetiteless' looking; they are designed to foster an engagement with art that is intended to take the body out of the equation."[6] That may seem a contradictory statement when used to argue that the Menil chapel provided an authentic experience, but the confluence of its compelling qualities produced an extraordinary experience in ways a unique Hagia Sophia can also provide, even if the cathedral-mosque-museum is not transparent to its medieval selves any longer.

But in their original forms, however we now come to imagine or experience them, those two churches made those who came into their realms. Those buildings each formed subjects, not by mirroring or reflecting human experience, but by fundamentally determining them through their assertion of agency and autonomy. Perhaps an effective way into how these spaces formed subjects is through the figural decoration in the interior of some of these domed churches—though not Hagia Sophia, which did have figures of Christ circulating throughout the building, if not in the dome itself. In the modest chapel from Lysi, however, that sense of subject-creation emerged forcefully and clearly (Figure 10).

6 Bagnoli 2016, 14.

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The intensity and strength of the figure of Christ in the dome of the Cypriot chapel are expressive miracles of a kind, and they were felt as such in Middle Ages, as texts attest.[7] The particular moment depicted here is difficult to pinpoint: Christ stares fixedly out of the canopy of heaven, with one hand clutching a book and the other raised in a gesture of address; the angels, along with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, indicate the scene of the *Deesis*, the moment of interventions on behalf of those to be judged before the Judge of All; and the empty seat, the *hetoimasia*, or things made ready, awaits the arrival of the Judge (the court having risen, it needs only the great decider to appear). In other words, a dynamic and powerful scene is readied for those who came into the tiny rural chapel or those who made the journey across a parking lot, through the decompression chambers, and into the centre of the infinity box in Houston. (The current installation of the frescoes in Nicosia has robbed the dome of nearly all its majestic intensity.)

How did such figures take charge of and make medieval orthodox Christians? The visual and spatial control effected by those figures is still evident to us, but those Christians had what we might call more transitive expectations from their sacred ritual environments than most of us now do. That's to say, the environment does not "reflect" those expectations.[8] It determines them and in doing so forms those Christians. These Pantocrator figures have intense fixity of expression. The Lysi Christ doesn't blink; he is forever about to enter the world, collapse the threshold between the worlds of the divine and created. Leo VI (r. 886–912) wrote that you might think you were "beholding not a work of art, but the Overseer and Governor of the universe Himself who appeared in human form, as if He had just ceased preaching and stilled His lips."[9] Sources tell us of the Pantocrator Rorschach test: Nicholas Mesarites in the twelfth century famously stated that Christ makes himself benign in appearance to those with clean consciences and fearsome to those with stained souls.[10] Meanwhile, some comparable Cypriot programs contain inscriptions that make the menace of the Christ epiphany unmistakable: fear, tremble, make yourself a more perfect Christian, or this is the terrible visage and voice you will witness at the end of time.

A particular story from a tenth-century hagiography demonstrates the full transitive state of these frescoes. In this story, a man falls into the depths of despair over his chances of salvation, and while praying over a long period of time in a fully decorated church, the image of Christ in the dome finally addresses him and, in the end, absolves him.[11] Painted inscriptions give guidance, but the face is sufficient: it always returns your gaze, and moreover, it sustains that gaze, because it is always watching when your gaze is elsewhere. As Father Constas again points out, the gaze is not a distant, disembodied act, outside of self and senses; as with Zacchaeus spied in the sycamore tree, God's gaze

7 See Binning 2018.

8 *Pace* Binning.

9 Akakios 1868, 245; Mango 1986, 202–3.

10 Angold 2017, 94.

11 Wortley 1987, 92–95; Wortley 1996, 101–2.

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captures all from that place looking over the rim of heaven, and it pulls each person in, just as Zacchaeus was told to offer his hospitality (Luke 19: 1–11).[12]

Here, a subject is made among those who might have assumed they were in possession of the controlling gaze, but these painted spaces have ways of undermining that assumption of self-control and self-determination. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) increased the intensity of selves imbricated in these encounters when he wrote that it was "like a crystal-clear mirror capturing completely the whole shape of God the Word who is looking at himself in me.[13]

That visual mirroring was intensely formative in a neck-bending way, in the manner of an infinity mirror, the constant, perpetual work of God's likeness in humans. In addition, the deep faceting of the experience with the audial complicated subjects' integrity in these vibrant and complicating spaces. The voices read and acknowledged through inscriptions in these church interiors, as well as the reports of the paintings talking and talking back, reveals some of the verbal—and not just visual—charges there. I would like to try to describe some of the ramifications of this visual and aural mixture in a Byzantine interior. Perhaps, just as the Menil chapel showed how an infinity box worked and made meaning in a Byzantine mode,[14] that infinity's sonorous reach and hold on its human subjects can also be described.[15]

The voices of God, prophets, and living persons have, from an early point in Christian examination of self, been intertwined. The voices of the Psalms are the best example. In the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria famously talked about the voice of Christ speaking through David speaking through Christians praying the Psalms, to the degree that each voice is folded into the other, like the infinity mirror with sound. We could put it this way, taking a passage from Dominic Pettman's recent book, *Sonic Intimacy*: "At some level, thanks to our strong theological heritage, we all suspect that we are puppets and other unseen forces are making us speak. Existence is essentially ventriloquial. This is what the voice is telling us."[16] Another way might be to assert the sonic imbrication of the Psalms, for example, as opening selfhood to divine and historical voices speaking with and in our own voices.

However, I also want to try, briefly, to argue for the voices that extend beyond the human and divine maker. Voice is not the sole possession of humans, nor also of other creatures, but also the possession of elements and matter. I would like to make a short plea for the voices that all matter can use to enter into a harmonious chorus

12 Constas 2014, 31.

13 *Patrologiae Graecae* 91, 1137B; trans. in Constas 2014, 32.

14 From "The Library of Babel," in Borges 1998, 112: "In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite—if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication? I prefer to dream that burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite."

15 The chapel museum has hosted a series of musical events, such as a marimba–cello concert in March 2012, along with a choral concert in the lead-up to the frescoes' departure, and a saxophone performance in March 2018.

16 Pettman 2017, 91.

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with the maker, even in these medieval buildings (or maybe especially) such as Hagia Sophia. Some indigenous cosmologies make this claim, such as the testimony in Patricio Guzmán's documentary *The Pearl Button* (2015), which deals with Chilean persecution of First Nations peoples and political activists under Pinochet: "They say that water has memory. I believe it also has a voice. If we were to get very close to it, we'd be able to hear the voices of each of the Indians and the disappeared."[17]

We need to extend the range of thought and voice and accept the many subjects at work in an activated building such as Hagia Sophia or the Menil chapel—accept that persons are throughout, not just humans. As Eduardo Kohn wrote, the world is also enchanted in an ecology of selves, a place of indistinction, as he puts it.[18] Sound is part of the web of dividuals, and it forces representation, that is self-making, among all who hear there.

I can give a couple of examples that might show better how sound makes subject in Byzantine telling and understanding. The first comes from classical legend, from the life of the great warrior Achilles. Not in Homer's account, but in other classical authors and very popular, the story relates in its basic terms an attempt by Achilles's mother, Thetis, to preserve the life of her son by hiding him in disguise as a woman at the court of Lycomedes on the island of Skyros. The Greeks cannot win the Trojan War without the great warrior, so Odysseus is sent to retrieve him. The wily one flushes Achilles out with a sonic reflex. He has the trumpet sounded, an alarm for entry into battle, and Achilles answers his *true* nature without thought, sheds his drag, and seizes a weapon. Here is one way sound returns us to our selves, through an involuntary submission to sonic imperatives. The trumpet tells Achilles who he is, in other words, and the glorious warrior cannot help but obey.

The trope of the musical instrument possessing some kind of soul and personhood goes deep into antiquity, too, and it also has implications for the Christian performance of God-bound selves. The singing of the Psalms already mentioned, for example, engages instruments beyond the human (and others') voices, namely, the harp, which is sometimes conflated with the human performer, in the sense of God playing the singer like a harp. That confusion of agency—the human playing the instrument is also the instrument played by God, and so on—is a fundamental means by which human and other subjects are formed in Christian thought and performance.

The reed and flute are related to this extension of subjectivity. God can be the player, and the Christian the reed pipe or flute, but the world outside God and human creation is also in concert. Jacob of Serug (451–521), for example, not only claims a role as God's flute, filled with melody through inspiration (a purposeful pun) of the Lord, but he also makes a case for reeds in the wild creating their own musical praise in concert with the wind.[19]

Moreover, water was naturally voice-full thoughtful in the Byzantine world: the traveller known as the Bordeaux Pilgrim (writing about a journey in 333–34) mentioned, for example, that the pool at Siloam observed the Sabbath and ceased flowing on this

17 Guzmán 2015, 1:17.

18 Kohn 2013, 16.

19 See Haines-Eitzen 2017, 118.

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day, and Egeria, the Spanish pilgrim of the fourth century, likewise described the reactive quality of the fountain that flowed at the site of Job's dunghill when it changed its nature to issuing blood, pus, and gall.[20] Hagia Sophia had potent waters that healed and sang, what Eunice Dauterman Maguire calls "liquid utterances,"[21] because the fountain in the forecourt babbled and burbled its pure streams, according to the ekphrasis of Paul the Silentiary in the mid-sixth century.[22] The sound and its kinetic energy (it "leapt into the air") lent force to its nature as healing agent, too. The water was known to "drive away all suffering" when drawn in "the month of the golden vestments" and at the "mystic feast" of Epiphany, which occurs in January, but also when the consuls came to office in their sumptuous robes. There is a long tradition of the healing and apotropaic qualities of water, and the watery basis of medicine and protection was well established in the church. Moreover, a liquid understanding of the entire building was frequently expressed: according to Paul, the marble on the floors of the church represented water, and some lanes in the flooring were treated like rivers of paradise.[23]

That description is more than metaphor: stone was formed by compressing earth and water, according to ancient and Byzantine geology, and marble reveals its aqueous origins in its veining, polish, and glitter, very similar to gold, which likewise is a watery substance. Not only was gold most frequently found in rivers and streams and therefore considered to be primarily a water-born metal, but it also revealed its watery nature in its self-destabilizing glow and halation, when light makes gold shine and blur. In the interior of the church, covered with marble and gold (and little or no figuration), the abstract fields of floor, walls, arches, and dome lived a liquid identity in its material demonstrations of indistinctions.

The acoustic qualities of the paradoxically watery composition of the interior of Hagia Sophia have been studied recently by Bissera Pentcheva and colleagues. Those scholars have attempted to measure and replicate sound performance, and they describe the power of melody and assonance in the building, the ways it built its sonic power during its frequent liturgical celebrations. The building both revealed its acoustic dynamism in moments of clarity, for example, when the patriarch rose onto the ambo in the middle of the nave to deliver his sermon—though even then, the ambient distractions were no small thing—and moments of sonic confusion, which seem more common in analysis, when words became lost in the murk of the resounding noise of the music, perhaps even resembling thunder at times, according to Agathias, another sixth-century

20 On the Bordeaux Pilgrim, see Geyer et al. 1965, 16 (592); Wilkinson 2002, 30; and on Egeria, see Geyer et al. 1965, 57 (*in lacuna post* 16.4); Wilkinson 2002, 129n8; Alturo 2005; De Bruyne 1909.

21 Dauterman Maguire 2016, 183.

22 Mango 1986, 85. See also van Opstall 2018. And on the apotropaic qualities of water, see Maguire 2019, 207.

23 Onians 1980, 9, on Paul the Silentiary, *Narratio de S. Sophia*, 26 (Preger 1901–07/1975: 1:102–4; Mango 1986, 101), "The significance of this passage is considerable. By implying that Justinian himself saw the marble as representing water and stating that particular strips of marble were treated as representing the rivers of paradise in early rituals it takes our texts out of the realm of mere rhetorical inflation into that of real contemporary experience."

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writer on the building.[24] That oceanic sound must have had deeply affective power for all the human participants as they swam in the noise of that vast space.[25] That noise was both a sign of well-being for the Christian empire and created unity and relation among all the humans trembled by those reverberating sounds.

Byzantines are often viewed as a strongly scopophilic culture, with their rich visual traditions and extensive speculations on image theory, but sound provided a complementary affective presence in ritual performances, such as the singing of Psalms. The resonance of the Psalms, an essential part of every liturgy, troubled the smooth surface of discrete subjectivity, but the sound amplified and noisied by the interior of the great cathedral had a more immediate affective impact on humans in that space. That impact might be close to what Dominic Pettman calls an "aural punctum," where the "unexpected piercing by sound" leaves a deeply affective wound or trace, a stirring, in listeners who are also in this case performers.[26] The Psalms return to the humans singing, both confused and intensified. Jean-Luc Nancy has written succinctly about this effect: "To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself."[27] Here, sound enlarges and ramifies, pulling each participant into the same voice, a voice that transcends temporal limitations and subject positions.

In this chapter, I've attempted to hint at the symphonic effects of voices gathered together in particular Byzantine buildings, voices that included human and divine, building and representation, instrument and Psalm. Those multiple subjects also resonated in space and among themselves. The mingling of subjects, it seems to me, is the process of divinizing, of the thoroughgoing entry of God into every part of creation. It also seems to me that the Menil Chapel was also a Byzantine space, able to speak Byzantine subject formation to modern people, open, despite ourselves, as we've always been, to the face and voice, the light and sound, of that divine power emanating from the dome.

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24 Frendo 1975, 143 [5.3–4]: "He also produced the effect of thunder and lightning in his room, using a slightly concave disk with a reflective surface by means of which he trapped the sun's rays and then turned the disk round and suddenly shot a powerful beam of light into the room, so powerful in fact that it dazzled everyone it came into contact with. At the same time, he contrived to produce the deep, booming sound by the percussion of resonant objects and achieve the effect of loud and terrifying peals of thunder." See Papalexandrou 2017, 72.

25 See Schwartz 2011, 28, "Just as noise is what we make of certain sounds, the meanings we assign to noise are no less consequential than the meanings we assign to other sounds. Noise may be unwanted or incomprehensible sounds; it is never insignificant sound."

26 Pettman 2017, 44–48.

27 Nancy 2002, 8.

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Part 2

Byzantine Things in the World: Animating Museum Spaces

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Chapter 3

PRELUDE ON TRANSFIGURING EXHIBITION

Exhibition is a difficult thing. It means selecting and installing and arguing, and it is improvisational, a way things on display also show their ongoing precocity and autonomy. I wrote the following text in the months before *Byzantine Things in the World* opened at the Menil Collection in Houston, and this text was the gallery guide for the show. The exhibition ran from May 3 to August 18, 2013. The Menil provides very little verbal guidance to visitors, and no wall texts (beyond title and sponsors, and very basic wall labels) were included. For those who did not purchase the catalogue and who still wanted some information, this text written for the gallery guide was the only real resource. I include this text here in order the provide a prelude to the chapter following, because some of the arguments presented here were preliminary, as it turned out, and they needed more careful consideration after spending the summer of 2013, on and off, in Byzantine things' company.

Byzantine Things in the World Gallery Guide (March 2, 2013)

Byzantine things do work and act in the world in ways that art never can. On the one hand, Byzantine *art* concerns the aesthetic qualities of such objects, the exquisite qualities that allow them to be displayed and hung like easel paintings done by Titian or Ingres. On the other hand, things perform actively in the world and change all the other things (and here people are included) in their vicinity. They are not inert and passive, waiting to be seen by a person standing in front of them (though the things here will appear, in some ways, to be waiting, too—they're not). The company things keep often determines that appearance of attendance on our gallery-going attention.

Defined by our notions of discrete culture and chronological periods, Byzantine *art* falls into a larger system that we devised to order the past; and so we parallel Byzantine with Romanesque and Gothic from Western Europe, and those three categories precede the Renaissance—thus *medieval*, the long "middle age" between antiquity and its "rediscovery." But those categories for the past, however convenient they are for us, also distort those cultures and often force them to resemble us more than they in fact do. This exhibition offers the first opportunity, to my knowledge, to see Byzantine things outside of that environment that we made for them. It doesn't claim that this environment is natural to these things, either, but it aims to allow the things to speak in new ways that are unfettered by our insistence on Byzantine things belonging to a distinct set of rooms or cases in our chronologically ordered museums.

So, conversations that are open in this exhibition should lead to new experiences of this culture's made things. They aren't about Byzantium as a new modernism (and yet Matisse closely studied Byzantine coins, de Kooning compared New York City to Constantinople, and Mark Rothko was deeply sensitive to the Byzantine monuments he saw in and around Venice). They are partly about ways that modernism allows us to see new

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aspects in Byzantine culture. So, Barnett Newman knew about ideals of the Byzantine world, and his *Onement* series may owe its inspiration to writings by Matisse's son-in-law, Georges Duthuit. But his modelling of body to work, the zip or vertical line running through the centre of the painting in the exhibition, concerns the viewing body being called back to itself by the painting. In that way, bodies before Byzantine things were always completed by facing bodies on these painted panels, like Onuphrios here, that determined and dictated how a viewer became more fully an orthodox body before it.

Likewise, this conversation between modernism and these things lead one to know aspects of the material world for Byzantines that we think should be natural and self-evident—but never are, since we are in many ways an exception to how humans have encountered the world in the past. In the first place, Byzantines understood the world to be composed of a constituent form that is present in almost all reality: the cross. From face to outstretched arms to ships' masts, the cross defined the world, like an essential building block, which was recognized only after the Incarnation of Christ. The swirl of crosses and the deeply embedded crosses in the Ad Reinhardt here speak about surface and depth of that ever-latent form that promised salvation to all who could see it and *do* the cross, in prayer for example; and likewise wearing these crosses on one's body is a reminder and recapitulation and catalyst to *be* the cross in one's life.

Gold is another aspect of the Byzantine world that would appear transparent to us in its work and meaning. Our geology lets us know that gold is a precious, inert metal that is also highly workable. Its symbol as chemical element is Au, after *aurum*, in Latin, dawn's first glow, which also recalls Homer's "rosy-fingered" and Paul the Silentiary's variation for Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, "rosy-ankled." Those descriptive terms come closer to getting at the way Byzantines understood gold, as a potentially living element in the world that brought its animate and animating qualities to every thing it made. The Byzantine gold box is a tiny treasure, and yet it worked oversized to its scale. It contained, likely, a relic of a saint, a remnant of a holy person deeply saturated with the divine, and both box and bone were real presences. Not just a reminder in a suitably beautiful setting, these things (only the box remains—it's empty) were also living agents of the divine in world. The saint was truly there, in the same way that gold was a living element: Byzantines, like Greeks and Romans before them, understood minerals and ores to be living features of the world, not living like us, but much slower and older, literally a kind of nearly frozen blood in the earth with different rhythms and paces than our blood, but not dissimilar in essence.

Gold demonstrates its animate nature through its material qualities, and so the deep luminosity it raises is like dawn's body, her lambent ankles and fingers. Such things never get to show themselves this way any longer, but the company here lets the box glow closer to a natural state. Klein, Rauschenberg, and Byars are good company for this miniature thing; they produced giants to this miniature, but their conversation is held through their deeply open halations. They absorb and reflect, they pull one in, and their glowing fields include one. The box, despite fighting in a lower weight class, still gives as good as it gets. It is the one animate thing in the room, except for visitors, and its life is irrepressible once it's allowed to say so.

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African objects also tread a fine line between art and thing, and perhaps their balancing act in Western museums provides a good model for how like-minded Byzantine things ought to be treated. The *boli* is both inside and outside of container, for example, and it operated as a full participant in its culture. The charismatic materiality of the thing cannot be ignored, wherever it lives, and it worked out its performance through its powerful agglomeration. Byzantine relics and reliquaries and the whole multimedia environment that serviced them can't be replicated here any more than the *boli*'s environment can be. But the intensity of their effects is still bodied forth for any viewer who takes the time and attentiveness for that embodied encounter.

That larger world of bodies or things is an open field where all things interacted and acted on each other. This world is a kind of animism, where the Byzantines' New Economy, initiated after the Incarnation of God on earth, distributed God's energies, presences, and flows throughout creation. In Byzantium, each living thing and every such thing in this exhibition can still be strong currency. However we choose to classify them, these things still circulate and make new relations among themselves and other things. This exhibition asks that we recognize that economy and, perhaps, enter into a newly enchanted relation with our own world.

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Chapter 4

TRANSFIGURING MATERIALITIES: RELATIONAL ABSTRACTION IN BYZANTIUM AND ITS EXHIBITION

I ATTEMPTED AN argument about how analogical, anachronic exhibition revealed a comprehension, or rather perception, of the Byzantine objects in *Byzantine Things in the World*, a perception that such things could not provide under normal conditions, neither through conventional display nor in isolated study. The eponymous book accompanying the exhibition tried to make arguments for certain readings of and positions against those objects, but those arguments necessarily preceded the exhibition itself. What forcefully emerged, and what I will proceed to describe and argue below, is that the objects argued for their own fluidarity, to use Félix Guattari's term from *The Three Ecologies*—that their worlds could be united in a flux that we can only now retrieve, imagine, and explain historically through these objects' dynamic showing of their inner lives.[1] So the goal here is to describe and to explain what the objects did and showed during the exhibition and in particular how the exhibition demonstrated alchemy, in the literal sense of showing the mutability, interconnectedness, and irreducible fluidarity of things that ancient and medieval alchemy so energetically concerned itself with and explained so provisionally. Alchemy emerged forcefully not only as a magical element within our experience as visitors to the show, but also as a historical way to explain material conditions of these objects perceptible only in that environment. Alchemy revealed a fundamental understanding in that world, its belief in the essential relationships of matter in which we all share.

In their characteristic ways, objects abstract themselves under varying conditions. Lambent materials such as gold and silver reflect and absorb light to the degree that individual qualities of colour and texture shift to sheen and generalization. Figuration loses its identity in objects, and regardless of iconographic content, the integrity of the object is always lost under sensual scrutiny of the user, holder, and/or viewer. Where integrity dissolves, transforming relations among objects and human subjects come into play.[2]

This book uses abstraction as a guiding principle for alchemical exhibition in two ways, and it does so in accordance with—however hoary the conceit—meanings made available by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). In the first place, it examines these Byzantine objects abstractly, that is to say, it regards an object: "independently of its

1 "Fluidarity" is adapted from Guattari 2000; see 54, where he signals his indebtedness to Gregory Bateson. See Bateson 2000, 339: "In a word, schizophrenia, deuteron-learning, and the double bind ceases to be a matter of individual psychology and become part of the ecology of ideas in systems or 'minds' whose boundaries no longer coincide with the skins of the participant individuals."

2 My position resists any such allegorization as argued for, say, in Kessler, 2011.

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associations or attributes, and isolating properties or characteristics common to a number of diverse objects, events, etc., without reference to the peculiar properties of particular examples or instances." This approach to abstraction runs the risk of essentializing matter and experience in the Byzantine world, but it aims to examine objects for their realizations of the irreducible encounter among a thing and its materials, maker(s) and subject(s). In the second place, this book seeks to undermine assumptions about representation, that is *re*-presentation, that are so natural to us (to generalize, of course). It takes a position, in this way, divergent from a Platonic understanding of images standing in diminishing authenticity as they proceed away from the prototype or model; in other words, a portrait is *not* a lesser version of a discrete human subject. My position thus follows another definition of abstraction literally: "freedom from or absence of representational qualities; a style or method characterized by this freedom." So examining these Byzantine objects abstractly entails no representational qualities, in the sense of there being no figuration needed on an object, but also no representation involved even if figures are present: some of the object's meaning may derive from reference to a prototype, but the life and agency it possesses are limited to the object itself at an essential level of its signifying work. This position is the freedom of non-re-presentation, an attempted move away altogether from human-centred, human-determined perception and away from dichotomies such as abstraction and figuration.[3]

Animism and the Atomic Principle

The particular relation in play among objects and persons in late antiquity and Byzantium was a Christian animism. Despite the protestations of theologians in their always-interested texts, that world revealed itself to be fully open and transformative, when looked at with the "right questions" in mind.[4] It is evoked in the "atomic principle" described by Flann O'Brien (pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan) in his posthumously published novel *The Third Policeman* (1967).[5] The principle holds that like makes like, so in the logic of that book, someone who persistently stands with one foot resting against a wall will idle themselves into a state of a bicycle resting on its kickstand—and become a bicycle, literally. Too much idling in this way leads to a transformation, a sympathetic union of natures, that makes like things more obviously similar to themselves in the world.

The cross operated in late antiquity on the atomic principle in the sense of providing a permeable form by which like, the originary Christ, can make like—Christian believers. Believers simply needed to find physical unity with that essential form of a Christian universe, the cross, either through prayer or other attitudes or gestures that made alike forms find unification among themselves.[6]

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3 See the incisive remarks in Siegel 2013.

4 On the disciplinary, productive tensions between theology and religion, see Helmer 2012.

5 Similar ideas are also in O'Brien's *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).

6 See Peers 2013, 67–69, for example.

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Objects, too, themselves declared this "atomic principle" and were active in creating such passages from person to the divine.[7] The range of states along which the principle operates runs in both directions, from humans to things and back again. The bidirectional quality means bikes and men share potentialities between them, and self-othering can occur across ontologies. Objects, including facets of monuments, could enter into sets of relations with their full environments that constantly transformed subjects. Abstraction in the senses already described was deeply invested and operational in materiality here, and it never worked to absent object or subject; it is not transcendent, but fundamentally of the world saturated by God's Incarnation. So the spectrum of transformation is not direct always, as in man to bike, but a larger array of potentialities in which subjects, objects, things, could engage in constant like-minded alterations toward God.

Objects had venerable models for acting out. That ability was always latent, but things did such work frequently. Scholars have often tried to explain away these aspects of objects' work in Byzantium by ascribing any mention of such work in the sources as superstition or textual error. However, both explanations infantilize human reactions to objects in Byzantium or privilege accidents of preservation and transmission over real human knowledge of the world those people lived in. They are neither relevant nor true for explaining any significant aspect of that culture. Such have been the explanations, for instance, of the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter*, a fascinating third-century (?) text. In it, the cross on which Christ was crucified makes a dramatic appearance at the moment of the discovery of the empty tomb, and it has a speaking part. In the first place, the stone appears to withdraw itself to make way for the advance guard that announces the remarkable news to the soldiers. Then a voice from heaven speaks to the cross, who emerges from the tomb and declares its speech capacity:

> And they saw the heavens were being open, and two men descended from there, having much brightness, and they drew near to the tomb. But that stone which had been placed at the entrance rolled away by itself and made way in part and the tomb was opened and both the young men went in. Then those soldiers seeing it awoke the centurion and the elders, for they were present also keeping guard. While they were reporting what they had seen, again they saw coming out from the tomb three men, and the two were supporting the one, and a cross following them. And the head of the two reached as far as heaven, but that of the one being led by them surpassed the heavens. And they were hearing a voice from the heaven saying, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?' And a response was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'[8]

Not to overburden this text by forcing it to say more than it does or by overrepresenting its explanatory power, this passage is a remarkable and not atypical description of the ways in which objects, things—but also the stone that rolls itself away—that are to us inert and passive are shown to be alive and participatory in the world. Taken at its word, the text reveals a strong tendency in that culture to enchant its world.

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7 See Basl and Sandler 2013, who argue artifacts' "good of their own" is counterintuitive, though one might have to begin taking what is good for artifacts into account in all of one's practical and moral deliberations: "After all, artifacts are created to serve our purposes, and if we choose to act in ways that are detrimental to them, why should that matter?"

8 See Foster 2010, 202–3 (9.36–10.42), Foster 2013, 89–104, and Foster 2008, 30–42.

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Figure 11. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

And ways to rediscover that enchantment are also available to us in exhibitions. *Byzantine Things in the World* attempted that quixotic task through conversations among diverse works of art and through evocative display. In the first room of the show, a painting by Ad Reinhardt, with its crosses latent on and in its one-note tonality, and another with the overtly Christian mirror crosses by Robert Rauschenberg, revealed the diverse ways crosses emerge and make themselves perceptible and engaged (Figure 11). Likewise, a novalike explosion of crosses on the wall facing the exhibition entrance demonstrated the spread and density—and beauty—of that simple form, constituent of all Christian reality. The single standing cross by Jim Dine on the left-hand side of the wall likewise abstracted that shape, stated the essential form, while insisting on its particularity in itself. One encountered how to see a world motivated and moved by the intersection/intercession of these perpendicular lines. Relation with and among these forms is a fully human way to enter into communication with the divine—or just with the world, to place that project into Menilian practice and ambitions. It happens through abstraction, a reduction to essence in the repetition of the cross form and in the consistent lack of figuration.

Some of the experiences of conceiving and mounting an exhibition that related to these arguments for a certain kind of understanding of late antique and Byzantine materiality inform my position in this book. They showed alchemy in action. One of the key conceits of the exhibition was showing Byzantine objects in novel juxtapositions with modern and non-Western art. Another queried the ways we often encounter historical

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Figure 12. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

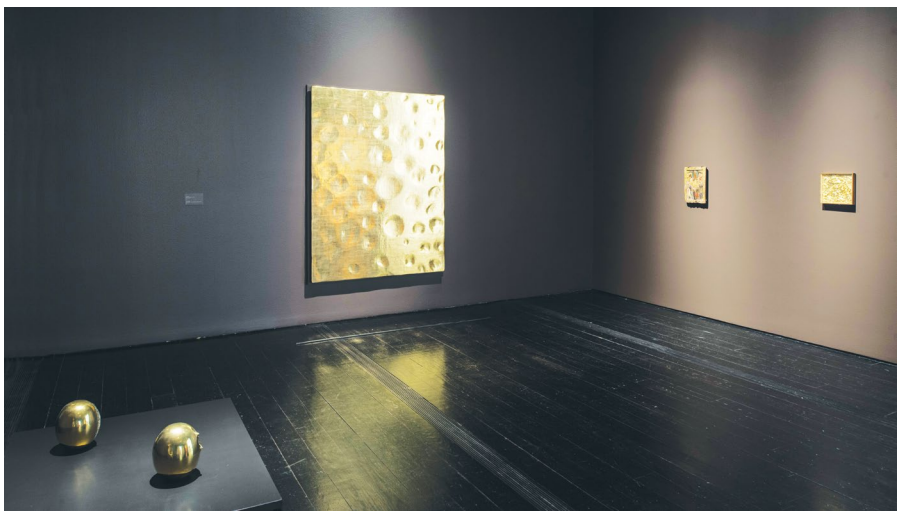

Figure 13. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

objects in museums and tried to indicate misleading qualities of those encounters, and so care was taken, for example, in the installation to avoid overlegibility of illumination. In a room dedicated to the "mystery of vision," a gorgeous gold box (ca. 500) in the collection was a focal point; small in scale, it sat on a plinth in the centre of the floor, where it could interact with other works, namely, *The Halo*, by James Lee Byars, *Monogold*, by Yves Klein, and *Untitled (Gold Painting)*, by Robert Rauschenberg (Figures 12 and 13).

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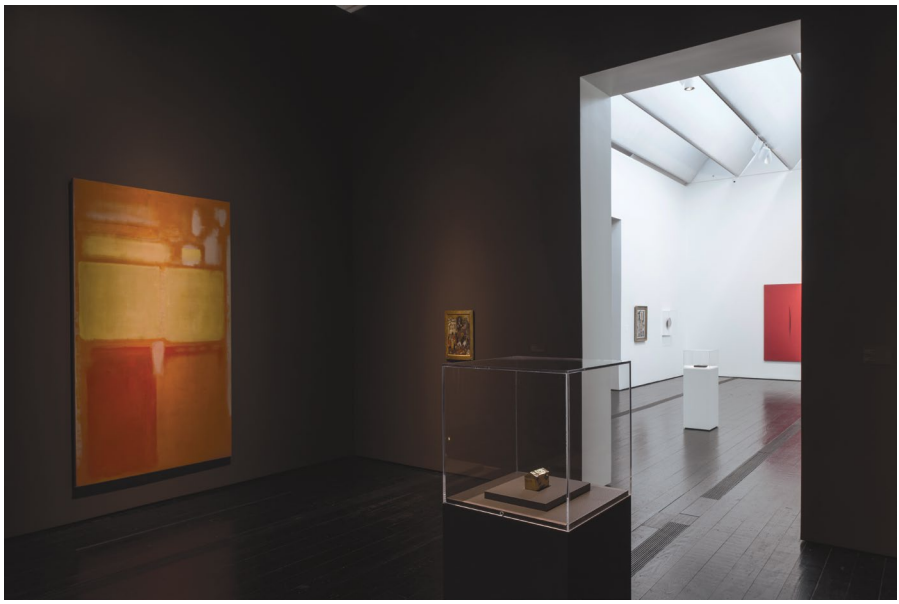

Figure 14. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The constellation of golden abstraction produced memorable effects in a room lighted only by a small number of spots on the ceiling; no natural light played a role in the direct perception of objects in the room.

Here, the show showed the argument: each gold object communicated with the ambient environment in the absorption of light and radiation of reflection, and among them, they then modelled alchemy's essential, fluid truth. Dramatically, a painting by Mark Rothko, *No. 21 (Untitled)*, with modular components of orange and yellow, found itself entering those gold fields in the room (Figure 14). Every surface captured and returned elements in the painting, and the painting in turn increased its golden, glowing intensity. The Byars work needed regular polishing, because of the way *The Halo* attracted airborne particles of all kinds, as well as touch—visitors often try to touch this magnetic object, as they do the Klein painting, too.

The interaction among materials, in other words, was active, and the transitive nature of gold emerged as forceful and dynamic. The alchemical relation among them was dramatic. The untarnishable gold box sat still and radiant, but its discretion was not absolute, for its reach extended to other works in the room, including the icons, whose gold backgrounds spoke under these conditions to each other. Remarkably, the gilded-brass halo immediately beside the box reflected, absorbed, and cast back its sheen, and its surface qualities were rich and deep and strikingly like neighbouring gold on a much smaller scale (Figure 12). *The Halo* radiated variable gold shadows on dark wall and floor, so it extended itself while also containing its environment in its convex brass mirror surface. The principle of relation among likes demonstrated itself in the comparable

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Figure 15. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

performances of the two works. One could say the little box was the little piece of yeast that leavened all objects in its vicinity to goldish perfection. Like making like was the mystery under vision in that space; each piece spoke to the other in visible, material terms, and each caught and kept viewers in the reflective intensities.

Touching sources of light and radiance is a compelling need, it seems. But light and radiance in this way came to be more than effects of objects' lighting and placement. They were thinglike, like the objects themselves.[9] They became thingly facets of objects. The intensity and density of radiance emerged when visitors went into the next room, if following the nonprescriptive counterclockwise route most often taken, because there, the effects of a sunlit room were almost overwhelming, especially combined with two bright, flamboyant Willem de Kooning paintings (*Untitled IV* and *Untitled VI*) on the wall inside (Figure 15). In the darkened room, however, the Rauschenberg *Gold Painting (Untitled)* shows gold leaf applied to a surface (of wood, fabric, and cardboard) cockled and ridged almost, but not really, like cloth, so that the radiance is broken and wrinkled, almost (Figure 13 and Figure 16).[10] The abstract surface there stated the same effect under these conditions as the late Byzantine icon of the Ascension beside it, an unex-

9 See King 2002, 27: "Although light exhibits wave phenomena, nevertheless, it is a thing—it is optical material. We don't treat it as such. Instead, we use it very casually to illuminate other things. I'm interested in the revelation of light itself and that it has thingness." And see Taylor 2012, 112.

10 For the first time, the piece hung vertically on the wall, rather than being placed on a plinth out on the floor.

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Figure 16. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Gold Painting)*, 1956, 3.8 × 27.6 × 3.8 cm, gold leaf, wood fabric, and cardboard in wood and glass frame. The Menil Collection (98-001), with permission of The Menil Collection.

pected contingency between the two objects, since several icons were tried next to the Rauschenberg before the Ascension took hold (Figure 16 and Figure 17).

Abstract in the sense being used in this book, the pieces manifested an essentialized quality, each reduced to a formal and material mutuality and also without re-presentation. The abraded surface of the icon took on the same dynamic intensity of field as the Rauschenberg, but without the three-dimensional effects, since the icon was scumbled, in the sense of appearing to be given a softer, glowing opacity through the loss of detailing in the centre of the panel.[11] In this case, the icon's figural definition has been lost through accidents of time, though the Ascension iconography is clear in outline, and

11 The conservation report (1985-57-9) is highly evocative: "Very badly damaged paint surface [...]. The wear and successive intervention by restorers make it difficult to see the original design: even a lot of the very damaged gold which at first would seem original is in fact a later addition [...]. The craquelure on the original ground is a very fine hair-line net, overlaid by a stronger pattern following the wood grain. These more defined cracks are strongest in areas where a granular pigment has been mixed with large amounts of white, and least evident where the pigment is finely ground and of homogenous nature. Although it is difficult to see the original boundaries of the gold because of all the later restoration—at the point where one can see the original vermillion border, it is also possible to see traces of gold beneath this. The leaf was laid on a transparent organic mordant [...] From the infra-red photograph there seems to be no detailed preliminary drawing [...]. [The] same freedom therefore [that] allowed the brush work explains the fluidity of the paint work and the balanced relationship between solid forms and stylized modeling."

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Figure 17. Ascension Icon, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection (85-57.09), with permission of The Menil Collection.

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Figure 18. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

the material abstraction emerged forcefully from the panel through its proximity to and unexpected agreement with the Rauschenberg and the Klein. The icon's troubled conservation history, ironically, allowed it to find common purpose with the neighbouring modernist works, and it also showed the active, fluid brushwork and productive tensions among ground, field and human forms—all of which resonated and articulated through that splendid Rauschenberg.

Light in some rooms was golden, and in the alchemical sense of Byzantium, the material spirit of the objects was transcending the object limits we normal ascribe to inert, dead things (Figures 12, 13, 14, 18, and 19).[12] Photography was inadequate to capture this quality of experience—on the one hand, the effects were so fugitive, and on the other, they became fully evident only as one spent more time among the objects—and so the chance to photograph was lost. Here the expansiveness of silver and gold's reach outside its (for us, normal) boundaries revealed a material essence reduced to the irreducible and sharing its perfect golden and silver states across object type and substance (say, from gold to brass to paint).[13] The individual properties matter less than the

12 See Lazaris 2018 on gold as the divine realm's splendour in this world.

13 Stones and gems also play into that spread. Gems participated in this process of extraordinary genesis, of course, formed and coloured by divine fire and earthly exhalations. See Halleux 1981, 50–51. Gems have special qualities, but these are not always discernible to the eye, except the degree of colour and grain. For example, the Menil possesses a number of small stones of variable origins and identity. One small red and green medallion of the Annunciation (thirteenth century?) is described as glass paste, while a nearly contemporary (?) bloodstone or hematite with the Virgin and Child was shown in the exhibition alongside it—neither was discernibly different. But the sympathetic red of the blood, in alchemical logic, makes like.

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Figure 19. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

characteristics common to these works, the spread among things and viewing subjects that allowed each thing, human and otherwise, to enter into relation. That relation was encouraged (for us), indeed, dictated (for them), by attitudes about metals and minerals, geology and chemistry, and the transformation of matter in the Byzantine world.

Alchemy and Matter

Alchemical theory and practice reveal a fundamental aspect of late antique and Byzantine materiality, consistent, too, with understanding the cross as the core of creation. Alchemy's search for similar essential abstractions, its insistence on colour as a sign of essence, and its revelation of living, transmutable qualities consistent across all matter make that esoteric science an important testimony to late antique and Byzantine assumptions about matter and the world.[14] One does not have to claim that that culture believed in all the tenets of alchemy to assert that its basic understandings were widely held. Some general notions about alchemy, as we know them from the range of sources that have survived, are important for this book: the belief in a *prima materia*, the basic, primeval stuff of the universe (derived from Aristotle, Empedocles, and Plato, largely) and in the four elements that make up the material world and in their exchanges form the fluxes and flows of the world we see and know. But also, and this assertion mirrors some of the arguments for a Christian animism, "the alchemists envisioned a universe that was sentient and filled with life, reflecting the permeation of the spirit

14 Alchemy has been applied to understandings of art making and to Byzantine art previously. See Ingold 2013, 46–49; Elkins 1999; and James 1996, 36–41.

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of God throughout its vastness."[15] So Byzantine alchemy is a way into understanding a worldview, and it also shows fundamental interpretations—and interpretations fundamentally different from our own—of materials, especially metals, of course, used for the creation of things in that world.[16] It shared a whole range of vocabulary, processes, and premises with cognate fields, such as dyeing, pharmacology, and cooking. Each field adapted shared notions concerning the conventions and ends typical of each area of work.[17] Each built a Christian worldview that attempted to explain all aspects of the material world.[18]

Alchemy was a kind of empirical investigation of the world, and it developed by means of practical knowledge and experiments. The engagement not only with process, but also with sensory data, is a striking aspect of alchemical researches and writings.[19] Some of the surviving writings from the late antique period deal with deception, such as the papyri now in Leiden and Stockholm from the late third century (?). They give recipes for achieving the effects of precious materials through base ones, for instance, gold colouring,

> To colour gold to render it fit for usage. Misy, salt, and vinegar accruing from the purification of gold; mix it all and throw in the vessel (which contains it) the gold described in the preceding preparation; let it remain some time, (and then) having drawn (the gold) from the vessel, heat it upon coals; then again throw it in the vessel which contains the abovementioned preparation; do this several times until it becomes fit for use.[20]

Those writings reveal a practical approach to something we might call chemistry, of course, but they also show full confidence in the ability to show philosophical knowledge in otherwise mundane-sounding recipes for the transmutation of metals from one state to another. They share that position with more heavily intellectualized, allegorical approaches to metals' lives, such as Zosimus of Panopolis (fl. ca. 300).[21] For a theorist such as Zosimus, alchemy was a route to the purified soul by means of the philosophy of discovery of the hidden structures of the world and their examination and contemplation.[22] But his writings also presupposed a unifying system at work in the world, with spirit as a privileged catalyst for its workings and changes: "The composition of waters, the movement, growth, removal, and restitution of corporeal nature, the separation of the spirit from the body, and the fixation of the spirit on the body are not due to foreign

15 Linden 2003, 15.

16 See Principe 2013 and Principe 2014.

17 See Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, et al. 20014, 13; Schreiner and Oltrogge 2011, 13–14, 50–61, and 108–9; and Mertens 1995, cxiii.

18 See Goltz 1972, 31–49.

19 See Smith 2010.

20 Halleux 1981, 87 (14), trans. Linden 2003, 47; from Caley 1926, 1149–66 and Caley 1927. See also Newman 2014, 116, and plate at 22–23.

21 See Mertens 1995 and trans. in Taylor 1937a, 88–92.

22 See Fowden 1993, 123.

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natures, but to one single nature reacting on itself, a single species, such as the hard bodies of metals and the moist juices of plants."[23]

Zosimus represents the beginning of a tendency toward highly elevated and often obscure language in the service of alchemical mysteries. Texts such as these are not self-evidently practical guides, unlike the recipes in the Leiden and Stockholm papyri, for example, with their indications of practical experience behind them. Together, this set of texts reveals essential aspects of this early stage of chemistry: experience overtaken by theory, but both engaged in a unifying system that assumed movement and change throughout matter and that sought the abstract, essential meanings of the world.

How matter maintains and regulates its unity is due to universal sympathy, where everything sublunar is in alignment. Toward the end of late antiquity, Stephanus of Alexandria (ca. 550/5–ca. 622) reveals the earlier tendencies, perhaps even more rarified than before: "O heavenly nature making the spiritual existence to shine forth, O bodiless body, making bodies bodiless, O course of the moon illuminating the whole order of the universe, O most generic species and most specific genus, O nature truly superior to nature conquering the natures, tell what sort of nature thou art."[24]

Evidently, Stephanus's position relies on a highly intellectualized analysis of metals and on a mystical view of creation—unlike the "rational" method of the later alchemist Michael Psellus (1017/18–1078/96), who still shared his premises.[25] It is dismissive of actual craft, because such handiwork is disingenuous in its assertion of skill and knowledge.[26] Indeed, his position eschews the actual stuff altogether in favour of a vitalism in and uniting everything, "Put away the material theory so that ye may be deemed worthy to see with your intellectual eyes the hidden mystery. For there is need of a single

23 Mertens 1995, 34 (10.1), trans. in Linden 2003, 50; and continuing, Mertens 1995, 35 (10.1), trans. in Taylor 1937a, 89: "And in this system, single and of many colours, is comprised a research, multiple and varied, subordinated to lunar influences and to the measure of time, which rule the end and the increase according to which the nature transforms itself."

24 Ideler 1842/1963, 199.20–25. See trans. in Linden 2003, 55, and Taylor 1937b, 121. For analysis of his work, see Papathanassiou 1996, 1990, and, more generally, Papathanassiou 2007, 121–27.

25 Katsiampoura 2008; Albini 1988; Healy 1978, 298; and Grosdidier de Matons 1976, 329–31. For a brief overview of Byzantine alchemy, see Papathanassiou 2006 and Mertens 2004. On the terms of appropriate divination, according to Psellus, see Magdalino 2019, 194–96, and Filimon 2019, 281n150.

26 The similarities between alchemy and art, as well as its competitive aspects, are well attested over the entire history of that field of inquiry. See, for example, Newman 2014 and Göttler 2014 and Göttler 2013, 504. The relationship is complicated, however: see Haug 2014, 97: "The discussion of early modern theories on metallogenesis has shown, that the creative process of the human artist and artisan was compared to the natural genesis of the divine artifex. The same primordial matters are available to the goldsmith and the metalworker, to the alchemist and to 'nature'. All four follow the same working processes, only their ability differentiates the final products. The juxtaposition of form and matter, which is thought of as a dichotomy of active force-shaping power and passive shape-receiving material, is of greatest importance with regard to God and his creation, which stands as a model both for the visual artist as well as the alchemist, who tries to recreate natural processes according to his will."

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natural <thing> and of one nature conquering all."[27] That single nature expresses itself through a spirit that is shared across creation, from humanity to ores and metals and to other parts of creation. Profound sympathies among all aspects of the world informed not only alchemy, but also notions about farming and agriculture, astronomy and physics.[28] Stephanus knew that copper, for example, had both soul and spirit, and he said so explicitly, even to the point of ascribing those same natural attributes to copper as humanity.[29] Fire gives spirit to metallic bodies, though in different measure, and copper can achieve gold's perfection through that element, even more stainless than gold.[30]

This common energy or spirit allowed the possibility of transmutation of metals, and if all these materials, like humanity, were enspirited, recipes for changes could leaven the process of alteration. In this sense, sulphur water can work like yeast on metals. It aids spirit in lessening any resistance on the part of the metal and allows that metal body to be transformed into a purer form. Likewise, gold leavens: "In fact, just as yeast, though in small quantity, ferments a great mass of dough, likewise also this little portion of gold perfects all the *xerion* and makes everything ferment."[31] A small amount acts as a catalyst for the movement of spirit and for the realization of an alteration of base matter toward a larger quantity of gold, optimally.[32]

Colour and Soul

Such views were not held universally, and these sources themselves reveal some of the points of contention between this particular type of philosopher and those arguing from other positions. However, one does not have to assert that alchemists were typical to understand that aspects of their position had wide currency in late antiquity and Byzantium. Their language, method, and goals were special to them, but their understanding of the world as somehow ensouled and mutable was a commonly assumed position among many in this period. An early eighth-century poem, commonly attributed to a Theophrastus, shows that these notions continued to be expounded and explored, sometimes—it seems—in the face of opposition,

> How then can those vile critics censure us,
> They who in secret learning are inept,

27 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,200.32–34; Linden 2003, 55; Taylor 1937b, 123.

28 Sympathies and antipathies in nature are also seen in agricultural and botanical handbooks, such as Lelli 2010; Dalby 2011; Grélois and Lefort 2012; and Thomson 1955, 66–73. See also Lefort 2013.

29 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,210.11–12.

30 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,210.12–20. And see Papathanassiou 1990, 126: "The physical bodies are said to be composed of the four cosmic elements, which are in a dynamic state having births, destructions, changes, and reversions from one to another. This is the physical principle underlying the possibility of the transmutation of various metals to gold."

31 Berthelot and Ruelle 1888/1963, 2:145 (3.10.3).

32 See Halleux 1975 and Hopkins 1938.

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> And who in sophic wisdom have no share?
> […]. They ask how gold is ever to be made,
> How that can change which has a nature fixed,
> Placed there of old by God the demiurge,
> Who formed its substance never to be moved
> From that position which from early time
> Was its abode and destined resting place;
> They say gold thus abides, nor suffers change,
> For naught can be transmuted from the class
> Or species where its origin took place.[33]

Evidently, critics of these philosophers had argued that nature could not be changed, once formed by God. But changeability in nature is still latent in the natural and made worlds, as attested by numerous accounts in chronicles, hagiographies, and council acts. The goal of making gold is the serious divergence, I would argue, in these conflicting positions revealed in that passage of the poem. And indeed, the unchanging aspect of matter was readily conceded by Theophrastus as a sign of agreement with those who diverged from his position. But that concession was only partial, since altering matter was not the object of alchemists' enterprise, but rather altering the outward appearance of matter; the essence, the abstract nature, remained the same, but the alchemical change directs itself at form. Likewise, the process was compared to the sun, which passes through seasons of hot and cold, dry and moist, and yet remains the same essential body throughout.[34] Theophrastus claimed a clear path to knowledge, but neither language nor meaning is fully lucid—or else the knowledge would have been commonplace, one presumes. And yet he insisted on the facility of the method leading to recognition of essence at the centre of all creation:

> But we will show the end of this our art,
> An end most useful and most quickly learned,
> For nothing strange it needs save that one stock
> From which all things by Nature are produced.[35]

The question that arises then, naturally, is how one recognizes when change in the form of an essential component in matter occurs, regardless of the technique employed to effect that change. The answer is the most obvious, but also the most difficult in many ways: colour.[36] This visual but vital aspect attached itself to metals, which were otherwise unstable; once it was joined, metals such as gold became themselves, as it were. Olympiodorus the Younger (ca. 495–570) wrote that colour is deeply dyed into matter and in fact fixes its state,[37] and as stated above, the language and terminology of alchemy moved across many disciplines, including dyeing. Moreover, the word used to describe a

33 Ideler 1842/1963, 330.7–21; Linden 2003, 63; Browne 1920, 196.

34 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,330.22–29; Browne 1920, 196–97.

35 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,330.30–34; Linden 2003, 63; Browne 1920, 197.

36 See Mertens 1995, cxxx–clii; James 1996, 41–46; James 2003; Papathanassiou 1990, 123; Lindsay 1970, 111–12; Hopkins 1938; Hopkins 1927; Pfister 1925; as well as Smith 2010.

37 Berthelot and Ruelle 1888/1963, 2: 77–78 (2.4.15); and see Hopkins 1938, 328.

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dipping process whereby a metal might approach goldness in some manner is a cognate for baptism or *baptizein*, that is, *baptein*. The dyeing, tincturing, and colouring of metals were often conflated with the sacrament of baptism, as well as with death and resurrection: "Each metal, the same as man, becomes endowed with the triple hypostacy of body, soul, and spirit [sic]."[38] The colour or tincture is the indelible aspect of their state, but one that could be changed, so that gold was not only a colour, but also a sign that a material shared in goldness, the quality most elevated among metals and most sought after by alchemists across the ages. Theophrastus stated this belief as clearly as alchemy's conventions permitted,

> The white, augmented thrice within a fire,
> In three days' time is altogether changed
> To lasting yellow and this yellow then
> Will give its hue to every whitened form.
> This power to tinge and shape produces gold
> And thus a wondrous marvel is revealed.[39]

That process of colouration is ascendant and determinant of purity, though here, the final and best colour is not mentioned: purple. The range of coloration runs in value from black to white to yellow to purple, so that if the alchemist can manage to create the colour, along the ascending scale, he has, on some essential level not knowable beyond visual perception, made the real thing. In other words, everything that glows like gold is gold.[40]

Many types of gold were possible, just as many types of apples once were available—and as with that variety now diminished, we find one gold valued in our culture.[41] The processes by which colours were changed and essences arrived at also revealed these types. At the end of the whitening process, or *lefkosis*, silver possesses a golden gleam, and that coloured shimmer showed the presence of gold in the silver and the distance along the spectrum that metal had travelled to get closer to purity.[42] In the same way, copper could receive that enspiriting colour by combining with silver to produce a straw-tinted alloy, the colour revealing its relative proximity to purity.[43] And in theory—alchemical, that is—even the commonest metal could become gold.

Mercury was the catalyst for changes in many versions of alchemical technique and belief. It was the basic component that spanned the properties and natures of metals, because it could alter from a silvery, fluid condition to vapor when heated; it was both matter and spirit in these varying conditions.[44] Such views are attested in late antiquity

38 Browne 1920, 203. And on soul and body, according to Stephanus; see Papathanassiou 2005, 123–27.

39 Ideler 1842/1963, 2,331.30–35; Linden 2003, 64–65; Browne 1920, 203.

40 But Psellus warned against greed for just that reason; the soul of the alchemist needs purification, just as he purifies matter. See Albini 1988, 56–58.

41 A comparison made by Wallert 1990.

42 See Hopkins 1938, 328–29.

43 See Browne 1948–49, 19.

44 See Smith 2010, 39–41.

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and Byzantium and continued to circulate well into the early modern period. For example, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 373–ca. 414) wrote a letter to Dioscurus with annotations on a treatise by pseudo-Democritus, and in it, he described the power of mercury to control other metals and cause colour change in each:

> For just as wax takes the color that it received, so also mercury, o philosopher, whitens all metals and attracts their spirits, refines them for cooking and absorbs them. It is arranged for the purpose and has in itself the principle of each liquid, once it has undergone decomposition, causes every color change. It forms the permanent base, as colors have no foundation of their own. Or rather, mercury, coming then to find itself deprived of its foundation, becomes modifiable by treatments performed on the bodies and their materials.[45]

The material traverses the metallic spectrum on account of its motility, and it gives the basis for colour to set, to fix. In other words, colour is the means by which the true identity of materials is revealed. As Synesius wrote, "Mercury has been classed in both catalogues, both in the yellow, which means gold, and in the white, which means silver."[46] And by that description of mercury's ambivalence, he was noting the element's presence in the colours—and natures—of silver and gold.

Gold and Silver Abstracted in Exhibition

This discussion of alchemical processes and beliefs is necessary not only for understanding the possible meanings inherent in materiality of late antiquity and Byzantium, but also for describing the effects and agencies objects had—and can still have—when in the world.[47] A history of materials—of their perceptions and explanations—is naturally a social history,[48] and exhibition provides environments where those perceptions and explanations can be explored, justified, and imagined.[49] Contemporary exhibition attempts these processes in the historical presentation of a development of making and speculation among alchemists, but also among modern artists, for some of whom alchemy was a compelling way to think through transformation of and through materials.[50] The transformative aspect of James Lee Byars's making of *The Halo* is impressive: 219.7 cm in diameter, the PVC piping was covered in brass and gilded (Figure 24).

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45 Martelli 2011, 234.136–236.144; Garzya 1989, 810.134–42; modified trans. from Hopkins 1927, 11–12.

46 Martelli 2011, 234.122–24; Garzya 1989, 808.119–21; trans. Hopkins 1927, 13.

47 Remarks on the early modern period by current scholars can be productively applied to Byzantium, I believe. See Smith 2010 and also Rublack 2013, 43: "A strictly sociological perspective occludes the ways in which matter interrelates with the meanings humans ascribe to things and how matter can therefore become an aesthetic category. In short, how objects were made and what they were made from may have a bearing on how they were perceived and gained significance."

48 Conneller 2011, 4–7, uses examples of descriptions of gold in a modern chemistry textbook and an eighth-century Persian text on alchemy to ask what a material *is*.

49 See the stimulating remarks by Cole 2011.

50 I am thinking particularly of the exhibition *Kunst und Alchemie: Das Geheimnis der Verwandlung*, held at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf from April 5 to August 10, 2014, with an excellent

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Figure 20. James Lee Byars, *The Halo*, 1985, 220 cm diameter overall, brass ring 20 cm diameter, gilded brass. The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The transcendence is implied in the title, and the piece nearly reaches that level of existence, but leaning against a wall, it also is always grounded, active within perceptual reach. Byars's other work likewise plays on these transformative positions.[51] For example, "Einstein, Stein and Wittgenstein," and "The Three B's: Beuys, Broodthaers, Byars" (both 1984–89, gilded stones) are altogether six small rocks coated in gold leaf, but the stones are named and become material metaphors, one might say, for personal transfiguration that leads toward an unself-assuming perfection. Alchemy was never about personal gain, among its most dedicated practitioners, but was concerned with the exaltation and perfection of matter, including the human. These small gestures in the stones parallel other performance pieces Byars performed over his life that ironically and playfully mapped possibilities of transformation in our world-bound existence. No one working with gilding and natural or machine-made materials could not be aware of the alchemical basis of his or her operations. Indeed, that awareness permitted a means to overcome even the limitations of "artist," for real alchemists discovered secrets of materiality and did not simply mimic those deep truths, as painters and sculptors could have been accused of doing.[52] Alchemy could provide someone like Byars a way to exceed his entire enterprise.[53]

The metaphor of alchemy is still used for a transformative, enchanting heightening of common experience, and exhibition can also perform alchemy in that sense, too, while also allowing us to probe implications of understanding more fully than usual what alchemy, or historical chemistry and geology, "do." Analyzing how alchemy, for example, operated as framework within which categories worked and meant can be revelatory for us.[54] Exhibition can work as inspiration, as a catalyst for thinking historically; it can

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catalogue (Dupré et al. 2014). Less successful, in my opinion, but still noteworthy is the exhibition held at the Kunsthalle Bremen from October 19, 2019 to March 1, 2020, *Ikonen: Was wir Menschen anbeten*; see Grunenberg and Fischer-Hausdorf 2019.

51 See Seegers 2014, 195–201; Wagner 2001, 293–300; and now Merianos 2017.

52 For example, see Newman 2014, 118.

53 See Peers 2018c.

54 I am thinking in particular of Morel 1998; but also Didi-Huberman 1995. See, also, Merianos 2017.

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begin with an argument and still lead to another explanation that gives unanticipated historical grounding.

In that same way, geology can be demonstrative of widespread assumptions about the nature and activities of the earth, even if not everyone in that culture would have expressed those common assumptions in similar terms. The belief in an organic nature of metals is largely impossible for us now, but it was widespread in the ancient world, including Byzantium. Metals could grow like plants, and so they were dependent on environment for their qualities and peculiarities.[55] For example, the amount of silver in gold was not explained by natural occurrences of alloys in the earth, but in terms of the natural occurrence of silver in gold that was transforming, eventually, into full gold.[56] Stones, likewise, grew and formed, rather like plants again, but also with a stony logic and pace that often stood outside human abilities to perceive and measure. Descriptions of how stone made itself and transformed, too, paralleled alchemical discussion in its insistence on vitalism and primary matter as foundational aspects of the natural world's order. Stones and minerals aided in health, generation, and fertility throughout creation, including in humans.[57] Modern science is revealing it, too. Scientists have studied the spermatozoa of gold miners and have found that traces of gold in sperm increase the motility of sperm. In the past, gold was vital, and now science is explaining it in a different way.[58] Gold—like all matter—transforms life mutually.[59]

The investigation of nature was infused—or infected, depending on one's perspective—by a kind of animism, with or without the word being uttered.[60] Moreover, workers who dealt with the earth for their livelihood knew that extrahuman forces were at

55 On the earth's womb and the early modern move to the extractionist position that we carry on, see Usher 2019, 42–48.

56 See Conneller 2011, 11–13 and, more generally, Craddock 2008 and Craddock 1995; Baboula 2014; and Vryonis 1962.

57 Usher 2019, 34.

58 See Sahab et al. 2011.

59 And see Haug 2014, 90: "Almost all theories offer a dualistic system that operates on the dichotomy of a primary passive substance acted on by a potent cause. The involved antagonists are matter and an active formative power, or in other words: a creator and a material in which the creation can manifest. This duality of primordial passive matter and active forming principle can be thought of in terms of natural procreational processes which approximates the third—mineralistic—to the other two reigns, the floral and the animalistic, where by seed or semen procreation and growth is initiated. If this biological analogy taken from the animal and herbal kingdoms is applied to the mineral, it can be extended to metallogenesis: if in the field of animals and plants male and female beings can be found who procreate by the union of the active and formative male seeds or semen and the female passive receiving matter—and if this means that this species can recreate self-reliantly— then it is not too far fetched to suspect comparable ways of reproduction and growth in the reign of minerals and assume the existence of metal 'semen.'"

60 On animism and its modernist enemies, see Peers 2012b; for geological and alchemical commonalities, see Morel 1998, 37–38; and on animism's presence in the absence of its naming, 26–27: "Même si toute reference animiste est à exclure, la terre en gestation est donnée à voir comme une sorte d'organisme pourvu d'une circulation interne et de cavités-réceptacles qui sont les conditions physiques (de lieu et de movement) de ce processus générateur."

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Figure 21. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

work on the materials they sought. Stars and planets affected the growth and quality of metals, so naturally sympathetic bodies played a role in the generation and regeneration of metals, most clearly the sun on gold and moon on silver.[61] Exhibition can show that life, too, as it turns out. It can show the ways in which sympathetic things enter into fluid communities where materials and forms show common purpose and where they can also reveal their irreducible selfness, freed from the constrictive regime of representation.

Habit-Deadened Life

This chapter has argued, elliptically, against symbolism, against representation, and it adheres strongly to materialist understandings of the world, to taking the world, including its Byzantine antecedent, as itself and nothing more. In one sense, it colludes with T. J. Clark's description of Picasso's project in 1920, when the artist was "wrestling with the problem of how best to state—to show—what it is to *be* an object."[62] Imagining how to be an object entails equalizing the world—adopting a fundamentally democratic approach to materiality.[63] Everything is an object or a thing. Such a position is nearly impossible, and it constantly challenges itself. Historically, it is even harder to sustain.

61 See, for example, Bailly-Maître 2002, 159–75; Sébillot 1894; and Daubrée 1890. And gendering of the natural world, sometimes a kind of human projection of binaries, also occurred. See Browne 1920, 205–6, as well as Foxhall 1998.

62 Clark 2013, 42.

63 This position has a long literary history in modernism, though not a happy one. See Steiner 2011 and Steiner 2010.

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Not that it was hard in the historical past, but it is very difficult for *us* to believe in a divergent set of assumptions about being a subject or thing in the world.

The last work one saw when leaving *Byzantine Things* at the Menil was *Untitled* by Cy Twombly, a large canvas with grey wash and trailing horizontal lines that do not parallel, coalesce, or directly signify (the materials are oil, house paint, and wax/oil crayon on canvas) (Figure 21). The lines and ground do not provide symbols, nor do they represent, but they strongly realize in their similarities and relationships a concomitant, spontaneous development and growth.[64] The rich grey ground of the painting is evocative of other fields outside it, but it is also just itself; its elusive qualities enfold and open out, and its gentle instability denies reference and just allows reception, absorption. The picture is a sensitive guide, especially as articulated by Richard Shiff, to the recognition of the flows of life among nondiscrete things when we instead are accustomed to seeing habitually, regularly, all the apparent "dead things" in the world. The philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce wrote in 1891 about this dispiriting aspect of our perceptions, "Matter is merely mind deadened by the development of habit."[65] One too easily loses the charm of the world.

Abstraction in part restores needed enchantment and charm. It provides means to recognize unexpected, arbitrary, unpredictable, and deep workings of our world. The glow of the Menil's gold box abstracted it to its essence of pure relation, and the figures on the silver plate reduced and expanded to a sheen that enlivened and touched one. Alchemy, for all its logical, epistemological shortcomings, was more than a historical curiosity, and it allowed a transformational wonder, even as it constantly pushed back at habit. So, by analogy, can exhibition.

64 This passage owes a great deal to Shiff 2008.

65 Pierce 1958–60, 8:215.

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Chapter 5

FRAMING AND CONSERVING BYZANTINE ART: EXPERIENCES OF RELATIVE IDENTITY

FRAMING NORMALLY IMPLIES art's integrity. It defines and maintains art's distinctive ontology. Because frames often change with owners, they show ownership across disparate objects. They're used for handling, cleanliness—all manner of practical functions. They also declare painting's status as aesthetic object and were sometimes valued more highly than the painting within. And only a few portraits that stay in collections over a long period retain their original, historical frame; portraits tend to stay in collections, while other subjects often have weaker claim to loyalties, as it turns out. Each new frame manifests the taste and discretion of curators, who are only recently coming to realize the full archaeological and experiential significance of matching frames to works of art.

In most medieval devotional contexts, framing is an unstable, porous, transformative zone where such normal categories that we assert for frames become less defendable.[1] Social conditions of intersubjective knowing apply in those settings, so frames do not work in the same way at ontological definition, safeguarding, ownership claims, and so on as in the era of easel painting (or "art"). Frames establish modes of communication and interaction, but they perform that function differently in various cultures, so that one should really speak of fields of intensity in Byzantine culture, rather than frames in the way we often apply the term. In other words, no clear line between inside and outside a work was possible, in the same way that aspects of ourselves, as human subjects, spread beyond the edge of skin we often take to be *our* limits. Works of art in that period had reach beyond their (for us) material discretion, and their frames then were their expansiveness, their potency in spreading beyond their apparent surfaces.

This chapter examines some epistemological and corporeal/sensual conditions of our encounters with Byzantine objects in their putative contexts. In this way, another aspect of framing can emerge: the degree to which our remaking those objects and spaces has conditioned our understanding of that historical culture. Conservation and restoration can blur or suppress lines dividing our interventions from an originary object, and they can also quietly assert an experience unintended or inappropriately close to our own expectations. In that way, restoration is a particularly "natural" framing; in our conservation-biased culture, we take for granted that we pursue the "historical value" of artworks, to invoke one of the categories of Alois Riegl—that is, a faithful preservation that prevents further loss.[2] Of course, in actual practice, we pursue a wide

1 In Peers 2004, I addressed some case studies from this point of view. See also Pentcheva 2010.

2 Riegl 1982, 28: "The postulate that issues about mankind, peoples, country, and church determined historical value became less important and was almost, but not entirely, eliminated. Instead, *Kulturgeschichte*, cultural history, gained prominence, for which minutiae—and especially minutiae—were significant. The new postulate resided in the conviction that even objective value

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variety of strategies in the face of decay, damage, and neglect, but the effects on things of all that work—their life support, as it were—are not always reckoned with. In these ways, frames and conservators' sutures are even more complex in our confrontation with particular aspects of historical art, and so we need to address how we come to know—and so, explain—*Byzantine*.

Trying to identify the balancing point in restoration, the point between keeping a "fixed quality" with historical significance *and* survival as a displayable object, is crucial for our own apprehensions of the art we try to authenticate and to contextualize.[3] Finding that point is a frequent and necessary discussion among restorers and conservators, but art historians often neglect this essential feature of our objects of study, that is, their long, altered lives and our perceptions of those processes of constant change.[4] The account by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) of the restoration of the painting of "The Circumcision of Christ" by Luca Signorelli (1445–1523; ca. 1490, National Gallery of Art, London) established the basic terms of debate: should the painting be "disturbed" by a restoration, in this case by Sodoma (1477–1549), or left as an incomplete work by the single hand of the master? Vasari opted for the latter, stating that Signorelli's work should remain partial and undisturbed by another hand, and the majority opinion of the last century is in agreement to a large degree. But in actual practice, the restorer is the mediator, however invisible the hand tries to be, between an "original" and our modern version of a work. It is the space in which the restorer works that creates new frames for us to encounter historical works, even if art historians do not fully appreciate or comment on that hand's presence.[5]

These questions around the integrity of things—people and objects—have exercised philosophers for a very long time as a set of problems concerning relative identity. For example, the paradox of Chrysippus (ca. 279–ca. 206 BCE) can lead to understanding how we come to know complex identity, which may have implications for Byzantine art. Chrysippus's paradox argues for restrictive identity: once Theon's foot has been cut off, he ceases to exist, and Dion, the newly (de)formed man survives intact.[6] In obedience to Leibniz's Law, if two objects are identical, then they share all properties, and so one of the men must perish; identity must be consistent in objects in every respect, according to that law.

However unexceptionable that Leibnitz's Law may *appear*, people and art often skate around it, and indeed, Chrysippus could claim that the "two" men could share the same substance, if not occupy the same space. One of the "men" endures, if changed and diminished, while the other, who is unchanged, must perish. Diminution and change are inevitable, it seems, and few conditions across this existence are consistent, predictable, or controllable by experiencing bodies. And so here we, as contemporary bodies wish-

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adhered to objects wherein the material, manufacture, and purpose were otherwise negligible." See also Brooks 2014; Lang 2006, 136–78; and Gumbrecht 2012, 128.

3 Important precedents are Brilliant 2000 and Steinberg 2001. See also Maranci 2014.

4 See, however, Clavir 2002, 26–66, and the essays in Oddy 1994.

5 See Bomford 1994.

6 Long and Sedley 1987a, 171–72; Long and Sedley 1987b, 177.

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ing to know, run up against impediments to our own knowing. One easy way to think about this conundrum of Dion and Theon is to consider the two men as coexistent. The leg of López de Santa Anna (1794–1876) makes this point vividly, because his amputated leg went on to become many things, as did the prosthetics that the Mexican statesman and general used to replace his lost limb.[7] With each change, new identities were formed,[8] and so the original limb was given its own burial and monument by Santa Anna, and in lieu of the whole body, the limb was later disinterred and desecrated by rioters. Likewise, various replacement prosthetics are found in several museums in the United States to this day. If not only Dion and Theon can coexist, but also Theon's foot, then we are truly confronted by actively relative identities.

And yet we often treat these identities in art-historical discourse as self-consistent. In descriptions of the church/mosque/museum Hagia Sophia, for example, Byzantinists analyze the conditions of that medieval Christian monument by filtering out experience divergent from that imagining of a particular past. We assume the building's fixed qualities are evident and comprehensible, and we describe its splendour by positing qualities the "church" timelessly has, but the "building" no longer possesses. So we give the same name (Hagia Sophia or Ayasofya), ascribe (intuitively) relative identity, and determine bodies' knowing in terms (somewhere) between the Byzantine and us. Art historians perhaps too often describe Theon before amputation, when we are really examining Dion—as well as the fractured parts that result in so many changing lives of objects and humans.

The Lives of the Frescoes

In its persistence *and* change over time, historical art cannot conform to Leibnitz's Law, and a question always answered by deduction, imagination, and science has been the limits of our knowing a past culture through our bodies. Take again the frescoes from the Church of St. Evphemianos, originally from Lysi in Cyprus, as an extreme but revealing example (Figures 14, 15, and 18). Severed from its original context by looters, the frescoes were purchased and restored by the Menil Collection in Houston and housed in the purpose-built chapel there from 1997 to 2012, when they returned to Cyprus for display in the Archbishop's Museum in Nicosia. Each phase of this existence, still unfolding toward a hoped-for completion of a circular journey back to Lysi, determines our understanding of that artifact. Each challenges the assertion of identity, as well. These issues are worth raising in relation to the frescoes: Is their return to Cyprus sufficient to overcome their still-orphaned status? Is this installation more productive, intellectually and spiritually authentic, in Nicosia than in Houston? And does it trump education beyond the boundaries of the home state, even when those boundaries are still in dispute?[9]

7 See Camnitzer 2011.

8 A graphic novel, *The Leg*, even narrates the vigilante exploits of the leg long after Santa Anna himself is gone. See Jensen 2014.

9 See Carr and Morrocco 1991; but also Peers 2013, 21–35 and Peers 2010.

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The Byzantine Fresco Chapel was a historical moment in the display of Byzantine art in the United States. The Menil also celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2012, and as part of that marking, the collection mounted a small, but packed exhibition called *Dear John & Dominique: Letters and Drawings from the Menil Archives*. The show presented two documents about the chapel from 1997 from the Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos I, and from 1989, from Mrs. Dominique de Menil, the founder of the collection. These isolated documents call attention only to the apparent motivations of each side. The first document is a congratulatory missive with a strongly expressed political directive of raising awareness of the situation of Turkish occupation of a part of the island. The body of the letter reads:

> I consider the Church of the Cyprus and myself as lucky, in that frescoes from Saint Themonianos ended up in your Foundation and that you built that wonderful Chapel to host them. I am sure that the people visiting the Chapel will always remember Cyprus and that in the occupied areas churches are looted and sacred vessels are stolen. Only the freedom of Cyprus will guarantee that the Church of St. Barnabas, founded in the first century after Christ, will continue to exist. Please exercise your influence on the officials of the USA and stress to them that they should demand from Turkey to withdraw its military forces and Turkish settlers from our island and should work for the restoration of human rights of all Cyprus people.[10]

Mrs. de Menil's letter to her son is also an official letter, and it raises all of the challenges of the chapel's equilibrium in Houston that came to make the space and paintings so compelling together: her concern over the possible tension between the study and the experience of art, between the secular missions of museums and the frescoes' undeniable spiritual power, between distant cultures and American modernism, between the past and lives lived fully in the present:

> I need you. I need your help to design a building for the Cypriot frescoes. We have to be ready to build a 'chapel' if the Archbishop of Cyprus reminds us of our contract. The plans we have developed have been justly criticized: without being an exact replica of the Lysi chapel, they are reminiscent of it […]. It was my intention to reconstruct in Houston a chapel similar to the one from which the frescoes had been ripped off. I thought this would be the way to do justice to the frescoes. Obviously, it is not the best way to look at them. Bertrand Davezac, for one, has argued in favour of a museum presentation, somewhat like the one we have now in the basement: frescoes are at eye level and well lit. If this is the best way for study purposes, it leaves out an intangible element, difficult to weigh and express, yet very real. It leaves out their spiritual importance, and betrays their original significance. Only a consecrated chapel, used for liturgical functions, would do spiritual justice to the frescoes. It is with this in mind that we entered into a negotiation with the Church of Cyprus, which owns forever the frescoes. The agreement we reached represents an innovation in museum policy. For the first time, important fragments of a religious building are not considered only as antiquities. They are approached also as relics and consideration is given to their religious nature. The legitimacy of reviving the religious context of these thirteenth century frescoes can be questioned. It could be observed that the African art, which is so abundantly present in the Museum, could be presented in a true functional setting, and that it would be the right way to approach it

10 Nicosia, October 17, 1997. Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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> and understand it. But the African treasures in the Museum, though they may move and inspire Afro-Americans today, belong to a culture that does not exist in America. Restoring them to their original function, except for a cultural demonstration, makes no sense. On the other hand, the frescoes have not only resonance, but a very real impact on Greek-Americans, and also on those who have converted to orthodoxy. A tradition fully alive.[11]

The several identities—living tradition being just one—that the fresco cycle has possessed over the last forty years of its life reveal just how provisional and elusive meaning can be in historical art. When the fresco pieces were taken through their long restoration process, necessary to repair all the damage the looters had done in ripping the plaster-and-paint ground from the walls of the chapel at Lysi, features of the original setting had been lost. For example, the orientation of the Pantocrator in the dome was not self-evident and needed careful deduction before being faced toward the west; the extent of the ground on which the angels were treading in the register below the Pantocrator was also not clear. because their feet had been damaged; and the height of the Virgin and Child flanked by angels in the apse area also needed consideration. Having been flattened and dissected in their illicit moves, the fresco grounds needed to be returned to contours that matched the original setting of the chapel building. Decision-making was done, it appears, through a great deal of consultation and careful thought, which included examination of the original church at Lysi. And the book that resulted, an excellent study by Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence Morrocco, was written while the dome and apse frescoes were still separated from an architectural context; Carr analyzed style and iconography with great sensitivity, and the general context of the frescoes on late medieval Cyprus became clear, but the experience of encountering these frescoes in anything resembling spatial consistency was not possible, because the chapel had not yet been constructed.

That art-conservation and art-historical identity was replaced in 1997 by the opening of the Byzantine Chapel Fresco Museum, a purpose-built pavilion for the frescoes' display. Those previous identities deriving from conservation and original context had not been fully erased. In the wake of the closing of the Menil pavilion, they are now in fact the paramount witness to the frescoes' life off Cyprus. Nonetheless, the particular ways in which the frescoes were framed within a profoundly evocative space and remade according to metal and glass sutures can be probed with profit for what they show us about how we came to know Byzantium in Texas for that period of time.

The pavilion was designed by François de Menil, and it demonstrated the ways in which framing experience can defamiliarize and heighten and enhance understanding. As I explained in Chapter 2, the frescoes were visible only when one entered the inner chapel form, since they constitute only the dome and conch of the apse. The encounter with the figural passages at the end of a series of preparatory movements on the part of visitors was on one level a meeting with a real thing: one saw art that is clearly of the past in its appearance and content. The restored aspects of the frescoes were not immediately evident, though some passages on the perimeter of the fields were incomplete and testified to the partial quality of the frescoes' survival. Moreover, the restoration

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11 April 25, 1989. Byzantine Fresco Chapel Papers, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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showed the ongoing process of revision that the frescoes had potentially witnessed; the technique used was true fresco, pigments applied to a wet plaster ground, but examination revealed that some touching-up or later additions in *secco* had also occurred.

On another level of experience, the framing within this glass form demonstrated the special tension of displaying Byzantine art in a foreign setting such as Texas. The glass chapel was both enclosing and open: the semitransparent glass was both inside and outside at the same time, and the skeleton of the chapel showed a kind of suturing that held together the provisionality of the enclosure. Of course, one was not bound by the original door, set in the south wall of the chapel, and one could pass between glass-panel walls and so part the sutures temporarily. The body of the chapel could work in several ways— as fields of flesh stitched together by metal rods and joins or as a skeleton on which flesh or skin only partly reached—but however one describes it, the chapel was never fully settled. It was architecture, but solid and evocation both; it was marked space, inside and outside, but it belonged to a continuum of space, too. Artificial light was captured within the glass frame, but it spilled out, because it received natural light below from the light descending the perimeter walls, and so light sources and stability were indecisive in their flows, especially given the naturally active skies in east Texas.

The result, I believe, was a remarkable equilibrium between two normally irreconcilable modes of encounter with Byzantine art: objective (or historical) value, which would not place value in the fragility and mortality in things, and aesthetic (or art) value, which is relative and not durative, but subject to constant change.[12] Timelessness was a goal of the architect, since the shell was also called an "infinity box," but the encounter with the installation was also entirely contingent on the bodied, in-time presence of viewers. A chapel without sutures and without that active framing would have been sealed, intact, impervious to movements of the atmosphere. In other words, the *original* chapel would have been less productive experientially, or at least less faceted, than this temporary state that the frescoes had in Houston.[13]

So the point along which these frescoes have fallen at any given point in time in the spectrum from "real" to "remade" was neither entirely clear nor stable. Another way to come at this situation may be through the ancient philosophical problem of the Ship of Theseus, which examines the constancy and identity of an object. Plutarch (ca. 46–120) stated that the ship became a standard nut for philosophers, one side holding that even a restored ship, with planks being replaced as they decayed, remained the same, and the other contending that it was therefore altered to another thing. Thomas Hobbes took this problem one step further: if the replaced, decaying planks were used in the same way for another ship, would it be possible for two Ships of Theseus to exist simultaneously?[14]

At the Menil, the identity of the frescoes was constantly faceting, or changing its perspective, from Houston to Lysi, but never entirely or ever one or the other. The line between the authentic Ship of Theseus and its recreation through cast-off materials is

12 Riegl 1982.

13 See Batario 2018 on the post-2012 uses of the pavilion.

14 See, for example, Dauer 1972.

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movable when trying to define authenticity of objects and perception of them.[15] The relative identity of works, which can be separately original *and* restored, makes it possible to have two works occupying the same space at the same time. Our perception of the space in Houston was both the one we persistently call "Byzantine"—focused on sacred, numinous, hieratic forms—and one we also recognize as modern, in the broad sense: interpretative, ironic, conceptual, and sensual.

The framing and suturing were the elements that gave the space of the chapel the ability simultaneously to present as authentic document and an interpretative text. The open joins, in particular, created passage and containment, and their mechanical aspect lent a restrained quality to their roles as support and perforation. Likewise, the framing black ceiling within the chapel pavilion was evocative of infinity, as was intended, but also, and strangely, of snow roofs found on mountain churches in the interior of Cyprus. The framing space between ceiling and chapel was where many of the contingencies became possible, and the zone around the chapel proper became more intense, more focused, because of the bridging space surrounding the chapel. Those fields of intensity raised around the periphery of the space and in the framing structure holding the frescoes in place then proposed means for visitors to know "Byzantine." That cultural and historical category may not be in full accord with the chapel, according to convention in the academic discipline, but in the same way, perhaps, that Arthur Evans brought his Bronze Age Cretans to life through painted concrete, Byzantium was made alive to us through this new version of itself, with a comparable set of gains and losses.

Soon after their return to Nicosia, the frescoes were installed in the Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation among other fresco fragments from the island. No reference to their short life in Houston is found in the display there, and the memory of that self that the frescoes had is disappeared. The frescoes are set into ceiling and wall, and each is much more approachable than it had had been in Houston, where the sacral atmosphere was accentuated through provocative lighting, accentuated iconostasis, and the high-drummed dome. Paradoxically, in the Nicosia museum, the sacred character is suppressed or mimicked in favour of quasi-objective encounter; the frescoes are just another display among treasures of Cypriot Orthodoxy. But in trying to speak the Western, institutionalized language of museum exhibition, curators in Nicosia have drained blood from a vibrant object. The same guiding principle that determined the tone and position taken by the archbishop in his 1997 letter to Mrs. de Menil informed this position. Here, a particular ideology—ethnic and confessional pride, perhaps—is the motivation.[16] While the frescoes endure, their patience and forbearance before our apparent care were dignified counterpoints to the power moves to which

15 See Gaskell 2013, 70: "Cultural historians can, and should, make use of curatorial manipulations of material things to explore their contingencies and interrogate their immaterial, as well as the material, aspects. In doing so, they might take note of the consequences of the Ship of Theseus paradox: while things may perdure, they never stop changing."

16 As put another way, Howard 1990, 27: "The phenomenon of 'Antiquity restored' can be seen, then, as essentially self-fulfilling, reflecting desires to return to, to know, to control, and to transcend a preferred image of ancestry, a witting regression (through the agency of history) in the service of the ego, an attempt of the will and the imagination to knit and to extend the fabric of self and time."

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Figure 22. Icon of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

they have been subjected.[17] Undoing the interpretative framework from Houston was a means for Cypriot officials to reclaim property, and at least to my knowledge, none of the restoration was undone, but now the Lysi frescoes have quietly allowed themselves to be placed in a historical, confessional framework that gives them no special intensity, no particular voice. They endure as orphans still, like Santa Anna's leg.

The Lives of Things in the World: An Icon

A number of icons at the Menil Collection have salvaged passages of paint that make clear their subjects, but still openly declare their relative selves.[18] Since the damage was extreme, several of the icons needed restoration before they could be shown, and the

17 On long "lives" of medieval art, see Feltman and Thompson 2019, though for them, "lives is a metaphor only.

18 The group came from the collection of Eric Bradley and was dealt to the Menil Collection in the 1980s by Yanni Petsopoulos.

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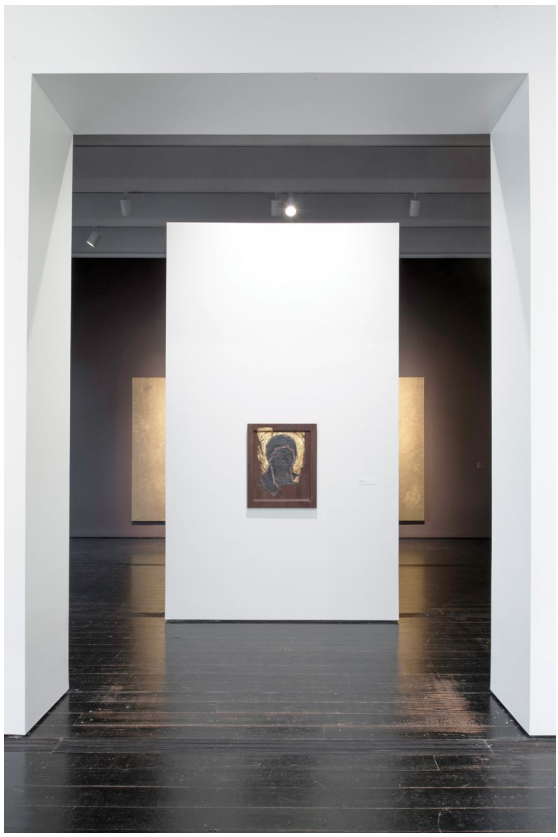

Figure 23. Installation view icon of the Virgin Mary in *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester.

icons in this group betray unmistakable evidence of these interventions. The figural passages are partial, but strong and legible, and they show that the icons were at one time impressive and beautiful objects. Those qualities are still evident, but the wooden beds used as settings for those passages are no minor part of the objects.

The late Byzantine icons of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel and of the Virgin Mary entered the collection at the same time, and their restoration history allows us to follow some of the conditions that led to their present appearance, so divergent from their original presentation and state (Figures 22 and 23).[19] The framing and suturing that embed these icon fragments in a new surround opens up fresh and not very Byzantine ways of experiencing that art. The guiding principle behind the conservation was clearly not a return to a faux-Byzantine surround, but one that allowed the conservation to be visible, understated, and true in some fashion to a fixed state of the original, or at least of that original type. Here we have something approaching Riegl's historical value in operation, but not entirely: "The more faithfully a monument's original state is preserved, the greater its historical value: disfiguration and decay detract from it."[20] Decay was halted, and so some necessary parts of the objects were preserved, but their original state was simply irretrievable by our standards, so that the icons escape full adherence to Riegl's definition of historical value.

The restorers were evidently aiming at a level of authenticity in returning the disconnected passages to a plausibly historical state. In the first place, the scale of the framing bed was significant, since it was desirable that it accommodate the figural passage

19 These are 85-057.06 and 85-057.05, respectively. See Carr 2011, 42–43 and 50–51.

20 Riegl 1982, 34–38.

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at least in outline, as the original state had. Yanni Petsopoulou wrote on this subject to Walter Hopps, director of the Menil, on July 21, 1988, about the process of determining the best way to make the icon showable,

> Laurie [Lawrence Morrocco] and I spent the entire afternoon yesterday on the problem of reconstruction of the original size of the panel of the Virgin and the Archangels. We first worked from the fragments themselves and the information contained therein as to the extent and size of the missing areas. We then pulled out a few hundred comparative illustrations from my files, both to confirm our guesses as to proportion […] and to fill in information not available from the fragments themselves. We arrived at what we felt was a size of panel common and natural to both fragments. We then went back to my files and looked for some of the standard proportions in icon panels of that period. We were gratified to find that many of them were in a proportion of 4 to 5, which as it happens is exactly the proportion that we arrived at independently. We think, therefore, that the panel would have been 106 × 85 cm […].
>
> The aesthetic effect we would like to aim for is not dissimilar to that on the famous head of Christ by Rublev […].
>
> Unless we hear to the contrary, we propose to mount both pieces on separate but identical panels, which could be displayed either back-to-back or separately.[21]

The series of deductions are natural for conservationists and dealers, because value resides in the historical clarity and authenticity of the work. For that reason, the damaged passages needed to be made to appear normal ("common and natural"). Not only was the frame expanded to fit authenticity, it also gained true aesthetic stature by assimilating to the restored icon of Christ, originally painted by the great Russian painter Andrei Rublev. The space within which these restorers proposed to work was the void between the disfigured painting, literally hanging by threads, and the modern sublime of Rublev's superb achievement.[22] That space actually covers a great distance, and in large part, it is traversed by that wooden surround. The Menil icons were anonymous, very fine examples, but not of the aesthetic, national, or historical order of Rublev's work in Moscow. But the restoration project clearly presented itself to the owners in ways that transformed some of that significant authenticity to the "new" icons. That reach of the Menil icons to an authenticity effect is almost entirely conveyed by the new backing.

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the chief conservator at the time, replied to Morrocco on August 30, 1988, to raise questions about the treatment "of the bare space" that the wooded enlargements would create, "We would like to know how you propose to treat the bare space on the enlarged replacement panels, i.e., will you use aged wood, will you treat new wood to look old, will the panel be toned, rubbed, or covered with fabric? We remain concerned about the amount of exposed space in relation to the fragment and would appreciate your comments."[23]

No reply is present in the object files, so the continuation of the discussion possibly occurred by telephone or in person. Certainly, some negotiation unfolded that took into account the desires and sensibilities of the Menil side of the conversation, for Petsopou-

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21 Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

22 Hughes 2003.

23 Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.

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los had proposed in his letter that the wooden ground be expanded to 106 × 85 cm, in scale comparable, if not the same as Rublyev's restored icon, which measures 158 × 106 cm. In the end, and for reasons not entirely clear now, the Archangels panel is larger than that of the Virgin according to the restorers' final dimensions. The latter measures 76 × 57.5 × 2.5 cm, while the former is 95.3 × 72.4 × 3.8 cm.

The framing of these icons distinguished the two, probably because a double-figure icon requires a more spacious surround, but the meeting of icon and backing diverges in each case, too. The Virgin Mary panel is described as "tempera and metal leaf on wood without fabric," while the Archangels are "tempera and gold leaf on fabric transferred to modern wooden panel." According to a conservation report of October 1995, written by Morrocco's studio, the painted surface was subsequently removed from the panel and the backing canvas, which was detaching, was also removed; the canvas and its gesso backing were then reapplied to the panel; canvas fragments were added to the left-hand side and the bottom of the fragment. While not arbitrary, given the deliberations described already, the alterations certainly pose questions of the level of what is "genuine" in a historical sense.

The final result of the icons' restorations, in the event, is a successor to each of the original objects, true to some comforting degree. Some of the comfort may derive to a viewer from the evident rescue of fine art, so that one can understand the partial quality being a retrieval of the past nearly denied. But to what degree are either of these icons playing a role that just approximates the manner and self of the first holder of this icon's identity?[24] The icons are recognizably historical, and so they retain reference to a fixed quality we call "Byzantine," but at the same time, essential aspects of their historical selves are apparent and recognizable only by feats of imagination, by experiential leaps to contexts not so much where whole icons are the dominant format—where fixed values prevail—but to contexts where aestheticizing, conscientious remaking is possible or probable, that is to say, museums. In other words, there are multiple identities in the same object: Dion, Theon. and the foot, all coexisting, but in highly specialized, imbricated contexts.

The display and restoration did not aim for and could not achieve an experiential aesthetic value that was accurate to the time of the icons' painting. But they could still reveal perceptual qualities that were once part of the object, then lost to time, and now given back to some degree through exhibition alchemy.[25] In *Byzantine Things*, the contingencies of exhibition made these icons perceptually rich encounters among historical and modern works. Their reflective surfaces and warm, wooden surrounds made them linking bridge objects that were simultaneously modern and medieval. The exchanges were transformative among these icons and their modern neighbours in *Byzantine Things*—including *Untitled* (1970–71), by Michael Tracy, *Glacier (Hoarfrost)* (1974), by Robert Rauschenberg, and *Golden Tondo* (2011), by Stephan Balkenhol (Figures 23 and 24).[26]

24 See De Clercq 2013.

25 De Clercq 2013, 267.

26 Michael Tracy (1943–), *Untitled*, 1970–71, metallic paint on canvas, 259.1 × 119.7 cm; Robert

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Figure 24. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

The contingencies at play within that room and the sight lines from outside it evocatively revealed material qualities of the icons that were fugitive and concrete, of the past and in the present—different shades of true, one might say.[27] The restored icons were placed within a rich brown field in the final room of the exhibition, and that colour accentuated the depth of field that the wooden supports have. Indeed, the effect was striking for the degree to which the painted fields of the icons emerged and withdrew against the chocolate ground of the walls. Especially from a moderate distance, the figural fields of the icons appeared to obscure and assume substance simultaneously. In that way, the icons assumed qualities that related to and supplemented those of the Rauschenberg, Balkenhol, and Tracy works in close proximity: qualities such as illusionistic and nonlogical depths of field, an unexpected interplay of materials, instability or

Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Glacier (Hoarfrost)*, 1974, solvent transfer on satin and chiffon with pillow, 304 × 188 × 14.9 cm; Stephan Balkenhol (1957–), *Golden Tondo*, 2011, poplar, white and red gold leaf foil, acrylic paint, 100 × 11.1 cm.

27 See Rohrbaugh 2003, 178: "To put it crudely, we should think of artworks as objects in and persisting through history, ones which merely have a certain form. This picture of works as historical individuals is at odds with certain tendencies in aesthetics to tie the very identity of a work of art to its form, that look or sound which the artist selects and executes. This tendency is at its strongest, though equally misguided, in the case of photographs and other repeatable works when, abstracting from the particular occurrences, one thinks there is nothing left but the form with which to identify the work."

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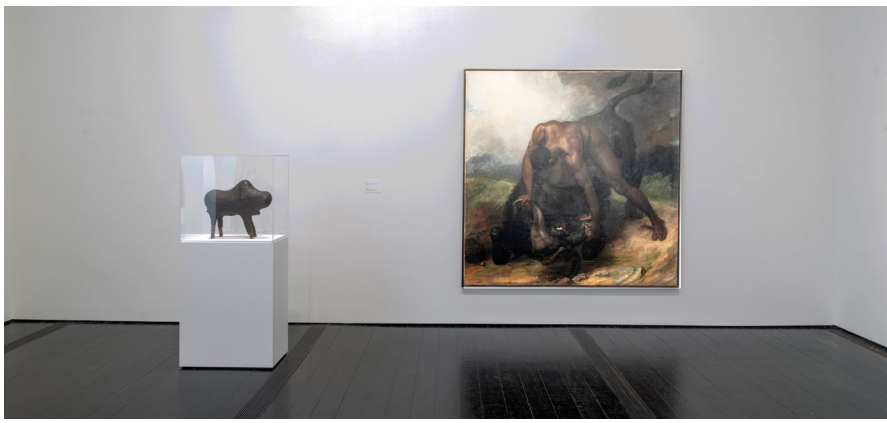

Figure 25. Installation view of *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), The Menil Collection, photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

evocation of figuration, and environmental permeability or porousness. Those qualities were likely otherwise irretrievable from a Byzantine object without intervention, both conservationist and curatorial, having been acted on it.

Moreover, the vivacity gained from those encounters was multiplied by some other associations drawn out across two rooms, not only a malanggan mask from New Ireland and a Duma or Mdédé mask, but also, in another room, a Bamana *boli*, one of the most uncanny museum objects one can experience (Figure 25).[28] Shared materials, primarily exposed wood, allowed currents to run through the rooms and conducted a shared vitalism, so that each of the objects were charged. But faces and forms that could be bodies were consistent among these varied objects, from the altered facial forms of masks and icons to the eerily present body of the *boli*, with its extraordinary mixture of materials and organic, still-living body.

The conception of frames and framing that was introduced at the beginning of this chapter is of course a straw man. No such phenomenon really exists. Such things as were circulating among each other in these two rooms of *Byzantine Things* belie all generalizations about modern, historical or non-Western framing conditions. No one in the rooms stayed still or discrete; in highly expressive, even dramatic ways, each overlapped, softened, and intermingled. Cordoning, closing frames had no role here—if they ever do—because it is nearly impossible for there to be discrete entities in these exhibition settings. (They are possible, but one needs to repress in order to achieve their discretion). Conservation at the Menil, with these icons, as well as with the Fresco Chapel, made more active the possibilities of relative identities as means to assimilation with human subjects or things. The ample wooden surround of the icons triggered assimila-

28 *Boli*, various animal and vegetable materials, clay, wood, sacrificial materials, 116.1 × 135.2 × 32.4 cm; *Malanggan Mask from New Ireland*, wood with pigment, fibre bark, lime and shell, 32.4 × 15.2 × 36.5; and *A Duma or Mdédé Mask*, wood and pigment, 33 × 44.4 × 18.1 cm. On the *boli*, see Sutton 2013, and see also Franses 2013.

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tion with its environmental spread—wall, floor, fellow things. Those damaged bodies might lead us to think with real humility about the multitude of bodies and our mutual, ongoing reliance.[29]

Likewise, the chapel's sutured architecture and its outward and upward rings of darkness and radiance revealed the transformative zones we can experience in such framing spaces. For we participate in these frames as fully as the objects we think we are framing. We occupy the same continuum that those things charge and electrify—if we are fortunate—and we alter in those intensity fields. Restoration is a tricky game: sometimes it doesn't work out, as when we see a disfigured Reinhardt, but sometimes it actualizes potential to work on us, not because it is historically accurate, in a literal sense, but because newly remade objects take on identities relational to our insecure bodies—that is, bodies uncertain and vulnerable to objects' attentive probing.

29 See, for example, Lubar and Shields 2008 and Siebers 2010.

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Part 3

Pushing the Envelope, Breaking Out: Making, Materials, Materiality

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Chapter 6

ANGELIC ANAGOGY, SILVER, AND MATTER'S MIRE

LOOKING AT BYZANTINE icons is a difficult experience to articulate entirely. Our immediate impressions are very often preconditioned and so not really accessible. We are at the very least struck by their weathered antiquity, distinctive formal qualities, and probably above all by their confident charisma, their ability to confront without apology or qualification anyone entering their presence. One of our protective positions before that self-possession is to fall back on readings of contemporary (that is, primary) documents that indicate native ways of looking at such objects. These leading documents are often persuaded to agree with our commonly held explanations for these objects, explanations that in fact did not really exist in that culture. This chapter explores some of our useful fictions about images of angels, their recursive play, and matter's implications in this play.

Anagogy is the process habitually summoned to explain how objects, icons mostly, portage the space between the sacred and the profane. That is to say, the object transports the mind to a spiritual place and erases its own presence in this process of spiritual desire. A classic example is an epigram on an image of the Archangel Michael by the poet Agathias, sometimes called Scholasticus, who lived from about 532 to about 580. I use here a recent translation by Aglae Pizzone, who has also written a thoughtful and very useful analysis of this poem.

> The wax—how daring!—molded the invisible, the incorporeal archangel in the semblance of his form. Yet it was no thankless task, since the mortal man who beholds the image directs his spirited impulse by way of a superior imagination. His veneration is no longer distracted: engraving within himself the model, he trembles as if he were in the latter's presence. The eyes stir up a deep intellection, and art is able by means of colours to ferry over the heart's prayer. [1]

Like other scholars (including me),[2] she treats the icon as window, a transparent entity that exists to erase its existence.[3] Moreover, in her model, the viewer (and really, the writer, since the icon does not survive) is an autonomous agent, and the matter at hand is not only the image. Instead, the viewer's imaginative carnality, his/her corporeal presence before the object, is the determining materiality.[4]

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1 Pizzone 2013. On the relevance of this epigram into fifteenth-century Rome, see Gill 2014, 78–83.

2 Peers 2001.

3 Pizzone 2013, 80, "Agathias stresses the emotional impact of the image, eventually eliciting intellectual ascension. The painted portrait of Michael both stimulates embodied faculties and triggers a superior cognitive ability."

4 Pizzone 2013, 83–84: "By 'matter,' I mean not only the substantial, material object, i.e. the

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Figure 26. Paten with the Communion of Peter and Paul, 65 cm in diameter, silver repoussé in high relief, ca. 600 CE. The Menil Collection, Houston (1990-12DJ), photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Pizzone's analysis rests on an understanding of spiritual knowledge and fulfillment working through vision and resulting in communion with the divine. This explanation, to be sure, parallels many descriptions in devotional literature and theological florilegia. But those sources are not neutral and need analysis, just as any sophisticated, self-involved literature would. Pizzone's work does certainly advance the question of the viewer's body in relation to the icon, and I am really using her for rhetorical contrast. My argument takes a strongly divergent tack, because I want to make a case for eliminating discussion of transparency, as well as of carnality as it belongs to humans only, and not least, I favour object over text, so I do not elide that sixth-century writer's explanations with a reclaimable material reality. A text is always self-interested, and it is always in an agonistic relationship with its subject ("art"), especially when it is ekphrastic. It is only one interpretative position among many possible, and it is prescriptive in the face of objects' own ceaselessly asserted materialistic independence.

My position tries to take account of the variety of experience and ontologies of the late antique/early medieval worlds. No single, discrete category exists, for them or even for us, and my argument champions mixture over line, multiplicity over binaries, and progress through many possible states of contact with the divine. That mixture is a natural state for us all. As Michel Serres has written, "No-one has ever witnessed the great battle of simple entities. We only ever experience mixtures, we encounter only meetings."[5] At stake, just the same, in any historical analysis is the particularity of mixture in that context. I want to confine myself here to relatively narrow limits, objects, and texts from approximately 550 to 650 and primarily in Greek. I will stray a little, but this period stands for larger issues meaningful for understanding Byzantine and Eastern Christian relationships to their material world and consequently (always as a consequence, one has to stress) to the divine.

Moreover, I want to spend time on silver, because of this precious metal's role in defining craft, science, and interpretations of the world for this period (and beyond). This medium also illuminates others used for this period's art. Protochemistry (or alchemy) and geology are necessary knowledge for viewing this period, as it would be

painted image, eliciting the beholder's progress, but also the carnality of the beholder him/herself, the physicality of his/her sight."

5 Serres 2008, 28.

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for anyone attempting to understand us. The science of late antiquity was a distinctive system of thought, organic with their relations to the world, however well or poorly any one person knew it.[6] Alchemy also combined those fields in its search for essences, for ways to perfect matter, and in its careful attention to process, however misguided many early scientific fields were, by our standards.[7] Our time is deep time, the time of geological and evolutionary processes, and is based on assuming that minerals and ores are inert. It is easy, then, for us to ignore alchemy, and to overexploit it, too.[8] Late antique explanations were based on an organic geology, and their temporal assumptions of minerals and ores necessarily were not deep. That time was flowing and emergent, because stones were constantly making and moving. (They are for us, too, if we stop to recognize it.)[9] Time was mixed, in the sense that human time was also mingled with stony time. Moreover, that geology was not then simply under their feet, but living its mingling life among other living creatures.[10] Geology, and its chemistry and physics, were divinely compelled and soaked in God's presence and provided the fullest understanding of crossing to the divine.[11] Rather than Agathias's anagogy (or at least our explanation of it as such), I would argue for straddling or bestriding over traversing, that is to say, mixture, relation, mingling, movement, a perfect meeting of physics and metaphysics.[12]

Drawing on the example of Michael Baxandall in *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, these late antique objects can likewise be "addressed as lenses bearing on their own circumstances."[13] In the first regard, art historians use their eyes, but vision dislikes mixtures, and most conditions of display in museums undermine the heterogeneous in favour of clarity and legibility.[14] This silver plate from the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, dates to around 600 CE (Figure 26), and it shows a scene of communion given by Christ to Sts. Peter and Paul. In documentary photographs, the plate is evenly lighted and consistently easy to read for narrative and identities. But in *Byzantine Things in the World*, and indeed in its display in the collection current to this writing in 2019, the silver plate partook and partakes in a dynamic process of figural passages yielding to

6 For bibliography on Byzantine science, see O'Meara 2017; Mavroudi 2015. For a wider net, see also Takahashi 2011, Takahashi 2014 and Lazaris 2020.

7 Alchemy's scientific roots are often borne out with sympathetic examination, if not realized as such. See, for example, Viano 2006, 199–206.

8 Parikka 2014, 22.

9 See, for example, Norris et al. 2014.

10 Feigelfeld 2015.

11 Braidotti 2013, 60: "'Life', far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended."

12 See the excellent article Smith 2012, as well as Chin 2015.

13 Baxandall 1980, vii.

14 Serres 2008, 81: "A medium is abstract, dense, homogeneous, almost stable, concentrated; a mixture fluctuates. The medium belongs to solid geometry, as one used to say; a mixture favours fusion and tends towards the fluid."

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abstraction under light's intensities, even if installation photographs resist that dynamic (see Figure 21).[15]

Strangely, the embossed plate became illegible at just the points where figures and representational elements were present. In that sense, the apprehension of the scene takes self-conscious searching for the right position vis-à-vis the plate for seeing figuration, while its "natural material state" is lambent, mysterious presence. An irony, perhaps, is that the "natural state" took place in such a constructed setting, and photography scarcely touches its effects. Moreover, the colour values of the sheens of the plate revealed an identity instability that echoed alchemists' notion of shared essential qualities of silver and gold. From certain angles, the silver came to look golden and appeared to traverse both metals almost simultaneously. Exhibition is really the only way most of us can experience this changeable nature.[16] Silver reveals its own instability, its movement from state to state, its ability to cross worlds. Matter, in other words, is not an intruder on the making of meaning; rather, it contributes directly and fully to passages among states.[17]

And yet our explanatory framework asserts no real connection between an image and its model, except insofar as conventionalized *essential* resemblance gives it. To return to Agathias, wax is in some sense "greatly daring" in its material capture of the archangel. Such metaphors from technology have led scholars to develop theories of nonessential relations between images (the impressed wax) and the model (the seal)—one impresses the other and leaves a trace, but no essence is shared between the two, seal and wax. Theologians did employ this metaphor, and it allowed them to pursue an inoculating relation between icon and subject. Friedrich Kittler tells us, however, that a historical discursive practice is predetermined by media technology, and media—such as seals and wax, to take it to late antiquity—established and maintained a certain understanding of the operations that materials bore out.[18]

Materiality made passages between the terrestrial and divine, and technologies (and their descriptions) attempted to catch up with matter, its *Stoffe*, and its effects.[19] Alchemy was in the first place a strongly observant system. It examined the shining, self-perfecting lambency beyond the eye's reach and then attempted to articulate it and harness it. Here, silver and wax provided—and provides for us retrospectively—lenses with which to understand their own circumstances in their world. As Jussi Parikka

15 See Peers 2013.

16 I am also thinking of the David Plates in *Byzantium and Islam* at the Metropolitan Museum, where the plates shone brilliantly in silver and gold flashes. I am immensely grateful for the collegial sharing of installation photographs by the curator, Helen Evans, who also edited the catalogue (Evans 2012). See, also, Kiilerich 2012b.

17 See the stimulating book by Bucklow 2014.

18 See Kittler 2013 and Kittler 1999.

19 Jussi Parikka in Feigelfeld 2015: "I want to insist that the materiality of media starts even before we talk about media: with the minerals, the energy, the affordances or affects that specific metallic arrangements enable for communication, transmission, conduction, projection, and so on. It is a geopolitical as well as a material question, but one where the *geos* is irreducible to an object of human political intention."

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has argued, "The engineer does not breathe life into inert material. With their specific qualities and intensities, the material demands a specific type of specialist or a specific method to be born, so that they might be catalyzed into the machines we call machines. The material invents the engineer."[20]

If Kittler tried to position media at the outset of cultural discourses, Parikka takes us one step back in the chain, to an originary moment of materials, or just matter, which includes stones, ores, wax, and so on, as formative or generative of its own outcomes in human hands. And to take this recursiveness one step further, or deeper, that lack of individuality or independence of the human agent, or even its self-evident existence, is difficult to catch hold of in these contexts where media technology shines its light.[21]

Substance as a basic stratum of the world is a necessary component in any historical discourse concerned with things. Naturally, contemporaries of this silver plate had notions about substances, and they sought explanations, as far as their media allowed, for how substance or matter worked and unfolded. For example, in this period, Stephanus of Alexandria is one of the most important sources for natural philosophy, in which alchemy should be included.[22] He has been credited with being an important intellectual bridge between Alexandria and Constantinople in the crucial seventh century, when the loss of Egypt meant a new gravitational centre for intellectuals was needed at the capital. That reputation may be undeserved, as recent work has argued,[23] but in any case, Stephanus wrote important treatises for this issue of substance, for matter and its dynamic independence.

Alchemy, in the hands of a thinker such as like Stephanus, was a program of self-improvement, indeed, of spiritual perfecting, that matched the self-refining progress of base metals to gold. Only the pure in spirit could help realize pure matter, and discerning that essential aspect of matter was based on a belief that all bodies, down to the lowest level of matter, have power and ability to regenerate. Those qualities all derive from an understanding of and connection with a vital spirit in matter:

> And being burnt to ashes they make many and divine works and various colours […] leading the nature back outside to the visible. On the one hand, [those sulphurous things] are active bodies; on the other hand, a power, according to another discourse, displaying activity […]. For such things as come to rebirth, relate to an easily apprehended art, especially they who cook together the ash of common plants with the like, and melt together the ashes of bodies and glasses with the like […]. For [these bodies] come again to a certain power and virtue and re-birth, having a nature imitative of the whole universe and of the elements themselves, whence also they have re-birth, a communion with a certain spirit, as of things coming into existence by a material spirit. So copper, like a man, has both soul and spirit.[24]

20 Parikka in Feigelfeld 2015.

21 See Holl 2015, 86.

22 See Papathanassiou 2008.

23 Rouché 2011.

24 And further: "For these melted and metallic bodies, when they are reduced to ashes, being joined to the fire, are again made spirits, the fire giving freely to them its spirit. For as they manifestly take it from the air that makes all things, just as it also makes men and all things, thence

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In this elaborate way, Stephanus's position permits a further view into how substance or basic matter was conceived and explained in this period. It conforms to some fundamental definitions for substance used by scholars today: the possibility of division and separation, while retaining identity as substance; characteristic structures remaining in the substance despite separation; and certain tendencies predictable in themselves and in relations.[25] An important distinction is the vital spirit, the animating current that runs through matter. Modern physics and chemistry have their explanations for this spark of life, while scientists of all kinds had their own explanations in late antiquity. For Lucretius, famously, the movement of atoms was due to *clinamen*, an unpredictable and arbitrary swerve.[26] For this period, the swerve may be unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary, but that opacity is due only to a lack of discernment: for alchemists, investigation and experimentation were ways into a deeper and fuller understanding than was possible for those not able to reach that level. Alchemy was self-perfecting in claiming that vital spirit and to further world-knowing.

Part of that knowing involved risky work, and here I would like to bring us back to silver. Silver was a metal nearly stainless. In a system without classifications for metals and ores as we have them, the only real way to rank and organize them was through their relative purity. Ruled by the moon (as gold was ruled by the sun), silver had lofty celestial credentials, and it moved to perfection's rank naturally, as all things in the world moved to their proper places eventually. No one knew how long silver's route to perfection would in the normal course of time take to reach its goal, but the assumption was always that it would. Alchemy was the search for the accelerant for that purity, a way to harness that vital matter to its own perfecting end. And so the plate in the Menil is not inert according to this system; in its substance, it is moving that way through its vital spirit. Its vital spirit is most often temporally quite deep and slow, and it is also most often innocuous. But another quality of substance is its unpredictable and dangerous potential for change, regeneration and combination.[27]

In the absence of definitions of distinguishing characteristics that we would recognize from our geological framework, silver had such traits, too. Silver possessed qualities that were not fully explicable, especially when the problematic aspect of its relationship to quicksilver is examined. In Greek, *hydrargyros*, and in Latin, *argentum vivum*—the difficulty is evident in the very designation of mercury in that world.[28] Its vitality, both in its neutral form as silver and in its active form as quicksilver, is a common assumption in that world. Indeed, Stephanus inferred its basic sympathy with life-giving fluid, because

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is given them a vital spirit and a soul. So also the fusible bodies, being reduced to ashes with the metallic bodies, by a certain method recover their soul, as if becoming akin to the fire. And likewise all the elements have creations, destructions, changes and restorations from one to another" (text and trans. Taylor, 1938, 40–41).

25 See Hahn and Soentgen 2011.

26 On Serres's use of this theory, see Hahn 2006.

27 Hahn and Soentgen 2011.

28 See Stillman 1924/1960, 7–11.

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warm, human blood is most like quicksilver.[29] In those terms, quicksilver and its slow brother, silver, are kinds of the lifeblood of earth that have cognate human attributes, but also dangerous and miraculous qualities. Mercury and sulphur were the basic catalysts of life in these theories, and their basic interaction produced vermilion, the material that artists and others knew to be closest to blood.[30]

In these ways, Greek science in the period around 600 was able to draw connections and, in fact, to find substantial unity in the world, from cosmos to humanity to the matter underfoot. Not everyone would know or articulate the material world in this way, of course, but the general position was certainly deep seated in nearly every aspect of life.[31]

Those properties are similar to descriptions found in intellectuals' texts, alchemists' included, of the cosmic sympathies that guide and govern. And all these qualities establish ways for bodies to know, experience, and be guided to proximity to the divine and even contact with God. Geology's organic qualities, its patterns of growth, its abilities of motion and action, were common assumptions that linked the Bordeaux Pilgrim—never given a great deal of credit for his critical faculties—and great thinkers such as Proclus (412–85), who also wrote of the living qualities of stone and metals. Two principal camps, to generalize, claimed the field. On the one hand, Platonists, for whom the cosmos was caused by the One, saw soul in all things, making alive even those things that could not live otherwise. "Indeed, [soul] accounts for or is closely involved in a wide variety of functions that few people nowadays are inclined to ascribe to a single thing: reason, sensation, passions, appetite, and so on, but also life and growth, the 'vegetative' function people share with plants and the living, growing earth."[32] On the other hand, from the ancient world through the Byzantine, late antiquity was part of a long continuum wherein geology was life and provided passage from stones' and ores' matter to the highest insights into the unified workings of the cosmos.

Explanations for those workings varied among intellectuals writing in the fields of philosophy and science in this period. Aristotelians offered explanations from the other direction from Platonists, not top down and form on matter from above, but a solid stratum from which form could emerge and pass. Their philosophy in this period established a continuum from heaven to earth that broke the old dichotomy between the two realms. But they kept the notion of a dynamic universe filled with *pneuma*, or spirit, which pervaded the universe and established basic balances whereby all things strove to reach their own perfection, according to their nature. In this period—the sixth and seventh centuries—major arguments were mobilized that altered age-old Aristotelian

29 Papathanassiou 2006, 176, translating an unpublished text by Stephanus: "blood composed of air is warm and human and is like quicksilver. Yellow bile composed of fire is warm and dry and is like copper. Black bile composed of earth is dry and cold and is the dross of both [quicksilver and copper]. Phlegm composed of water is cold and humid and is like the vapours of a watery solution of gold, which are the souls of copper."

30 See Smith 2014a, 110–12, and 2014b, 36, as well as Connor 1998, 28–29.

31 Smith 2012, 516: Plotinus and others are a "potential index of certain deep-seated assumptions that rarely made it to the surface of explicit discussion."

32 Smith 2012, 526–27.

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dogma. Adapted by philosophers such as John Philoponus (ca. 490–ca. 570) to the Christian deity, the *pneuma* became the divine spirit, heaven and earth were governed by the same principles, and the eternity of the universe was cut, replaced by creation and finitude.[33] A Christian understanding of the mechanics of the universe in these terms became increasingly exclusive in this period.

Two examples show how these models implicate the stuff of silver. The first comes from the life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, an Anatolian monk and bishop who lived during the reign of Heraclius (610–41); his hagiography dates shortly after that reign ended.[34] In one episode, the saint sends a deacon to Constantinople to purchase a silver service set for liturgical celebration. The deacon returns with a shiny new set, but Theodore discerns a problem with the silver. Not visible to a normal eye, the silver atoms had been debased by a previous form imposed on them, namely, that of a chamber pot for a prostitute. Judging the silver to be forever spoiled, Theodore had them both perform a prayer of blessing over the liturgical vessels, which tarnished before their eyes. Miraculous connoisseurship is revealed here. At a level distinguishable only by the saint, matter had sufficient form still to be intelligible as rotten and debased, but that level was below the current, apparently blameless form that the silver had taken. The real protagonist here, Theodore, is working through reductive concerns, of right and wrong substance, pure and contagious mixture. Almost radioactively tainted by sin, matter was in this episode the aspect that carried the body (in the end, the liturgical set), but the unformed substance of silver is the basic subject and discerned only by symptoms observable by an informed examiner.

The other example gives the positive side of mixture and contagion. Written a century or two after the fact, the *Narratio de Sancta Sophia* described the silver altar produced for Hagia Sophia in the sixth century in terms of a bravado mingling of stuff: in order to produce a work costlier than gold alone, Justinian collected a team of specialists in different materials, who advised him to combine all the most precious substances: "gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, copper, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic substance."[35] The craftsmen ground the sub-

33 On Philoponus, see Sambursky 1962; Wildberg 2008; Sorabji 2010b; Torrance 1999; and among other noteworthy studies, MacCoull 2010a.

34 Festugière 1970, 1:36–38 (42); Dawes and Baynes 1948/1996, 117–18. Festugière 1970, 2:196–98, also mentions a very similar contemporary story from Theophylactus Simocattes (active first half of the seventh century).

35 *Narratio de S. Sophia*: "Wishing to make the altar table much costlier (*polytelesteran*) than gold, he called in many specialists and told them so. They said to him. 'Let us place in a smelting furnace gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, copper, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic substances (*hylen*).' Having ground all of these in mortars and bound them up they poured them into the smelting furnace. After the fire had kneaded together (*anamaxamenon*) these (substances), the craftsmen removed them from the fire and poured them into a mould, and so the altar-table was cast, priceless mixture. In this way, he set it up, and underneath it, he placed columns of pure gold with precious stones and enamels; and the stairs all round upon which the priests stand to kiss the altar table he made of pure silver. As for the basin of the altar-table, he made it of priceless stones and gilded it. Who can behold the appearance of the altar table without being amazed? Who indeed can comprehend it as it changes

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stances in mortars, smelted them all at once, and kneaded them together, and finally poured them in a mould. The text gives other extravagant descriptions of the liturgical furnishings, but the effect is also noteworthy: the resultant material brought out wonder in viewers (naturally), and it more compellingly altered colour and brilliance, so that sometimes it was golden and sometimes silvery in sheen and glow, but also alternating with sapphire; it was able simultaneously to include all colours and hues.

This narrative has a number of points of contact with my argument: in the first place, it shows the nature of mixture according to understandings of the period, that is to say, as a blend without loss of individual characteristics. Each material retained in some way an aspect of its own appearance and substance that played out in the altar cladding. Such questions of identity and mixture had been debated throughout this period. The examples of torches and woven cloth often played into these philosophical discussions: torches when bundled together can seem united, but are perfectly distinct when they are separated, and likewise, cloth of many-coloured threads can appear one colour, but examination of the weave reveals individual threads and colours. For Platonists, "mixture is one of the delusions so characteristic of the world of seeming and becoming,"[36] but for an erstwhile Aristotelian such as Philoponus, while mixture is ultimately reducible to the four elements, above that level, substances, such as water and wine, retain their particularity while losing or reducing their actuality.[37] Without that position, every combination above the four elements would have been very hard to comprehend and to describe, according to how we know the world.

In the second place, the process described has a great deal in common with methods of alchemy preserved in late antique sources. The kneading of metal to produce certain effects occurs as a cognate to breadmaking, because as we've noted, alchemy has many cognate forms in other fields such as cookery and agriculture. The kneading takes place there because the smiths are working with a yeast—namely, gold. Gold is a seed, like semen or yeast, that enlivens and engenders all with which it comes into direct contact in such processes.

In the third place, this description takes us back to the Menil silver plate. That object is an antidote, as so many things are when considered in themselves very carefully, to mental or spiritual anagogy as the prescribed means for late antique people to overcome the limitations of this world and to traverse to the next. The conditions of display and points of contact with such a plate allow us to imagine what that anonymous narrator could be describing, that is, the play, growth, and change of substance so richly seen in gold and silver, but evident in all materials in descending show. In this way, the plate comments on its own circumstances. It can reveal, if looked at in light and space, its silvery, watery quality, when forms submerge in that glowing field; it can stabilize

colour and brilliance, sometimes appearing to be gold, at other places silver, another gleaming with sapphire—in a word, reflecting seventy-two hues according to the nature of the stones, pearls and all the metals?" See Preger 1901–7/1975, 1:94.17–96.6 (17); Mango 1986, 99 (slightly modified).

36 de Haas 2003, 262–63.

37 Erismann 2014; Sorabji 2010a, 24–26; de Haas 1999; Sambursky 1962, 99–121; and for Philponus, Sorabji 2004b, 291–94 (20a.4–7) and Sorabji 2004a,178–80 (5c.2).

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and coalesce into that legible moment of communion with Christ; it can also show its golden substance, which ferments and grows the plate to the perfection that only gold can give. Such an object can recapitulate in its matter and form the very nature of the world and its relation to God. Nothing is eternal but God, according to thinkers such as Philoponus, and that belief—strongly against tradition—became increasingly common in this period.[38] God created and provided motivation to all matter, and nothing reduces entirely to nonbeing (except in its form).[39] For Philoponus, this argument about the nonperishability of substance can also apply—strikingly—to the Eucharistic materials, too. So the bread can become flesh, as he wrote in his refutation of Proclus in *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World* (529), but when the form of the flesh has perished, the form of the flesh can be "non-being," and yet the body or substance remains itself.[40] And so for the wine as well: "For when the wine is changed into blood, straight away the form of the wine is destroyed; and likewise, if the bread changes into flesh, the very form itself of the bread has not become flesh, but rather it itself has on the one hand gone into non-being, yet on the other in its substrate the form of the flesh is generated."[41]

God-motivated, but not activated by ritual or prayers in this model, what Philoponus is describing is in some fashion the tainted substance of Theodore of Sykeon's silver. Form is passing, however miraculously produced, and substance retains its nature, however it is shaped. In other words, the plate and icon, like so many objects or things in that world, can reveal their own self-directed anagogy through their substances.

As in Baxandall's aphorism, the object is its own lens on its own circumstances—its recursions are always rich. The forms on the plate show the very anagogy in matter: Christ is giving his own blood, but the wine remains, even having received that form, while the bread is sitting there, separated flesh (though unrecognizable as such from its appearance) of the man behind it. On the Menil silver plate, the Lord is giving his very (undiminishing) body for eating and drinking by the two princes of the apostles.[42] The bread is still bread, clearly—this is Philoponus's point, as Leslie MacCoull says: "there is no need to imagine some kind of incorporeal matter mysteriously at work in our world. On the contrary: the three-dimensional performs as matter perfectly well."[43]

Here is a remarkably realist philosophy that also finds resonance in hagiography and other literary genres, such as ekphrasis. Alchemy is a cognate system of thought, one in which the substratum of matter can be directed and purified to its best essence. Likewise, the liturgical action of the Eucharist demanded purity on the part of the participant in this period, so in a remarkable conjunction of thinking and being, transitive

38 Burrus 2013 reveals some of the beautiful complexity of this position.

39 See, for example, Torrance 1999, 323–26.

40 On this issue, see the excellent MacCoull 2010b.

41 Rabe 1899, 358.14–20, trans. MacCoull 2010b, 320. For an alternative translation, see Share 2010, 41.

42 On a comparable plate, see Krueger 2014, 113–14.

43 MacCoull 2010b. 322.

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matter refined Christians to their best, most divine form.[44] Gold is the divine substance that pulls along *every* other substance in its wake toward accomplishing its ultimate self-realization, its best essence. Science told them about such matters, and the things around them told them what their science could say.

The mix and mingling that we all do was active on stuff's side, too. The wax was greatly daring in the image of the archangel, and the silver of the plate was deeply involved in its search for perfection. Movingly, matter was able to bestride these passages between material and spiritual realms. The angelic wax might have been about anagogy for Agathias, but that anagogy was, ironically, downward, to the matter that made present and real to him the fearful archangel.[45] At this level, substance trumps form. Agathias's semblance of the archangel's form is only ever stated at the level of wax and colour, the basis of the encaustic technique of icon painting. Tellingly, the archangel is never described as such; he has none of the attributes other texts might give him, such as wings, a beardless face, youthful beauty, a staff or orb. He is revealed on the level of matter, the wax and colours. And the viewer is likewise made into a semblance: the moulding of the archangel is also performed on that imaginary viewer, who is engraved within himself or herself in that same spiritual semblance. Substance, shared among God's creation, is the stratum truer to the divine than form, and the mingling of this matter, our mire in our world's stuff, shows forth the archangel's anagogy, descending to the "deep intellection" of strangely invisible matter.

44 On the move from communal to penitence and purity in understanding and performance of the Eucharist, see Krueger 2014, 127–29.

45 I have argued for this movement in Byzantine and some modern art in Peers 2018c.

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Chapter 7

LATE ANTIQUE MAKING AND WONDER

I ENTER INTO this discussion on making with the fear that appropriate modesty causes. Treating craft in the late antique world, let alone the Middle Ages, is a humbling enterprise, not any less for the company, for Anthony Cutler has for over twenty years been examining, with typical vigour and incisiveness, just these issues of maker, making, and made, to provide a cognate-filled triad that covers the range of craft's life. He has presented compelling arguments and careful analyses, and he has treated the life range of objects without neglecting the thing at the centre of craft's process.[1]

Cutler discussed the "shadow cast by a higher plane" onto late antique craft, that is, the way craft became simply a way of arguing on a symbolic level at the expense of making itself.[2] While engaging the symbolic world that craft encourages, I will argue for directing that plane back, in a sense, on the things themselves. By looking closely at the things and their processes in late antiquity, I want to argue for the hand making a world in its thinking and practice that are cognates of divine world-making skills. Even if writers did not articulate that animating process always as such, craft skills—such as metal casting, painting, and ceramics—*made* worlds, small and large, and they extended their agency, their material thinking, into a world constantly filled and refilled with new versions of world-making things.[3]

Taking this position means pushing back against a deeply held bias in our culture for the priority of interior thinking and against thinking with the body.[4] For example, in an article published in *The New Yorker*, a test for Parkinson's Disease privileged unseen thought as a sign of mental well-being. When the author attempted to experiment by moving objects around before submitting his answer, he was told, "Putting action before thinking is the kind of error you made. You did something and then thought about it. That's less efficient and less elegant than planning a strategy."[5] Of course, that statement cannot be validated, and many of us would not support such a position on principle, but the statement constitutes a diagnosis and carries serious weight for human subjects.

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1 Some of Anthony Cutler's work on the subject is listed in the Bibliography. On craft's conception and realities, see the useful historical studies of Magoulias 1976; Burford 1998, 186–200; Sparkes 1998; Morel 1993, 214–44; and Burford 1972, 184–218. And now the significant study Kessler 2019, 59–89.

2 Cutler 1997, 971.

3 Bray 2015 makes a case for her artistic practice as anthropological research in which a portrait gets "more intimate, truthful and 'thick' than were it to have been done in just a few hours." Artistic practice learns and discloses essential truths about humans, in this approach, as it can about materials and materiality.

4 See, for instance, Adamson 2007, for a carefully reasoned response.

5 Kinsley 2014, 30.

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In modernism, that emphasis on innate abilities and intellectual inspiration is fundamental to our value judgments of made things, namely, art. The debate begins, perhaps, with Goethe and Schiller on dilettantism in 1799: Does a real artist, as opposed to an amateur, need more than genius (whatever that is)? In the twentieth century, modernism went strongly toward "genius," because the hands of the real artist were guided by idea, concept, and inspiration at the expense of skill, technique, and material knowledge. To take just one example, the German painter and teacher Willi Baumeister wrote that genius is not taught, has no experience or standard; modern art emancipates us from training or vocation.[6] In terms laid out by Gilbert Ryle, for example, we value museum knowledge over instrumental knowledge,[7] or the elegance and efficiency of the thinking over the same qualities in the doing. These positions have a long history beyond modernism, but bias against making and craft—hand thinking—is still a prevalent mode of explaining our relation to the material world.[8]

So I am reacting to the weight and value, as I perceive them, of previous positions in the history of art. In the first place, my insistence on relation among all these agents—makers, things, and users—comes from recent work in anthropology that allows me to argue for a world livelier than we admit normally for our historical subjects and for ourselves.[9] In this way, craft's self-knowing process, a doing that thinks, rather than relying on rote learning and repetition, is a way into arguing for an extended mind that things bring into the world.[10] I posit an effective persuasion that craft can carry out in the world; its thinking, formed, but not determined by the maker, is in force and difficult to resist. I want to address aspects of revision and renovation that also implicate issues of "distributed authorship," in which objects carry marks of multiple traces of renovation and remaking.[11]

Finally, I want to focus on wonder—sensations of perplexity and astonishment that made things cause—as a way of approaching cultural models of makers and the effects and lives of the things they make. The Shield of Achilles in archaic and classical Greece provides incentive to think about the play of that model of the craftsman (Hephaestus), the commissioner (Thetis), and circles of recipients (among whom: Achilles, the Myrmidons, the Greeks, and all the strata of readers of the *Iliad*) extended into late antiquity. The uncertainties of wonder, its displacements, fear and attraction, are means by which craftsmen and craft extend their reach out into their world and put all their agencies into play.

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6 Baumeister 1947, 124–25.

7 Ryle 1971, 212–25. See also Polanyi 1974, 92.

8 See Mark 1995, but also Auther 2010.

9 For example, this pithy statement with tremendous potential from Conneller 2011, 20: "Becomings always exist in relation to something else (becoming-animal, becoming-stone)."

10 For example, see Descola 2013; Descola 2010; Marchand 2010; Ingold 2001; and essays in Rose and Rose 2000.

11 I also want to argue for a kind of social idealism around craft, which is often the case for writers on craftsmen in the modern world. I take Richard Sennet's model of social cohesion that arises from practicing craft to be very stimulating. See Sennett 2012.

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Craft Hands

The lives of almost all of the women and men who performed any kind of specialized work in late antiquity are invisible to us now. Representations show some of the *realia* of a studio,[12] but of course no representation is transparent to process.[13] Indeed, many representations of craftsmen—even if done by craftsmen, as they invariably were—reveal very little that we can see about the realities and processes of craft that are *self-reflective*. They are commissioned and interpreted for their symbolic, referential value. For example, at the other end of late antiquity, the images of craftsmen in the painted program of the desert palace Qusayr 'Amra (Jordan, early eighth century) are not autobiographical in a transparent way, but highly determined by the overall demands of the program in that set of rooms.[14] In other words, craftsmen most often describe themselves through their work and its outcomes, not by representational self-portraits.

The material results of that thought-filled work, which is craft, tells us almost all we can know about the skills and knowledge of those workers or craftsmen.[15] They scarcely reveal aspects of craftsmen's beliefs or aspirations in ways that we can understand. But made things can demonstrate how craftsmen used their work to gain the world a thing, a "letting appear" that confirmed, extended, and amplified their agency.[16] For example, Karl Marx made this point of working on and with the world as a full reciprocity: "By thus acting on the external world and changing it, [man] at the same time changes himself." His examples of making are about loss of will and subordination, but I will not admit alienation is part of the process I am describing. For Marx, the spider and the bee are supreme craftsbeings, because they do not have an ideal form imposed on them for production—they do not have need to impose preformed images from their head directly on the world.[17]

Insisting on the skill of late antique craftsmen runs against certain official expressions that survive in hagiographies and theological texts. Church officials, priests, bishops, and saints alike revealed their suspicion of the independent hands of craftsmen, and they were often, at least in public pronouncements, willing to denigrate or neutralize the potential of unchecked power that makers and their things had.[18] For example, an episode in the hagiography of Symeon the Younger (ca. 600) reveals an attempt on

12 Such as the Roman sarcophagus in Lazaridou 2011, 62.

13 On this issue, see Lehmann 2012.

14 See Fowden 2004, 215–16; and see Maranci 2015, 146–56, on portraits of workers and their crafts at Zuart'noc'.

15 See Dormer 1994, 14: "Tacit knowledge refers to a body of knowledge which we have gained through experience—both through the experience of the senses and through the experience of doing work of various kinds. Tacit knowledge differs from propositional knowledge in that it cannot easily be articulated or described in words."

16 I take the "letting appear," or "Erscheinenlassen," from Martin Heidegger: in his essay "Bauen, wohnen, denken," he described "*techne*" as a dynamic process of bringing into being, rather than a stamp of mind on world. See Heidegger 2000, 161; Heidegger 1971, 159.

17 Marx 1962, 4:178; Marx 1957, 1:169–70.

18 See Peers 2012b.

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the part of the saint to dispense craft skill to a young man who wishes to become a sculptor.[19] The saint touched the chest of the young man in order to give him the inspiration and skill that God would provide. The gesture is almost romantic, in the sense of a generalized, transforming touch of the whole body—it is not placing a hand on the head, the place of intellect, or taking the man by the hand, where the wished-for skill would begin its world changing. The saint channelled skill and inspiration, the apprentice accepted the hierarchy of craft, and presumably—according to the text—the sculpture was acceptable to the church. And yet this institutionally idealized process cannot be "real," for sculptors learned their craft through watching, doing, and working with and against materials in the usual ways that craft is acquired and enacts.

A World-Making Basket

My point is that humans and materials work together in a mutually enlivening process of more or less ability or interest in self-articulation on the part of either. As Chris Gosden has recently written, "Artifacts do not reflect intellectual schemes, but help to create and shape them."[20] Basket weaving is an excellent example of this process, and as an ancient art with not much technological change over millennia and with global applications, it allows us to see how weavers still manipulate raw materials into new, practical, pleasing objects. And yet weavers, like all craftsmen, do not impose an order or image; they must work with and on the material, just as the material works with and on them.[21] Moreover, the work is not simply performed by a person emptied of mind and initiative, fully trained to produce in rote; it does not eliminate creativity and free expression, because materials always insist on their equal role.

Baskets survive from the late antique period, mainly from Egypt, and anthropological work in that country also reveals essential features of making.[22] The craft depends on intense concentration and full-bodied engagement with materials.[23] But this precious equilibrium between attention to materials and the application of acquired knowledge is also seen in other contexts, such as modern workshops, in which highly developed skill is self-maintained at great cost in a battle to ensure quality and output.[24] Basket making is likewise improvisational to some extent, while maintaining a need for results. That is a little obvious, maybe, but the point is that unlike mechanical production, handicraft is process, and the environmental, material elements matter as much as the skill and strength of the maker. Where one makes a basket, indoors or outdoors, with a firm set or hand held, with resistant strands or pliant, all these are participants with maker in a process that does not need, maybe cannot have, a predetermined outcome.

19 *Acta Sanctorum, Maii*, 5: 349B.

20 Gosden 2013, 39.

21 On this process, see Ingold 2011; and also Ingold and Lucas 2007, 296–98.

22 See Wright 1959; Colt 1962, 59–60; and Wendrich 1999.

23 This engagement occurs in ways that perhaps reveal some of the tensions that Marx saw leading to alienation in modern workers.

24 Dormer 1994, 40–41.

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Moreover, baskets have no frame, no inside or outside, because wrapping transverse fibres makes them alternately inside and outside.[25] That organic quality makes it sometimes difficult to know when a basket is finished, though when it is finished, it can last a very long time. The basket then emerges in a mutual agreement through an interaction of skilled action and materials, and repetitive, attentive action makes the resultant thing regular and complete.

The acquisition and development of such skills is a social activity, naturally, and in this world, it took place in workshops within master-apprentice frameworks. The mosaicists in the apse at San Vitale worked in tandem, beginning in the middle of the apse, for example, and worked outward from that point; constant communication, mutual realization, and result matching must have taken place in that creative process.[26] That type of craft learning could not really be called independent, nor is it a fully integrated activity shared between teacher and pupil. It leads by example, in fact, to another kind of knowledge that has been called a "material consciousness," that is, a way of knowing that develops through sensitive, attentive familiarity with materials.[27] This kind of knowledge operates, perhaps, as a basis for a "dialogic social behavior,"[28] and if that is so, it comes out of those particular master-apprentice and maker-material relationships. Beyond the social ramifications, that set of relationships enlarges the maker's experience and knowledge of the world. As Peter Dormer wrote, "Craft knowledge is genuine knowledge. To possess it in any form is to see the world in an enriched way compared with someone who does not possess it."[29] Anna Odland Portisch tells a story about a craftswoman in Kazakhstan who constantly eyed and coveted her niece's new outfit—until she could manage to persuade the girl to relinquish it so that she could make a wall hanging from the yarn,[30] a story that reveals the particular acuity with which craftspeople look at the world, not as a passive field, but as a realm for creative engagement and fashioning.

In that sense, baskets are both the result of a set of actions between maker and materials and answers to a vast number of needs in the world for containing, storage and transport. The objects themselves are modest, almost unremarkable, but they are found in a large number of contexts and in endless forms and sizes. Their domestic and ecclesiastic uses are obvious, but their adaptability is remarkable, such as being used as insulating shutters in late antique houses in Egypt.[31] Holding and containing are natural uses to which these things have always been put, but they have added valences when they are represented in late antique art as sources of bounty. So, for example, at

25 Ingold 2000, 55.

26 See Andreescu-Treadgold 1992, 34.

27 See Venkate 2010.

28 Sennett 2012, 199–220, and Sennett 2008.

29 Dormer 1994, 68. Kentridge 2014 is very rich in such observations on practice, perhaps most movingly on drawing as negotiation with the world.

30 Portisch 2010.

31 See Dauterman Maguire, Maguire, and Flowers 1989, 89–90. And on basketry's connections to the development of the codex, see Boudalis 2018, 28–29, 54, 59–60.

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Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, baskets (among other things) contain the bounty of paradise, and in other scenes, such as the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, they are vessels of miraculous plenitude.

The Stuff of Making

These modest things, then, are impressive distillations of the dynamic relationship among makers and materials, of the work that happens in the flows of matter and attentive, evolving, reactive skill by which thing and maker reciprocally emerge. This model, in general terms, applies equally well to humble objects such as baskets as it does to elevated categories such as like metalworking, bronze casting, mosaic, and painting.[32] Just as all these categories of making belong to a more undifferentiated group of activities than they do for us and our fine-art traditions, so all these ways of making take part in these same cooperative world-making actions and energies.

Can worked materials and the artisan's work form and change how we understand nature or life? And can the raw materials themselves also determine a craftsman's approach, experience, and outcome?[33] Such questions have a history, and materials are not absolute in the world, because they have explanations and functions that change with period and culture.[34] So engaging in a kind of materialist iconology can open up some of the ways materials and their worked states participate in a world-defining process.[35] How one explains the materiality of reeds and twigs, for example, might be one way into the inherent meaning of their worked forms.

Likewise, to travel to the other end of the spectrum of material values, how one explains the meaning of gold as mineral and medium should tell us a great deal about what the material and resultant thing *did* in its culture.[36] So the small gold box in the Menil Collection does a great deal still, but it does more when its material explanations are examined and its worked qualities are explored (Figures 5, 6, 12, and 14).[37] Only in this way can we approach the particular work that the material and its partnering maker did and how that thing went to work in its world. The box is small scale, and I want to talk about wonder and the miniature, too, but in the first place, I want to address briefly what gold did in late antiquity. By its doing, I mean the explanations that culture had for its materiality.

That understanding goes back at least to classical antiquity, and it strikingly undermines our understanding of materials as inert. The geology is based on mixtures of ele-

32 On that categorization, see, for example, Scott 2006; Olson 2005; and Lapatin 2003.

33 See Bensaude-Vincent and Newman 2007, 9, and Cutler 2011, 186.

34 An important offshoot of material-culture studies needs to be noted here, because it examines the interplay between matter and form, but gives significant credit to the *Stoffe* or basic substances of making and life (and social effects). See Boscagli 2014; Espahangizi and Orland 2014; Hahn 2014; and Naumann, Strässle, and Torra-Mattenklott 2006.

35 See Zaunschirm 2012.

36 Beer 1983.

37 See Peers 2013, Peers 2012b, and above.

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ments, and most metals were thought to be primarily water based, that is, water trapped in the earth and hardened into metals such as gold and silver. This elemental combining then is an animating force in the earth, rather like a vital force that runs through creation like a lifeblood. Aristotle spoke of the spirit in the moisture within the earth that, combined with life heat, produced these metals. In some way that Aristotle could not explain, that combination charged the materials with soul: "In earth and in water, life occurs, and plants through the water in the earth appear, and in the water is spirit, and in everything the soul life-heat is present, so that in this way all things are full of soul."[38] If the world has soul, it also has feelings, and Pliny the Elder describes the earth trembling in indignation at the rapaciousness of humanity; we would be better off if we had never broken ground and had never succumbed to the greed for what lies under earth's skin.[39] These general notions are basic to a material iconology, and they can be applied across a wide chronological range, because they continued to be in play well into the Renaissance, as Michael Cole has shown in his work on Benvenuto Cellini.[40]

That play of spirit in matter was an essential part of the iconology of matter in that world, and it also affects the resultant forms, such as this box, and its functions. In that sense, the watery nature of gold is part of the enlivening action apparent from careful attention to the box itself—perhaps better, from careful imagination, because to perform this action is to forget the ways most of us encounter such things, as well-lit objects in museum cases.[41] After something is made, the materials remain, and they continue to do things, as in this box, to shimmer and to halate in weak light, to disappear to lustre in stronger light, to vacillate between elemental states apparently even as the box glosses and maintains its natural lambent substantiality. The limitations and expansions of life, one might say, are the subject of something like this mere box. The box cannot hide its history as water and earth, ensouled by geological process, and it adapts its nature to the ways the maker forms it. The dappling and denting, its uneven surfaces, are the result of handicraft, not machine work, obviously, and the necessary way maker and materials worked through the sheeting's irregularities demonstrate the box's faceted reflecting and absorbing light. Seeing these aspects, imagining them, as it were, means working against our own experiences, not just those determined by museums, and reexamining senses and relation to the natural world.

As we have noted before, in the work of modern artists such as Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg and James Lee Byers, gold also is the matter at hand.[42] Klein's Monogold series reveals the instability and partial quality of our perception of gold; it always shifts

38 *De generatione animalium*, 3.11 (762a). See also Theophrastus in Caley and Richards 1956, 19 (1). Likewise, gems are created through various actions in the environment, most importantly by celestial bodies such as the sun and moon, but also by climatic conditions, such as heat and cold. See Halleux 1981, 50–51, on theories of Poseidonius (ca. 135–51 BCE), for example. And for miraculous or otherwise inexplicable generation, see Epstein 2012 and Lugt 2004.

39 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 33.1.

40 Cole 2011 and Cole 2002. See also Weinryb 2016.

41 See Greenblatt 1990. On the triangulation of poetry, water, and gold, see Usher 2019, 48–54.

42 The artists are included not only because of their mutual interest in working with and through

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and changes, moves from gold to silver, reflects and absorbs, shows its environment back while staying aloof from it (Figure 13). These qualities are useful to observe and describe, because they are inherent to gold as matter and apply equally well in principle to the late antique box. But we are minimalists at heart, and we know the gold is just gold.[43] For people who made and witnessed the gold box in late antiquity, gold was more than the itself that we give it. Gold was a divine material that demonstrated in its birth, its making, and its made state the wonder of the world that can contain and recapitulate divine truths and presence.

Emergent meaning in craft made the divine immanent, and craftsmen's knowledge and experience of the world were instrumental in this process.[44] But that reality is worth stating, because it asserts the distance between a theory of practice and activities based in practice and experience in a craft. It is the difference between reading a language with a dictionary and actually manipulating all potentialities of a language in its diverse forms—or, coming close to home, like writing about painting versus painting.[45] Separating the makers and users into a teleological relationship where the makers gave the box over after having done their separate work is probably false. Different agents were involved in the making and use of the box, in all likelihood, not least the materials themselves, from the conception of a container, through its making, and then its birth into the world, and then its long life, which shows on the gold skin's marking, and meaning was distributed among and by all of them.[46]

Our mastery of materials made into things is an easy illusion—let alone our mastery of the things that result—but anyone who has worked by hand on wood or metal realizes that one is necessarily in a compromising position before materials.[47] The gold painting series by Robert Rauschenberg abounds in certain ironies about this sense of

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gold, but also because their artworks were included in Peers 2013 and are discussed in the exhibition volume. For a comparable exploration, see Dupré et al. 2014.

43 Analogies with modernist approaches to gold are suggestive for understanding the divergent materialities at work. For the modern position, see the useful essay Gehring 2012.

44 Ludwig Wittgenstein was dealing with linguistic determinism, that words have a meaning but also a *work*, and in this way, he indicated an obvious craft reality: "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique." See Wittgenstein 1958, 81*e* (199).

45 See Keller 2001 on the divergences in perceptions of an activity between practitioner and spectator, master and novice.

46 See Knappett 2004, 43–51 and Knappett 2005.

47 Warnier 2001, 8–9. And see Latour 2007, 74–75, on *homo faber* as *homo fable*: "I never act, but I am always surprised by what I do. That which is acting through me is also surprised by what I do, by the occasion offered to mutate and change and bifurcate that which is offered, by me and by the circumstances surrounding me, to that which has been invited, recovered, welcomed." Moreover, Gordon 1979, 21: "In the products both of ordinary labour and of the artist, conception is translated into artifact, into an object, which exists independently of those intentions. An idea is concretized, but in such a way that the object transcends the idea: the object does not merely 'betray' the intention which formed it, but provides the objective basis for further acts of signification. Its meaning is no longer confined to the intention of the maker, which has no special privilege and may, in a given society, have no privilege at all."

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mastery (Figures 13 and 16). Of course, he was a maker revealing his making at every turn, despite his denial of art as such, and he certainly played with the arbitrariness of process and the visual interest and pleasure that could result. In this series, he applied gold leaf to fabric or cardboard and allowed the qualities of gold as glowing surface to emerge when it wanted to, as it were, and the surface qualities of the support, fabric etc., to do so when it could. The subject is the gold and what it does, according to certain varying aspects of his practice. Here, materials and hands work together without forethought, but full of process thought.[48]

I am arguing that the gold in the late antique gold box does more because it was allowed to perform beyond its surface, where Rauschenberg stayed so productively. While still significant, surface was just the place for late antique craftsmen (and anyone else in that culture) to find the different meanings, if not also the wonder, of the divine: transmutable matter moves toward gold always, naturally, just as human nature moves toward the divine, and gold is the perfect condition of salvation.[49] For that reason, one of the first acts performed by Adam and Eve after tilling the soil was setting up a forge; they were crafting redemption.[50] Labour and making were basic ways in which the heirs of Adam's fault could find a return to divine likeness.[51] On the one hand, pseudo-Macarius (ca. 400) wrote about Christian self-fashioning being comparable to a portrait maker capturing a likeness (in this case, a Christian studying the face of Christ), and on the other hand, and in a less metaphorical sense of craft, Egyptian monks wove reeds into mats while in communal prayer and reading.[52] Handiwork accompanied the making of salvation and guided the hand, and thus the soul, back to the divine.[53]

The shape of the object, with its lid and receptacle, its boxness, recalls sarcophagi, and so death; it was connected with death, too, in its likely use as a reliquary.[54] In that way, moving from its utility as container and object of beauty and wonder, the box also travels from craft to art; as it withdraws in its role as holder of divine substance, it becomes the precious miniature that gives sacred death emotional resonance.[55] In this world, death was in life, and vice versa, and the box's material performance made that death dramatically, physically alive to one—all the while showing the animate, perdurant metal life of the made thing. Gold is untarnishable, seemingly permanent in its conditions, and its deathless life is a perfect surround for sacred relics. That surplus or excess is the place where enlivened material is made dynamically active in the world

48 Here, I would note diverse examples of things making arguments and, moreover, demonstrating them nonverbally and materially. See Haug 2014; Kessler 2012; and Faraone 2011.

49 See Mertens 2004.

50 See the tenth-century ivory in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan, for example, in Dupré, et al. 2014, 12 and Daim 2010, 198.

51 Ballan 2011.

52 Peers 2004; Zanetti and Davis 2016; Veilleux 1968, 307 and 309n142.

53 Painters, moreover, performed acts of piety through their active practice. See Limberis 2011, 53–96 and Webb 2007.

54 This indexical evocation is skeuomorphism, according to Knappett 2002, 108–10.

55 Olson 2005, 327. See also Kohring 2011.

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by knowing hands of its maker.[56] Indeed, gold's material transcendence paradoxically foregrounds the madeness, the process by which it came into this being.[57]

The Craft Life of Things

At variance with the notion of authority in modernism,[58] craft presupposes the distribution of authorship across makers who work together and also through time. In *Medieval Modern*, Alexander Nagel glances at mosaic through the lens of the interest of Marshal McLuhan in Byzantium.[59] In striking ways, McLuhan's notion of the author's role, Nagel argues, approaches medieval notions: "Authorship before print was to a large degree the building of a mosaic." Mosaic has long life in part because of the durability of the materials, but also because of the ongoing work of restoration that takes place on these fields. In effect, mosaics reveal an unstable set of practices with open, distributed authorship where revision and restoration are the means by which things survive.

Craft is clearly in play when mosaic fields are being made and mended, however successful we consider the result or however much we devalue the intervention at all. When interventions occur in painting or sculpture, we are almost always disappointed. The interference by Medicean painters in the Rabbula Gospels (Florence, Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, cod. Plut. 1, 56) was not a positive addition, for example, and discovering those Renaissance alterations to the sixth-century manuscript took a surprising amount of time.[60]

Marble heads received attention by Christian editors in late antiquity, and crosses were added or imposed on heads carved already in the Roman period. A sculptor—if he deserves the name (I grant him the privilege at least)—recarved the face of a female figure in the fifth or sixth century, evidently to remake a face into a human-cross composite. And another head, also recently exhibited in travelling shows, shows related work by a carver who incised the cross on another female head, this time of Aphrodite.[61] The former is certainly engaged in a stronger statement and with more skill than the latter, but is that a qualitative distinction that matters? This act of replacing face with cross is brutal on one level, but perhaps one could also see this alteration as a way for an argument

56 So I am arguing against the excellent, but to my mind limiting argument in Schwarz 2012.

57 Conneller 2011, 13, provides a useful corrective for going too far to materials' side: "at times, materials do seem more important in the generation of an artifact and the affects it may come to have; at other times, materials' properties are subsumed, transformed or transcended in the making of an object. As a result, a meta-theory where things are always animate only by virtue of their materials does not allow us to conceptualize the variability of past interactions."

58 No matter how hard Rauschenberg fought "art," he was still Rauschenberg.

59 Nagel 2012, 159.

60 Bernabò 2008. And see Heilmeyer 2004, 409, on remaking of bronze in the Renaissance.

61 Drandaki, Papanikola-Bakirtzi, and Tourta 2013, 60 (created second/first century BCE, revised fifth/sixth century, marble, 25 × 20 cm, now in the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, in Rhodes, Greece); and Lazaridou 2011, 147–48 (created first century, revised fifth/sixth century?, marble, 40 cm high, now in the National Archaeological Museum, in Athens); and see Kristensen 2012, who stresses purification.

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to be made about the indelibility of the cross in all reality. Justin Martyr in the second century was already making claims that the cross is like a Christian DNA that was visible only after the Incarnation and Crucifixion (See Figure 3).[62] Since then, we can know that all of reality is built from this building block of life. While unsubtle, this face clearly comprises the cross, the meeting of brow and nose that is one of the crosses embedded in the surface of our bodies. The victory stamp of cross and inscription demonstrates its reality in the partition of a human face into Christian quadrants.[63] Here certainly is an unstable set of practices that served to reveal skeleton and leave flesh, and both authors retain some claim to copyright here.

A bronze figurine of Dionysus likewise had its active life extended by craftsmen separated by centuries (now in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia).[64] Cast in the second/third century, it was once more elaborate than it is now, in the sense that peg holes reveal it also had a wreath and a cloak (and of course, all four members), but in the eighth/ninth century, a new craftsman approached the object and revised it for new work. That new work was perhaps twofold: the presentation of Psalm 29: 3 (in the Revised Standard Version: "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters") as a belt resting on the hips of the god. The text begins to the right of a cross, which rests midway between navel and genitals; it does not follow the same sinuous curve of the hips, but its straight lines serve only to accentuate the sensuous S pose of the god. If that cross might be said to be trying too hard, then the cross-shaped monograms on chest and thighs also work at sealing and inoculating.

I want to give proper credit to the person who performed these revisions, because to my mind, they are very sensitive to combining what might seem the incommensurable of sacred and sensual. Although the belief in the innate qualities of material that relate to purity/impurity was also in play, as it was in the story related in the seventh-century vita of Theodore of Sykeon, when the saint perceived the taint in the previous use in a profane context of a silver chalice and paten set, this statuette obviously did not partake of the same unforgiving text-world analysis that Theodore directed at that silver.[65]

In the Theodore of Sykeon story, once form is impressed, matter is marked, but here, the statuette is a telling example of an object that was determined to retain essential aspects of its original makeup while operating as something quite different at the same time. Irony has to be playing a role here, too, for that Psalm passage was also used at Epiphany for blessing the waters. The head, too, underwent revision, and it was opened

62 See Peers 2004. Gerhard Richter in his *Kreuz* from 1997 claims to have measured himself to determine the proportions of the work.

63 The face is an essential and understudied aspect of late antique self-understandings. For example, the theologian Evagrius (345–99) wrote: "So just as the mind receives the mental representations of all sensible objects, in this way it receives also that of its own organism—for this too is sensible—but of course with the exception of one's face, for it is incapable of creating a form of this within itself since it has never seen itself" [*On Thoughts* 25]. See Casiday 2013, 170, on the assimilative power of faces for Christian and Christ.

64 Cutler 2013, 172, and Althaus and Sutcliffe 2006, 50, 86, 171. On medieval revisions, see Cutler 2011 and Cutler 2010.

65 Festugière 1970, 1:36–38 (42). And see above on this episode.

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at the crown to provide room for a small receptacle to hold, perhaps, oil or water or wine—something precious, at least. One can certainly wish to know more about this piece (its context is not clear, since it was found in the Don River in 1867), but the distribution of craft authorship over the surface and its interior is worth noting. While the cloak was likely missing by the time the revisions were made, the craftsman was evidently sensitive to the material qualities of the bronze and respected them to the degree of addressing the contours and surfaces of the figure in a way that the sculptors who intervened in the marble female heads did not.

Bronze casting, its materials, and its processes, have a long and fascinating history, from Pliny's description in the *Natural History*, where he ascribed its invention to Hephaestus, to the Italian Renaissance, when the self-heroizing narrative of Cellini kept the stakes at an Olympian height.[66] I cannot absolutely establish the connections, but I want to indicate the possibilities for bronze and casting in the late antique world that might have influenced choices made by the craftsman in updating and intensifying this statuette's work.

Writers had long used bronze casting as a means to comprehend drawing order out of chaos and for world making. Moreover, making humanity out of earth was also explored as a natural, even divine, precedent to this craft. The molten material used in casting was sometimes, evocatively but also in some sense literally, like blood.[67] Minerals and ores are like earth's blood, not precisely, but blood is in the earth, and like blood does in this world, it becomes other things while retaining its nature. Hematite, for example, is obviously a bloody remnant in the earth, congealed somehow and transformed into a precious stone.[68] And if blood could be stone, the reverse was logically possible. Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 263–339) tells of marble columns sympathetically weeping blood before the terrible martyrdom of Ennatha in 308; the stoas were forever stained, because they refused to relinquish their bloody witness. Moreover, the streets were wetted from no other sources than the secreting flagstones, and many stones wept real salty tears. Their flesh suffered with her flesh.[69] (I am not claiming this as "fact," only that stones always had the potential in this world for secretion, transformation, and acting.)[70]

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66 See Grammaccini 1987, 163–64.

67 Galen (129–ca. 200), *Peri physikon dynameon*, 2.3.83; Brock 1916, 131: "But nature does not preserve the original character of any kind of matter; if she did so, then all parts of the animal would be blood—that blood, namely, which flows to the semen from the impregnated female and which is, so to speak, is like the statuary's wax, a single uniform matter, subjected to the artificer. From this blood there arises no part of the animal which is as red and moist [as blood is], for bone artery, vein, nerve, cartilage, fat, gland, membrane, and marrow are not blood, though they arise from it."

68 Theophrastus, *On Stones*, 19 (37).

69 See, generally, the tremendous work of Silverman 2009; but also Morel 1998, 43–85, specifically on the self-production of images in nature.

70 Cureton 1861, 33–34 (Syr. 35): "The atmosphere was perfectly calm and clear, when, all on a sudden, many of the columns of the porticos in the city emitted spots as it were of blood, while the market-places and the streets became sprinkled and wet as with water, although not a single drop

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Blood was also a highly changeable material, altering according to conditions to breast milk and sperm, for example. And as a constituent material of all life, it also extended itself into the natural world again, for example as honey. Honey is all the more powerful because it is an excretion by bees, but incorruptible, and paradoxically an almost miraculous nutrient, like breast milk.[71] Milk, however, loses it life the farther and longer it goes from the secreting body, and it becomes dangerous under those circumstances.[72] Honey, however, has an enduring quality that appears exempt from the constraints of time and space, and it was closest to ambrosia in this world.[73] Blood, tears, and milk all saturated the environment throughout antiquity and into the Byzantine period, and while their outward forms changed, the vivid viscousness flowed all through the landscape.[74]

I am trying to suggest here some of the things bronze was in that world, along with other cognate phenomena that have, of course, very different meanings for us. I can indicate then some of these lexical cognates: blood was another constituent material in the world that carried with it animation as an enspiriting, enlivening element.[75] The miracle and wonder of this element are fantastic, and they likewise need to inform our view of how bronze and its working were understood, from extraordinary skill to world making in its formation and renovation. Bronze workers into the Renaissance were fashioning life out of raw matter in ways God themself modelled, and those workers performed God's acts again in the creation of form and in the infusion of forms with vivacity (literally) that made real and present the latent life of materials.

This notion of God as first and perfect artist played a role in these conceptions of craft. According to Romanus the Melode in the sixth century, potting is God's act of creation of humanity, and Christ's blood was ink for writing; in these instances, the divine is not only the maker, but also the means of making. The Mandylion, Christ's miraculous self-portrait produced by his own blood (or sweat), is not just the best example of God taking in hand the accuracy of his own portrait; it even had the extended agency of God in making versions of itself and acted on its own.[76]

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had fallen from the heavens. And it was declared by the mouth of every one, that the stones shed tears and the ground wept; for even the senseless stones and the ground without feeling could not endure this foul and barbarous deed; and that the blood which flowed from the stones, and the earth which without any rain emitted as it were tears from its body, rebuked all these godless folk." Bardy 1967, 151, in the Greek version, just tears. See Patrich 2011, 269–70. On the stone that would have cried out to Jesus in Jerusalem, which Mark Twain was directed to when he visited the city, see Twain 1895, 575.

71 See Tétart 2004.

72 Orland 2010.

73 Tétart 2004, 89.

74 Buxton 2009, 191–230.

75 See the tradition that the Trojan Horse needed to bleed in order to convince the Trojans. Burgess 2011, 211n18.

76 Grosdidier de Matons 1964, 33.106; Peers 2004 and Peers 2018b. For more on blood in Western Christianity, see Jansen and Dresen 2012; and Fricke 2013.

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Matter can be its own self-crafter, too, so deeply is this vivacity of making woven into the world by God. Stones have marvellous power, as Philostratus said, one of which is to give birth. That ability is an outcome perhaps of their gendering, apparent by observing different colours of the same stone.[77] Precious stones not only regenerated themselves, but as animate things, they also could demonstrate theology.[78] Gregory of Tours (538–94) related the story of three drops falling to form a gem that demonstrated orthodox thinking on the Trinity, "While the drops were spinning in an indeterminate circle over the altar, they flowed unto the paten and immediately fused together, as if they formed one extremely beautiful gem. By an obvious deduction it was evident that this had taken place in opposition to the evil heresy of Arianism, which was hateful to God and which was spreading at that time."[79]

No other agency than matter itself is stated by Gregory; evidently water before gem thought out the act, planned the right moment, and made evident to human bystanders what it intended. Indeed, cognitive mind is not necessary for thought or intentionality, as biologists and philosophers would claim.[80]

The Wonder of Craft

Wonder arises not only from materials, but also from intricate work, from miniature fine work, and from the monumental—from every made thing out of our control. The wonder of the Shield of Achilles from book 19 of the *Iliad* is the first and greatest of such object emotions. Hephaestus with his robot maidens crafted the peerless shield, and to see it, as the poet did, is the wonder. Wonder, or *thavma*, is the uncanny animation of the shield itself. We are prepared for it by his robot apprentices, but nothing can fully cushion the blow of that incredible excess that Homer relates. The *thavma* is, on one level, an aesthetic pleasure to be had from encountering a work of art, but the power to evoke wonder is not in mimesis, in capturing an evocation of life, but in the very ability of a made thing to produce life out of materials that may have seemed simply inert, inactivated.[81] In the shield is contained an impossible world, of course, and its manifold operations (including, at the end, craftsmen such as an architect and a potter, and maybe a bard, who all do their work) are a real *mise en abyme*. That self-sustaining generation of life within the ekphrasis is noted several times: the prediction by Hephaestus that before the shield all will marvel (18.467), and women within the scenes did (18.496), and the ploughed fields were the greatest marvel, for they turned the gold black as they overcame their own materials (18.548–9).[82] Homer's privileged vision mediates world

77 Theophrastus, *On Stones*, 19 (5) and 23–24 (30–31).

78 See, for example, Gaifman 2008, 37–72.

79 Krusch 1885, 496.24–27 [12]; Van Dam 1998, 33.

80 See Turner 2007. From that point of view, the Trinitarian drops-to-gem story of Gregory of Tours was a dramatic, theologically oriented recapitulation of a geological process.

81 De Jong 2011.

82 See Cullhed 2014; Squire 2011; and Kokolakis 1980.

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and our imagination, and effects compound so that the description constantly shifts between real and poem in a way that is very difficult to disentangle.[83]

The history of readings of this Homeric ekphrasis traces understandings of central conceptions of craft, materials, and even life itself. Some viewers within the shield are caught in moments of awe and wonder before their crafted landscape and their very ability to be in such a living, crafted landscape. But the witnesses of the shield within the *Iliad* are not so many, so we are led in other ways to understand how we should see and experience this made world. In book 19 (14–19), Achilles's mother delivers the armour, and the Myrmidons are fearful and look away.[84] The surfeit produced by Hephaestus's craft is not for everyone. Achilles himself experiences a range of reactions: his anger blazes forth like flames, and then he lapses into gladness and delight.[85] This ekphrastic rendering of wonder was of course immensely influential throughout antiquity, into the period of late antiquity, and up to the present day. How late antique poets took up the challenge of the shield is revealing of attitudes toward made things.[86] Achilles's elite, controlled viewing may have been a model in archaic and classical Greece, but it no longer applied in late antiquity. Hephaestus, however, is still heroic, an unattainable paragon of craftsman who continues to stir wonder in those who experience his craft.

In Quintus Smyrnaeus's *Posthomerica* from the third century, the shield is full once again of "countless other scenes upon the shield, artfully wrought by the deathless hands of cunning Hephaestus."[87] Quintus stressed lifelikeness in a way that emphasizes also the poet's mediation; the shield here has been made—we are not witnessing Hephaestus himself do it—and the life is in Quintus's own craft, one might say.[88] Quintus underlines the importance of "know-how" when he describes Odysseus winning the armour from Ajax: *metis* is the key, the knowledge that is superior in performing every task.[89] In a sixth-century silver plate now in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the armour is lying on the floor before the competitors and judge, and Ajax stands erect and principled, while Odysseus hunches over, his entire body entering the quarrel and channelling his powerful *metis*.[90] Quintus has Odysseus laud the know-how of men, the intelligence of men who are able to overcome and tame the world (5.247–52). This

83 Squire 2011, 337.

84 See also Becker 1995, 29–30, on Aelion Theon (first century), who presented the armour as positive for allies and as fearful for enemies.

85 Only then can he speak, after he has travelled that emotional path to acceptance—and to his murderous mission. Achilles's vision is privileged, possessing, and it denies any easy access to that made, living world. See Papalexandrou 2011.

86 The conditions under which figures encounters their miraculous artifacts are also telling of attitudinal changes. Achilles and the Myrmidons do not figure as exemplars in the examples of *Homerica* I briefly discuss, and book 19 is the least attested in surviving papyri of the poem, so its popularity seems to have passed in this period. See Cribiore 2001, 194.

87 Quintus Smyrnaeus. *Posthomerica* 5.97–98, in James 2004, 82, and see Baumbach 2007.

88 See Maciver 2012, 45–46.

89 *Posthomerica* 7.200–204; Maciver 2012, 54.

90 Cutler 1990, 14.

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championing of will and skills in human activities presents the very best model for the enrichment of the world that experienced doing produces.[91]

Ekphrasis consistently deals in verbal control of visual experience, and that trait is marked in late antique examples of the treatment of Homer's shield. Late antique writers on contemporary and still-extant monuments give some sense of a related, but not direct emulation of that great paradigm of poetic wonder. Quintus again picks up the Homeric topos when Odysseus gives the armour of Achilles to the rightful owner, Achilles's son Neoptolemus. Hephaestus took delight in making: "those immortal things, which will be a great wonder to you as you look upon them, because the land and heaven and sea are artistically worked here and there on the shield, and creatures in a boundless circle are fashioned all around—they look as though they are moving, a wonder even to the immortals" (7.200–204). The wonder appears when Neoptolemus dons the armour, mounts his father's horses, and appears divine to those around him, as Deiphobus reacts in the poem—as we do, too.[92]

That oscillation between the real, made thing and the impossibility of its madeness brought about wonder and perplexity, fear and joy. In literary terms, the issue was never resolved through late antiquity or by Byzantine writers, either. Procopius of Gaza (ca. 465–528), for example, wrote about a marvellous water clock, and his point of comparison at the outset is naturally Hephaestus and the shield, as well as Alcinous's dogs.[93] Through the unity of his mind and body and through his sure action in gold and silver, Hephaestus made the handicraft as good as alive. Contemporary know-how is just as demanding of wonder, according to Procopius, and indeed it is not fiction, like what Homer produced. The irresolution of the animate qualities, however, of both past and current examples of extraordinary crafting, gave that wonder its piquancy and allowed the animate quality of made things to simmer, percolate, and erupt into experience for Procopius's audience.

Sixth-century descriptions of Hagia Sophia even more powerfully evoke both the overwhelming madeness of everything *and* its more-than-made plenitude, its excessive quality surpassing human skill, making it a heaven and earth.[94] In these descriptions, wonder is also being evoked and programming our own reaction: for Paul the Silentiary, the wonder is never ceasing, and his prose travels the heights of Hagia Sophia to make it so.[95] Describing the crafting of this wonder intensifies the experience: the mason

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91 In the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos of Panopolis (active first half of fifth century), the god is on campaign in India when the shield is delivered, unexpected and unmotivated—a clear case of Homeric emulation. See Hopkinson 1994, 23; Vian 1990, 33–42 and 260–62; Vian 1991. The shield is described at some length (25.384–567) as the richly wrought, cunning work of the god (383–84; *polydaidalon*, *sophon ergon*). The book ends with all gathered around and praising the fiery forge of Hephaestus.

92 Maciver 2012, 52, on 9.230–46 and 5.220–21: "The heavenly armor that covers the breast of the god resounds and flashes as brightly as fire."

93 Amato 2010, 204.

94 On a parallel track, see Tanner 2013.

95 De Stefani 2011, 28.398–29.416; Mango 1986, 82.

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"weaved together with his hands" the slabs of marble that produced effects of fruits on boughs, vines and wreaths—in other words, confounded orders of existence in making plant and stone indistinguishable.[96] Procopius of Caesarea (ca. 500–65) likewise emphasized his sense of wonder: Hagia Sophia is a "spectacle of great beauty, stupendous to those who see it and altogether incredible to those who hear of it."[97] It possesses "ineffable beauty" to the degree that the wonder of the place is simply impenetrable. God's richly wrought craft is at work here: "No matter how much they concentrate their attention on this side and that, and examine everything with contracted eyebrows, they are unable to understand the craftsmanship and always depart from there amazed by the perplexing spectacle."[98] The inevitable sense of perceptual shortcoming before this monument is perhaps shared by all who visit Hagia Sophia, though few would express that impression as Paul or Procopius did. Wonder for them, as it was during much of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, was a *cognitive emotion*, a mixture of thought and feeling that is unsettling, irresolvable. In sometimes breaching the boundaries between the possible and impossible, made and not made, craft undermines visitors' categories of the world.

Late antique *thavma* was expansive to all senses, not restricted to the one sense of sight, and extended across all ways of knowing the world through bodies. That relation of bodies to work was in Achilles's Shield and in other *Homerica* of late antiquity, and it was in that church, but it was also in the mere, in baskets and boxes. It was in remade marble faces and in bronze flesh. Our bodies make judgments of scale, and the enormity of the church and tininess of the gold box both tell us what human bodies can do.[99] They especially tell us what we did not know bodies could do until we witnessed them do it, and then a miraculous making shocks our world. The thinking hand of the craftsman is in and motivating all these phenomena. The making of small gold reliquaries reveals to careful looking and imagining more in the object than passive description of the world on the part of the box or its maker. Such objects show that makers *and* made participated in producing powerful wonder through materials and their formation. Those things are never in one's hands fully; they constantly escape, captivate, and make every view of the world wondrous—otherwise, they are false.[100]

96 De Stefani 2011, 44.647–45.663; Mango 1986, 86. On stone and metaphor, see Kiilerich 2012a.

97 De Stefani 2011, 1.1.27; Mango 1986, 72–74.

98 De Stefani 2011, 1.i.49; Mango 1986, 75.

99 See Mack 2007, 46–47.

100 The last word, as is right, belongs to Bynum 1997: "wonder."

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Chapter 8

SENSES' OTHER SIDES

AN INITIAL PAIR of propositions: senses work in language, but are not original to, dependent on, or servile to it; and on account of that nonlinguistic basis of senses, many entities, maybe all, but at least far beyond language's reach, sense their worlds.[1] Such propositions are simply that: possibly or even just intuitions or inferences; that is to say, they engage philosophical and ethical questions, at best, and become intellectual *passatempo*, at worst. Naturally, I want to argue for the former, because on the one hand, our own resources for understanding relations among entities in late antiquity and Byzantium are so incomplete and inarticulated that engagement with how we relate to and judge our own worlds is crucial. Patchwork, piecemeal, puzzling is our approach to the consistency of sense lives across living things, both in beings we easily assume have feelings (ourselves, animals) and those we assume do not (inert materials such as metals, for example). And so on the other hand, confronting our assumptions about life and our responsibilities can arise from historical investigations and determine both our attitudes toward the past and toward our common present. For these reasons, a highly provisional exercise that stretches the historical imagination and accords sense lives to others can be mutually beneficial.[2]

My specific attention in this chapter is directed at the viscous in Byzantium. By that I mean (mostly, but not only) the molten: the state that wax, metal, glass, stone, and similar, can achieve when heat is applied to it, a state that can bridge the liquid and heated and that can also be the process in which fusion of otherwise separate materials can take place. The state between solid and liquid is always in process; almost no substance stays viscous. Something is always on the way to something else when in a state of viscosity. In that mobile passage between states, essences are declared, as in alchemy's belief in the process of purification toward gold when some materials are melted and fused with others. One could take a lead on viscosity from a Christology of matter, because all matter can; for Christ's own blood, flowing and turning to gore, is the most significant precedent of all for Christian thinking on matter's sliding states and their holy mimesis.[3] Mimesis is a deep need for humans and for all other entities.[4]

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1 Sensing ought not to be confused with thinking, though the tension between the two is longstanding. For a rich treatment of such issues, see Shiff 2013. Thought, mind, and brain can extend into the world.

2 Serres 1995b, 30, and 34: "Can I think without thinking something? To be sure. But when I think this object, that subject, there is doubt that I am this subject, that object, if I truly think them"; and "Inventive thinking is unstable, it is undetermined, it is un-differentiated, it is as little singular in its function as our hand."

3 See Fricke 2013.

4 See Taussig 1993.

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But what can be discovered from thinking of how materials feel when viscous or molten? In the first place, some of that question has to be approached from our isolationist sensorium: How does it feel *to us* when a material state is changed, when states are bridged, when new forms and meanings arise from observing those states? But in the second, the more challenging question is: Can we know how it feels, however inadequately or approximately, to be in something else's molten or viscous passage from one state to another? Is language up to the task?[5] Is our sense of empathy sufficiently developed for such a leap of imagination? A historical imagination is one extra leap, and we enter a different event now, the triple jump: to an absent situation and even perhaps thing, analogical thinking, and an expansive ontology.[6]

To try this argument and to feel how it fits and suits representation in this world we perceive and answer to, let us turn once again to wax.[7] In the hands of some important scholars (Herbert L. Kessler, Bissera Pentcheva, and Charles Barber, in varying degrees), wax has been a significant (if secondary) material for the demonstration of Byzantine explanations of and attitudes toward matter and representation.[8] It has stood for a commonsense demonstration of the distinction between form and matter that is necessary for seemly Christian worship. Those scholars have opened up a revealing aspect of theological rationalizations, but in doing so, they have also neglected implications of the work of wax and other viscous materials in a lived economy—as opposed to the theoretical, linguistic world of theologians.

As we've noted above, such scholars have often accepted theologians' metaphor concerning the relationship between an image and its model in terms of the analogy of seals pressing into wax (as well as other materials). Recall that according to this longstanding assertion, an image is left behind in matter without any essential (that is, sharing essence) relation between image and model. This explanation of image making has all kinds of shortcomings: mind or spirit making the world with almost incidental participation of matter, for one thing. It implies a hierarchy of ontologies, too, in which a sentient, invisible agent (the hand holding seal here) controls process and outcome. The "world," however, operates a little differently, and the analogy of the molten, quickened material poured onto a surface or into a shaped form by a conscious, thinking hand—

5 Maybe not. See Serres, trans. in Connor 2005, 164: "We have lost hopelessly the memory of a world heard, seen, perceived, experienced joyfully by a body naked of language. This forgotten, unknown animal has become speaking man, and the word has petrified his flesh, not merely his collective flesh of exchange, perception, custom, and power, but also and above all his corporeal flesh: thighs, feet, chest, and throat vibrate, dense with words."

6 *OED*: imagination, 1a, "The power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations. Also (esp. in modern philosophy): the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception."

7 A useful reminder from Stoller 2011, 23: "To put the matter bluntly, we often avoid acknowledging the contingent nature of situated experience, which distances us from the ambiguous, from the tangential, from the external textures and sensuous processes of our bodies."

8 See, for example, Kessler 2000.

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which is always resistant to analogy—simply and directly recapitulates every process of image making, but that image making is not what those theologians imagined it was. It is not so easily instrumentalized. It *is*, rather, participation among relational agents that work with and against each other to bring something new and necessary into this world.

Bissera Pentcheva, for example, has built a large part of her arguments around ideas of seals and impressions. For her, these practices fundamentally informed the making and meaning of images in Byzantium, and they led her to propose *repoussé* icons, with gems, gold and enamel, as the paradigmatic iconic form in Byzantium after the period of Iconoclasm. The process begins for her with late antique tokens of the elder Symeon the Stylite (ca. 388–459). She describes these small objects as miraculously potent impressions in matter that had taken on powers of the saint, and such processes also paralleled processes in divinized and divinizing materials such as the Eucharistic bread.[9] Ensouling, or *empsychosis*, is an important transmission mode in this model for the ways imprinting or sealing showed the movement of the divine through the world. "The Spirit sealed the saint; his *pneuma* in turn sealed the column, the soil around it, and the *eulogiai* [tokens] made from this earth […]. This serial imprinting ensured continual access to the miraculous."[10] The movement of soul throughout matter is a compelling way of seeing chains of operation in Byzantine materiality, but it still stops short of according self-regulating agency to matter and leaves very often a bias in place that assumes the impression of form on matter.

Moreover, magic appears as an unproblematic term in her model and seems to stand straightforwardly for the way sacred power enters matter.[11] Sealing matter is a way the divine enters it, so matter becomes a passive field for the divine to spread its special potency in the world. Perhaps a(n impossible) parallel would be opening a circuit for electrical current that does not depend on the physical transfer of electrons for the passage of electric charge; in other words, disembodied electricity passes through matter without affecting or depending on it. This quasi-material magic also seems to stand for an animism, a belief that allows for a harnessing of nature, a.k.a. spirits, in inanimate objects.[12]

Both these usages, of magic and animism, are strikingly reminiscent of nineteenth-century precedents for a history of religion.[13] As sympathetic as Pentcheva is to her subject, she also works to create distance *to* it and *within* it: Byzantines belong to a more primitive world of shimmering effects that mesmerize its inhabitants, and all things obey their Cartesian compartmentalization.

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9 See Caseau 2014.

10 Pentcheva 2010, 34.

11 Pentcheva 2010, 30–31: "The potency of the ring stems both from the precious stone and the seal carved in it. It is this seal that controls the evil spirit: the *sphragis* of the master imprinted on all. Again the seal introduces the master-slave relationship." Similarly to my mind (*pace*) Caseau 2012. See, for example, Herva 2012, 74–75, on Greenwood 2009, who has "stressed that magic is not about belief or the supernatural but a form of knowledge. Magical practices, in her view, manipulate perception and consciousness which in turn restructure one's relationship with the world" and "artefacts can facilitate 'magical' connections with reality." The single quotation marks here do a lot of work.

12 Pentcheva 2010, 34.

13 See the Introduction to the present book.

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But this world was animist, and distance was not part of it. Many animisms exist and have existed, but they all posit (to generalize) a relational system among agents, a system that can potentially encompass human and nonhuman entities, as well as places and natural phenomena.[14] And such a system also depends on "serious, lively, socially relevant intellectual traditions and knowledges," ways of knowing "that would support an expression of animism." Without those features, we lapse into Romanticizing views of exotic and mystifying otherness.[15] So dialogue among participants, ontological flexibility, deeply and thoughtfully lived—these are explicit characteristics of animisms.[16] To plant spirit on matter and discuss it as manipulation is another system from animism altogether, one closer to that imagined by previous generations of historians of religions for their own purposes, which are now subject to historical analysis more than their erstwhile "animist" subjects.[17]

That preceding paragraph probably unfairly judges Pentcheva's argument (and lets others off the hook), but the lack of precision in basic definitions—and the dangerous assumptions behind those definitions that are offered—is strongly at odds with the clear competency in her mastery of sources and their historical settings. That discrepancy is difficult to assimilate. And yet the presentation of seals and stamps is forthright. To take the most important source for her argument, here is a passage from the great iconophile champion, St. Theodore of Stoudios (759–826): "A seal is one thing, and its imprint is another. Nevertheless, even before the impression is made, the imprint is in the seal. There could not be an effective seal that was not impressed on some material. Therefore, Christ also, unless he appears in an artificial image, is in this respect ideal and ineffective."[18] This formulation reveals "a perfect objective reciprocity between intaglio and imprint" for Pentcheva, and so we come to see in this way how the seal and its imprint in matter take on a theoretical symmetry—each relates to other in natural and obvious ways, each receives shared veneration, and each possesses mutually supportive identity for and with the other.

But wax has had almost no voice in this series of analyses (here both Pentcheva and Theodore are guilty), because it is an empty receiver, a passive field for signification, an invisible viscosity. Yet wax—indeed, matter—does not have limits; it arrives us; or, to put it bluntly: it has to be the *whole world*.[19] The miniature, the mere, stands for the mighty,

14 Curry 2006.

15 See, for example, Rooney 2006, 13.

16 Bird-David 2006, 48: "In the animistic cosmos, beings are invoked as participants and members of a single community of sharing. They cannot be depicted and looked at as objects. They have to be invoked and engaged with as co-subjects. They cannot be looked *at*; rather one has to look *with* them sharing a perspective." See also Bird-David 1993 and Bird-David 1999.

17 See, for example, Engelke 2012.

18 See Pentcheva 2010, 86; Roth 1981, 112.

19 Taussig 2009, 14: "To thus consciously see ourselves in the midst of the world is to enter into ourselves as image, to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for some other position that is not really a position at all but something more like swimming, more like nomads adrift in the sea, mother of all metaphor, that sea I call *the bodily unconscious*."

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as metaphor allows it to do. Wax is not empty, passive, invisible, however much texts seek to disappear it. Simply dripped or poured molten onto a surface, wax pools, oozes, spreads—depending on the surface, angle, temperature, all contingencies matter—and then it buckles, waves, sighs when pressed and penetrated by the metal seal, and then it holds that memory of shape and form, but with imperfect recall, since it is in viscous passage from solid to viscous and back to solid, and then it sits, lies legible and witnessing to a moment of intimate enveloping of itself on hard metal, but like memory—smoothed of some detail and intensified in others, the unpredictable import and pathos of one detail over another—still able to support and contain that inerasable contact.

How does it feel to traverse those states and senses? And what is at stake in asking that question? I'll argue that the second question should wait until the first is attempted. On the one hand, the imagining necessary for the first question means looking at texts, an imperfect way in and perhaps useful only as a negative exemplar (not because it's wrong as such, but because its basic premise is off). On the other, that waxy ontology is not our own, and not only will we have to think *wax*, but we will also have to think *past wax* (both in the senses of old wax and of distant wax, in each process done, passed, and ageing, aged).[20] Seals often declare identity, and identity with the person sealing (I am the seal of […]; I validate the letter of […]) or servitude to the saint portrayed (Saint […] help thy servant […] watch over me [owner, wax and document, presumably] […]). Theodore also gives intentionality to the seal, which "shows its desire for honor when it makes itself available for impression in many different materials." The seal is manifestly Christ himself here and takes upon itself to press pliant wax to that extra body.[21] Theodore also gives necessity—an effective seal is pressed into matter, otherwise it is ineffective. (And to carry the implications forward, Christ needs our resemblance more than we need his.)

Identity is transferred in this way and now legible in a new medium, but legible always as the medium allows and is able. I have focused on wax here, but wax is fragile, flakeable, and fragmentable, and it seldom survives.[22] As a result. the primacy or exclusivity of seal over wax is always too easily accepted. The linguistic content of so many seals, too, gives them authority over seemingly blank fields for representation. Words speak and represent and fix, and their hegemonic strength is expressed into the softened, yielding wax ground. But when the seal withdraws and the wax shows, only then does the incoherence of the seal clarify.[23] Illegible, reversed characters come to take on a new, fuller identity in matter. If theologians neglected that weakness of the seal (the incoherence of the divine) before matter arrives it, they had their reasons. We have less of an excuse for overlooking that gap in a confused self-expression (of God) and its real expression only on emergence in matter (in wax). This gap rather turns the tables in matter's favour.

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20 Most important precedent for this attempt is Didi-Huberman 2008.

21 Roth 1981, 112.

22 Very few wax impressions are extant. The majority by far of the impressions surviving are in lead, and are much more numerous than wax impressions.

23 www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/christian-jankowski-casting-jesus.

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Moreover, this language is lazily gendered: the wax is feminine (accepting, pliant, furrowed, fertile), and the seal is masculine (demanding, pressing, imprinting, withdrawing). It may reduce to an easy gender binary that was enforced by uniformly male theologians in the past. It also belongs to a long tradition in Western thought describing a binary-based cosmology of human thought and action on/in the world. That is to say, human agency, primarily mind generated, imposes its will on the environment, any environment, in which humans live. Here is another real danger of this metaphor so often deployed by theologians and accepted by art historians, and it is a trap laid by the great Aristotle himself—a productive mistake, but a wrong turn just the same. In the simplest formulation, being derives from matter and form, and body works with soul in this way to create a living, animate being. In that way, wax and the seal are a metaphor that Aristotle could prefer: just as wax takes its form from its seal or impress, so form and matter create a unity of body and soul.[24] This metaphor opened up a whole line of other metaphors that made making or action in the world a process of imposing form on matter, of mind projecting its will into the world.

Here is where mind, brain, will come to seem dominant. But really, how can any such system survive experience of the world we live in, which is after all a world of sense and matter independent of our desires? Theologians had an agenda, to be sure, and they were countering specific arguments about the essential relations of things to God. One side said images refer to a model by resemblance, custom, and even human frailty, while the other said such weak resemblance makes images beside the point, but in themselves images are too compelling, insistent, urgent, to be permitted. Both sides had only a few avenues open to counter those arguments, which are essentially right—everything *is* in relation to God, who filled the world with grace and presence—but it was a matter of submerging that relational position in other terms, for example, idolatry and decorousness, excessive and respectful veneration, correct and incorrect interpretations of the past. That's to say, the question is fairly simple, but also simplistic, because matter is either innocent or guilty in this debate. (As has been pointed out before, iconoclasts are far more invested in the independent power of made things than the so-called iconophiles; the former were aware, but afraid, the latter disingenuously found neutralizing language, always language, that ploughs once again in the ancient plots of Plato and Aristotle.)[25]

This statement can bring us back to wax's feelings, that is, to try to take matter's side again—and not to judge, just to empathize. A hand presses a seal (metal, stone, hard) into warm (even room temperature, let's say) wax. Hand and seal withdraw. Their work is brief. Look at (imagine) the wax field, its luscious, viscous spillage, pressed and peaked and left to cool and harden, over against (but really under and around) the imprint, which pushes out the wax into that frozen lava ooze. The first (only) thing you see, experience, is the wax, that uneven and splayed edging, and searching, an eye finds an image, verbal and/or figural, that coalesces on secondary inspection. That field is a little unsettling: it has shape and form insisted on by the seal, and yet it has other (its own) direction and dimensions in ruffing wax. It escapes a little its category (impres-

24 Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 412b5–6.

25 See Warner 2015.

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sion, but then it is not a real mirror of its seal, yet it is also not independent, because it exists in this form because of the seal); it is both still molten or viscous (it never quite loses that quality, even when cooled and dried) and yet compliant with the seal, too. No wonder theologians took the side of the seal. The wax is in fact defiant: it absorbs the seal's form, but submerges it, and (quasi-selflessly) wax lets the seal subside and withdraw into a spectre of itself.[26]

This chapter favours the particular ways matter constitutes itself, behaves, acts, and searches for its own meaning. In other words, it assumes we can observe how matter, the basic stuff of the world, plays a role in the unfolding of its own history. What results is a horizontal playing field that resists vertical ordering or stratigraphic description or temporal precedence; what results is a position *for* matter. And one might also claim that rather than showing how wax participated in its own negligence, the position taken here can also show how wax undermined that estimation of its passivity. That is, by reversing the order of the seal-wax hierarchy, we can see better how matter is the playing field through which the game is played, rather than upon.

The viscous can behave in a variety of ways. It can enfold and seep, withdraw and spread, as well as engulf and consume. Thinking through some implications of two late antique stone moulds in Jerusalem (at the museum of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum) can also open up, some other ways that the viscous is really how making works, as well as ways that molten materials can show relations and transformations (Figure 27). These moulds generally were used to make small souvenir tokens or flasks or ampullae for storing and carrying sacred substances, such as oil, water, or soil.[27] The first mould is two-sided, with scenes in both sides' carved cavity. The second, aniconic mould presumably, could have provided a nearly plain reverse that could have been fitted or soldered to the moulded obverse. The two figural sides could also have been cast and soldered to make a double-sided ampulla with

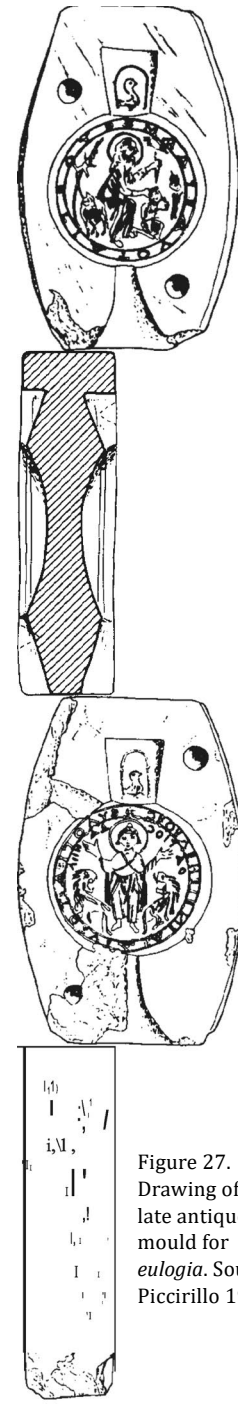

Figure 27. Drawing of late antique mould for *eulogia*. Source: Piccirillo 1994

26 Didi-Huberman 2008, 155: "The reality of the material turns out to be more troubling because it possesses a viscosity, a sort of activity and intrinsic force, which is a force of metamorphism, polymorphism, imperviousness to contradiction (especially the abstract contradiction between form and formlessness). Concerning the viscous, Sartre articulates very well how that activity, that 'sort of life,' can be symbolized or socialized only as an antivalue."

27 Piccirillo 1994.

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two scenes, heads and tails. One side shows the sacrifice of Isaac (labelled "evlogia tou avraam"), and the other has Daniel in the lions' den (labelled "o agios Daniel," "evlogia tou Daniel"). The two sides may have been connected with specific pilgrimage sites attached to the prophets, but the moulds were both found in different locations near Jerusalem and had some involvement in the pilgrimage trade.

The valve or opening at the bottom of the intact moulds is highly evocative, and it represents a kind of punctum, a passage of the object that emerges forcefully after the apparently necessary work of identifying and describing the figural portions is done, as it was above. In contrast to the cool, pale moulds—carved out of limestone—the valve represents a passage for change and othering. Bound together with a nonfigural backing, the moulds would be set upside-down so that the molten liquid could be poured into the receptacle created.[28] Cooled, the moulds would be separated, and an object with raised elements, figural and textual, would remain. Unlike wax (or lead) impressed by a seal, in these moulds, the viscous here stays elevated from the ground, lead or wax, after passing to a settled state.

So how does the molten *feel* in these different contexts in which it finds itself?[29] Warmed to its new, near-liquid consistency, wax pools against itself and drops into the moulds, leaving the wick's light to fall on the rough surface, which catches the fall and stops the rush, as the cooling air had already begun to do. How does that feel—to metamorphose and stay oneself? To travel across a state, return to oneself, but find oneself in a different form and place? Because then the hard form does descend and push, penetrate, and attempt to leave a seed of its own form in wax's forgiving, pulsed mound. Wax gets its own back by taking the other. The wax coats and blurs and swallows that form's insistence. The form or imprint in the moulds is never absolutely, entirely itself again. The pressing hand also stands back now and watches its work duck the intracting, hardening pool: not what the hand intended, but it never is.

Lead is a material that also needs addressing. Does lead feel differently, being poured and impressed into the moulds? Bright and silverish in its usual state, lead is also prone to tarnish and corrosion on exposure to air for any period of time. It has a relatively low melting point for a metal. And it responds to other metals and bonds easily with some. Lead's appearance changes to an even more intensely chrome-silver lustre as it forms a liquid state, and so as it readies to pour, it also intensifies its qualities. The lead fills, and the shallow indents in the stone are coated with this pooling metal, subsiding from its viscous state quickly and entering its condition of diminishing shine and increasing heft. Able to breathe once again with the removal of the forms, it is a new, less silvery thing,

28 Piccirillo 1994.

29 Symmetrical archaeology provides one model, to my mind, for this kind of writing, its worthwhile aspects and its solipsistic dangers. Olsen 2012, 220: "To extend ethical concerns and notions of care to also embrace things is not a question about anthropomorphizing them, turning things into human, but rather to respect their otherness and integrity." And as corrective: "Processes of embodiment may well have charged things with sociality and personality, but simultaneously silenced their own utterances. And if they speak, it is most likely our own voices that are heard."

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and it emerges as base, eldest of all (like Saturn, according to alchemists), hoary, heavy, hard, like that ancient god.

I raised and then deferred answering the questions of what is at stake in asking how it feels to traverse the states and senses of the viscous. Put succinctly, it is the nature of relationality manifest *as* feeling. "No-one has ever witnessed the great battle of simple entities," Michel Serres writes. "We only ever experience mixtures, we encounter only meetings."[30] And here we are born, each time, to the world. Aristotle talked about a sixth sense, a kind of *metasensum*, that mediated and articulated the working of the first five senses. Michel Serres treats that sixth sense as the skin, and perhaps this feeling surface is what we might take as the great common sense we all share, with which we meet and mix with the world. And in this case, the "we" includes wax and molten lead, the self-surfacing, viscous muck that heat makes, the substances whose inside and outsides became evident only vicariously as they wait for the next move to melt. Serres talks also about the discovery of the soul on skin, when skin touches skin, in those converging, excursive, and recursive accidents of self-touch. Maybe most significantly for Serres, the skin is the place where all entities meet and mingle.

We are born, each time, to the world, but so are objects, things, however we call entities we consign to nonfeeling. Images in the Byzantine world and into the present in Orthodox churches received intense sensual attention: kissing, fondling, stroking, leaning, embracing, and so on. They are still the concentrated focus still compelling tactile piety.[31] These things are not passive and are not without feeling, and they moreover create our place and time. According to Serres, if we tried to do without things, we would spin mindlessly and aimlessly; but things give us mind and a slower pace in which to have mind.[32] Without their contingencies, our own are very difficult to recognize, or even to have.

The viscous is a difficult state. Thus, wax has long been a particularly threatening substance. It is unstable, too contingent, perhaps reminding us too much of flesh or too

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30 Serres 2008, 28, and also 80: "The skin is a variety of contingency; in, through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge […]. I do not wish to call the place in which I live a medium, I prefer to say that things mingle with each other and that I am no exception to that, I mix the world which mixes with me." And Chrétien 2014, 85–86: "The most fundamental and universal of all the senses is the sense of touch. Coextensive for Aristotle with animal life, it appears and disappears with it […]. Every animated body is tactile […]. The first evidence of soul is the sense of touch […]. Touch is not primarily and perhaps not even ultimately one of the five senses: for Aristotle, touch is the necessary and sufficient condition for the emergence of an animated body, the perpetual basis for the possibility of human life and therefore eventually also of additional senses, which will always belong as such to a tactile body. Moreover the sense of touch, far from making the living organism into a mere spectator, pledges it to the world through and through, exposes it to the world and protects it from it. Touch bears life to its fateful, or felicitous, day."

31 See Caseau 2017.

32 Serres 1995b, 87: "The only assignable difference between animal societies and our own resides, as I have often said, in the emergence of the object. Our relationships, social bonds, would be as airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object, specific Hominidae, stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions. For an unstable band of baboons, social changes are flaring up every minute. One could characterize their history as unbound, insanely so. The object, for us, makes our history slow."

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little of the metaphoric.[33] According to Georges Didi-Huberman, that quality is what Jean-Paul Sartre must also have meant when he described the uncanniness of the viscous, that is, the ways it threatens and undermines.[34] Perhaps it is the antivalue of the viscous, wax and lead, that allows it to disappear not only from theological writings, such as those of Theodore of Stoudios, but also from art-historical writings on sense and representation. Perhaps the viscous undermines safe categories of representation, and it also threatens the authority of the seal, the metal or stone impress that tries to make wax the world in its own image, even if he really is Christ.

That threat was felt from the beginning of this sort of metaphoric manipulation of wax, and in conclusion, two texts—one from the fourth century and another from the fourteenth—can show the resilience of it, but from different directions. In the first place, Gregory Nazianzenus initiated a line of theological approach that denigrated the material and its effects at the expense of the noetic form of the divine. The menace of the wax is strongly felt in this rhetoric, but this expression is disingenuous, too,

> Let us take two seal rings, one is gold, the other iron, which bears the same engraved imperial image […]. Let us then impress these in the wax. What difference is there between the two seals? None. Look at the wax, and even if you are wise, can you tell me which form has been impressed with iron and which with gold? How then have these become the same? It is because the difference derives from the material and not the portrait.[35]

Can it really be the case (to answer one hypothetical with another) that iron and gold hold form in the same way and thus transmit it equally well? Gold is a much finer, ductile material that takes detail more easily than iron can. One might not be able to tell absolutely that a seal was gold or iron from its impression in wax, but the clues would be there in most cases, even for the not wise. The impression became the same because it suited Gregory's point. The textual quality of the metaphor gained the upper hand, and the wax continues to be silent. And yet the final sentence: the portrait or form does not differ from prototype to image, but differences do enter from choices in materials, that is, wax or something else changes form? So the material matrix is given its due indirectly. Here is the place, then, of metamorphosis, where form does change and Gregory's portrait takes shape and qualities that only the viscous can sense.

Antivalues can characterize wax and lead, but also pitch, or resin, or petroleum, or mud, because all can be unrealized being, and all can participate in processes of making and feeling. So in the second place and at the other end of the period, the fourteenth-

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33 Gombrich 1960, 60: "Such a bust may even look to them unpleasantly lifelike, transcending, as it were, the symbolic sphere in which it was expected to dwell, although objectively it may still be very remote indeed from the proverbial wax image, which often causes us uneasiness because it oversteps the boundary of symbolism."

34 Sartre 1943, 702–3, "Toucher du visquex, c'est risquer de se diluer en viscosité […]. L'horreur du visquex c'est l'horreur que le temps devienne visquex, que la facticité ne progresse continûment et insensiblement et n'aspire le Pour-soi qui "l'existe" […]. [L]a viscosité se révèle soudain comme symbole d'une antivaleur, c'est-à-dire d'un type d'être non réalisé, mais menaçant, qui va hanter perpétuellement la conscience comme le danger constant qu'elle fuit et, de ce fait, transforme soudain le projet d'appropriation en projet de fuite." See Didi-Huberman 2008, 154.

35 *Patrologiae Graecae* 36, 396C; Barber 2007, 137–38.

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century theologian Neophytus Prodromenus, a continuator of iconophile theology, used the seal as a metaphor for the innocence of matter. The chain of models extends here from the emperor, his hand, wax, and so on, and participant matter strikingly expands to include several types of the viscous:

> Consider the example of an image of the emperor engraved on a seal ring. This might now be impressed in wax, in pitch, or in mud. For while the seal [image] is one and invariable in them, the materials are different; hence the seal [image] also remains in the ring, separated from the [materials] in thought. It is the same for the likeness of Christ, since no matter which medium presents this, it has nothing to do with these materials, but remains in the person of Christ.[36]

The language has not clarified since the fourth century, but the use of pitch and mud as another kind of semiliquid/solid for sensing and showing relation with the divine reveals the ongoing usefulness of the viscous for these theologians.

Theologians believed that viscous matter was doing one thing, but really it was doing the other. It looked like it was passively receiving and like it could be tamed by this metaphor, but naturally, matter outside of text behaves like itself—because it feels like it. In this way, perhaps, the viscous approaches a place of antivalue from which consciousness flees and is haunted by it still, itself becoming a kind of uncanny wax, lead, mud, pitch. How each might feel about this accusation is a different subject from what the theologians are relating, but the seal needs to suppress such apparent gains of the liquid over the solid (to paraphrase Sartre). Nevertheless, the viscous here can feel its way to escape those confines and breathe and act beyond text and seal.

In the end, sight is a very unreliable way into the world.[37] But art historians use it so often to think sense. At issue is perhaps the resistance to the viscous and messy that making partly serves; the wax, mud, pitch, and lead travelled that making path only to be made into something clean and clear for the eye to apprehend and master. If we allow ourselves to step back and see a common skin (or flesh) for the world, maybe the mutual materiality emerges in ways that allow self-knowing likewise to enter passages of solidity and melting.[38] This claim to speak for those things is presumptuous, and it serves only us. But to locate our mutual, overlapping skins (and Serres's souls) is a kind of victory, provisional, fragile, and forever too bound in speaking about it.

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36 Barber 2015: 216 (Greek) and 222.

37 Again Serres 2008, 67: "Sight is pained by the sight of mixture. It prefers to distinguish, separate, judge distances; the eye would feel pain if it were touched. It protects itself and shies away. Our flexible skin adapts by remaining stable. It must be thought of as variety […]. It apprehends and comprehends, implicates and explicates, it tends towards the liquid and the fluid, and approximates mixture."

38 Connor 2005, 168: "This intolerance of the exteriority represented by death and degradation makes for a certain paradoxical claustration in Serres's work, makes it a monism of the manifold. There is nothing Serres can with do with it, because there is nothing anyone can do with it, this slow going, this ungraspable, unknowable, unignorable squandering of energy that in the end is what we will have amounted to. There is nothing we can do with it, though it has everything to do with us."

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EPILOGUE

> Taken, given; offered, received: my tattoo, my body, my desire. And now, my memory. Mine: because the gift of another. Mine: because read by you.
>
> —Virginia Burrus, "Macrina's Tattoo"

I have tried in the course of this book to describe not only how *Byzantine Things in the World* happened and meant in 2013, but also the ways (for me, at least) *Byzantine Things* (with and without italics) have kept inserting itself/themselves *into* the world, that is, their ongoing work on me, their incessant, gentle teaching and formation. I was guilty of a certain pride at the opening of the show in May 2013; maybe I can be forgiven: it was a wonderful team project. But I was patiently corrected in my overweeningly human-centred stance by the things, Byzantine and other, who showed me a silent, surplussing richness. I was fortunate to have the time and resources to watch, consider, and accept some (never all) of what they could reveal to me. I felt I had become related—in the sense of entering into a relational communion that now only exists in my memory, but that is, in/after the event, no less vivid in its effects.

My memory is deeply imprinted by the now-gone Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum. Even the body memory of hot, bright humidity changed to cool, luminous intensity is constantly with me. Leading students into that revelation of peerless Cypriot beauty was a deeply satisfying experience every time. But now it is gone, as I've described in the chapters above, and I have only that body memory—that skin-depth of knowing, a depth so much more profound than the sense we habitually use our "skin deep" to mean.

Byzantine skin, like every past skin, is not recoverable in any true way. But we know their skin was also permeable, as was the skin of every other thing in that world. This book has tried to include a wide range of things, to be as inclusive as possible, but it has neglected manuscripts, those gatherings of skin, ink, pigments, and other materials. But these things, too, were living, bleeding bodies; they spoke and felt and acted and bodied themselves in all the real ways.[39] And the skin shared and spread across all things felt across all senses.

So why not mine, as an offering and remembering and inclusion? In July 2017, I spent two afternoons in the studio of Joshua Lord having those hopes addressed. I was gifted the Archangel Michael to my inner left arm: red-purple robed, leaning away from sight in his perpetual prayer, and glancing back over his right shoulder at me. Drawn from the lower rim of the dome of the Lysi chapel, the gathering waves of prayer of angels, Mary and John the Baptist, always about to crest in Christ's taking of that ready seat. That angel on my skin keeps me in that pavilion in Houston, in that country chapel outside Lysi, even in the icon hall in Nicosia, and it gathers them into me. I hope to have added a second angel by the time you read this, a second to make the circuit on my arm complete, a readied hope coiled like the fresco. So many skins folded into mine, and more, if I am still this fortunate, to come.

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39 See Peers 2004, 35–58, and Coogan 2018, 377: "As an object, the Christian book was active, present, animate." See also Kristensen 2012, 125–28, on tattooing.

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