Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observations

Matthew Rampley

Introduction

One of the more striking recent developments in art history has been an intensive engagement with the role of agency. According to this, works of art are no longer understood to be merely the passive recipients of the art historian's gaze, instead, emphasis has been placed on their active role. As Keith Moxey has suggested, the work of art should be treated as 'an agent in the creation of its own reception.'[1]

The forms this interest has taken are various. Some more prominent examples include Horst Bredekamp's theory of image acts, Caroline van Eck's work on living presence, or Georges Didi-Huberman's attempts to rethink the meaning of art historical temporality.[2] In the anthropology of art, agency was central to Alfred Gell's attempt to redefine the scope of the field, while there is also a growing interest in the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour.[3] Ideas of agency have also been closely intertwined with elaborations on affect. Concern with the latter has been particularly prominent in literary and textual criticism, but it is part of a much larger phenomenon.[4] At the moment of writing, the Freie Universität in Berlin, for example, is host to a wide-ranging research project devoted to the study of 'affective' cultures.[5] Affect theory is a slightly belated arrival in art history, but it has become a growing presence in the guise of what Todd Cronan has, in a slightly different context, termed 'affective formalism.'[6] This is the idea that the aesthetic experience is based on bodily and affective sensations and that works of art thereby exert a hold on the spectator. In other words, the encounter with artworks, rather

[1] Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: the Image in History*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, 3.
[2] Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans. Elizabeth Clegg, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018; Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015; Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.
[3] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[4] See, for example, Donald R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, London: Palgrave, 2017.
[5] Key publications include: Antje Kahl, ed., *Analyzing Affective Societies: Methods and Methodologies*, London: Routledge, 2019; Jan Slaby and Christian van Sleve, eds, *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, London: Routledge, 2019.
[6] Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

than being founded on reflective judgement, is driven by something much more visceral over which the spectator has little control.

Ernst van Alphen has stressed the importance of the 'affective operations' of art and literature, which he describes in terms of the physiological impact on the viewer caused by the 'transmission' of affect by the work of art. Affects are the 'physiological shifts accompanying a judgment. The physiological shift takes place as a result of the evaluative, positive or negative, orientation toward an object or other person. This notion of affect as physiological in character also suggests that affects are not the same as feelings. Feelings include something more than a physiological shift or sensory stimulation. They suppose a unified interpretation of that shift or stimulation.'[7] In other words, there is a dimension to the experience of art that has no particular content, it consists just of 'energetic intensities,' and, as such, resists rationalisation.

The interest in affect and agency is motivated not merely by an attempt to re-engage with the emotional dimensions of art, or to persuade art historians to vacate what James Elkins once referred to as the 'ivory tower of tearlessness.'[8] It is also underpinned by a conviction that attending to the affective qualities of the aesthetic experience has consequences for how we might conceive the history of art. To cite Moxey again: 'The aesthetic power of works of art, the fascination of images and their capacity to shape our response in the present, argues against treating them as if they were simply documents of particular historical horizons.'[9] In other words, the work of art loses its anchoring in a fixed historical moment, throwing into question the idea of the history of art as an orderly succession. The notion of art as an agent thus has potentially wide-ranging significance and some of the authors mentioned have advanced ambitious claims as to what that might be. However, what does it mean to talk about agency in art? In what ways is a work of art an agent and how does this relate to the affectivity of the spectator? What is the theoretical basis for the claim about art's agency, and how coherent is it as a proposition?

Aesthetic agency in the Florentine Renaissance

These questions may seem to be recent, but they were explored over a century ago by Aby M. Warburg. In a lecture delivered in December 1927, less than two years before his death, Warburg described how, when he went to Florence as a student in the 1880s, he was struck by the visual qualities of the paintings he saw there; their energetic and dynamic aesthetic properties contradicted much that he had learnt in

[7] Ernst van Alphen, 'Affective Operations of Art and Literature', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53/54, 2008, 24.
[8] James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, London: Routledge, 2004, 70-83.
[9] Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: the Image in History*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, 139.

the seminar rooms at university.[10] 'Already even then' he notes, 'the hypernervous movement of Filippino [Lippi], for example, came across to me as an incomprehensible intrusion, and practically like some monstrous revolt against the laws of compact beauty …'[11]

A crucial question was how to explain such a 'monstrous revolt.' The recent publication of his theoretical jottings and notes on the 'theory of expression' (*Ausdruckskunde*) indicates that he was an avid reader of contemporary aesthetics, psychology and anthropology at the time, and was looking for possible answers to this question.[12] They coalesced into a coherent set of ideas in his doctoral thesis on Botticelli, in which he argued that it was not enough simply to *document* the intellectual and literary sources of Renaissance imagery. Rather, its aesthetic qualities had psychological roots: 'we can observe how, amongst circles of creative artists, a sensitivity for the aesthetic act of empathy became, as it developed, a force in the shaping of style.'[13]

The theory of empathy, much discussed in aesthetics and psychology in the final decades of the nineteenth century, provided a crucial conceptual framework for him. Spurred on by his experience of Hopi culture during his visit to New Mexico in 1896, Warburg took empathy to denote not merely a psychological act or capacity, but also a specific stage in human cognitive development, namely, primitive and undifferentiated absorption in the objective world. This would be the conceptual foundation of all his subsequent work. A *lack* of distance was evident, he argued, in the various religious rituals of the Hopi in New Mexico. Masked dancers assumed the identity of antelopes and other significant animals, during the serpent ritual dancers act out the role of the snake. For Warburg the serpent 'was and remains to the present day … a manifest symbol of the development from impulsive-magical assimilation to spiritualized distancing …'[14] For, as he stated baldly in the Introduction to the *Mnemosyne* Atlas, 'The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization.'[15]

This idea became a template for his theory of aesthetic response in general. As he later recollected, 'it would become clear to me that I saw the identity or, rather more, the indestructibility of primitive man, who is the same at all times, such that I

[10] Aby Warburg, 'Vom Arsenal zum Laboratorium', in Warburg, *Werke*, ed. Martin Treml, Sigrid Weigel and Perdita Ludwig, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018, 683-94.
[11] Warburg, 'Vom Arsenal zum Laboratorium', *Werke*, 685.
[12] Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, eds, Hans Christian Hönes and Ulrich Pfisterer, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015.
[13] Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 1999, 39-40.
[14] Warburg, 'Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer', in *Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika*, 83.
[15] Aby Warburg, 'The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past', trans. M. Rampley, *Art in Translation* 1.2, 2009, 276.

could also put him on display as an organism in the culture of the early Florence Renaissance just as I did later in the German Reformation.'[16]

Warburg thereby summarised the principal conceptual ingredients of his project: analysis of Renaissance culture against the background of anthropological interests and the idea of certain human psychological constants. His understanding of empathy was also informed by his well-documented discovery Charles Darwin's book *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, first published in 1872 and translated into German the same year.[17] Darwin tracked the evolutionary origins of human bodily gestures by observing the similarities with animal behaviour. Emotions bind together mental contents and the body, he argued, a relation evident in the expression of emotions, such as facial gestures. Some gestures may be culturally *learned*, but others appear to be *universal*, he argued, and are thus part of our evolutionary inheritance, with parallels in the domain of non-human animals.

Warburg derived from Darwin, therefore, the idea of a stock of bodily gestures that serve as visible signs of emotions, themselves grounded in the human body. Empathy theory in Warburg was therefore a theory of biological response and provided a crucial basis for the final important concept in his thinking: the artwork as *pathos formula*. The latter is a representation of the emotions crystallised into a repeatable form through the medium of stylised bodily gesture, and Warburg referred to the pathos formula as an 'engram of affective.[18] In this he was borrowing a notion from the Lamarckian theory of memory of the evolutionary biologist Richard Semon. Semon argued that experiences *inscribe* themselves on organisms, making permanent physical changes ('mnemic traces') in the nervous system, and thereby becoming inherited characteristics. The pathos formula is thus not merely a *representation* of human emotion, it bears the *traces* of ancient emotions. It was this that much Renaissance painting, classical art and the serpent ritual of the Hopi had in common: all were the expression, via the depiction of human gesture, of the memory of primitive, prehistoric, experience much of which Warburg viewed as traumatic. Hence, as Warburg concluded in the introduction to the *Mnemosyne* atlas:

> … It is in the area of mass orgiastic seizure that one should seek the mint that stamps the expressive forms of extreme inner possession on the memory with such intensity—inasmuch as it can be expressed through gesture—that these engrams of affective experience survive in the form of a heritage preserved in the memory.[19]

The power of images

[16] Warburg, 'Reise-Erinnerungen aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer', in 'Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer', 106.
[17] Charles Darwin, *Der Ausdruck der Gemüthsbewegungen bei dem Menschen und den Thieren*. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von J. Victor Carus, Stuttgart: E. Schweizerbart'sche Verlagshandlung, 1872. For Warburg's account see 'Vom Arsenal zum Laboratorium', 687-8.
[18] The crucial work by Semon was *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens*, Leipzig: Ernst Seemann, 1904.
[19] Warburg, 'The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past', 278.

For many decades after his death, Warburg's preoccupations were largely ignored. The Institute that bears his name largely contented itself with a positivistic cataloguing of iconographic survivals from the classical world. In the 1980s, however, this aspect of his thinking enjoyed renewed interest. One of the first revivals was *The Power of Images* by David Freedberg.[20] Taking Warburg's dictum 'We see it, but it does not harm us' as the motto of the opening chapter, it was an exercise in the history of the response to works of art in European societies.[21] Yet in contrast to commonplace understandings of reception theory as focusing on art criticism and history, literary responses to works of art or works by subsequent artists, Freedberg analysed the behaviour of viewers in the face of images and artworks. These ranged from religious awe and devotion to fear, horror, laughter and sexual arousal. Such emotions and behaviours could not be attributed to socio-historical factors, he argued; their roots were much deeper. Hence, his aim was:

> to develop a mode of discourse about arousal by image that bears on the general relations between images and people, and on cognition – not on conditioning. If we concluded that the only thing that could be said about the sexual responses postulated in the case of the picture known as the *Venus of Urbino* was that they were the product of male conditioning, male determining, and male possession, then the overall project would be threatened.[22]

The historical examples he cited, ranging from consecration rites in Sri Lanka and classical Greece, to the Christian cult of relics, 17th century *ex votos* in Bavaria and Perugia, the treatment of statues as living presences in 16th century Italy, and the iconoclastic campaigns of Calvinism, supported his general argument in favour of the need for an expansive theory of aesthetic response. Its appeal to the idea of a *universal* image response transcending cultures was an overt challenge to traditional reception theory. Indeed, provocatively, Freedberg suggested that theories emphasising the importance of cultural mediation were the product of a psychological urge to repress the power of images.[23]

The Power of Images lacked a wider theoretical underpinning; even though it mentioned psychological factors it did not developed a more theoretically cogent response. Its methodological and conceptual sources were nevertheless, clear. Freedberg did not use the classic *topoi* and themes of Warburg, such as *Nachleben*, pathos formula or cultural memory, but as the opening quotation indicated, *The*

[20] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989.
[21] This is a slight misquotation of Warburg's original statement in 'Basic Fragments towards a Monistic Psychology of Art': 'You are alive but can't harm me' (*Du lebst und tust mir nichts*). Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, 5.
[22] Freedberg, *The Power of Images,* 318.
[23] As Freedberg asks: 'Why the rigorous insistence by Nelson Goodman that resemblance is nothing but inculcation, that likeness is not merely but wholly conventional and symbolic? … Because … of fear.' Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 427.

Power of Images was guided by the latter's *general* interest in the psychodynamics of image response. Warburg's primitivism, his inclination to view the affective power of images as rooted in their ability to generate atavistic urges, played an important role. Moreover, like Warburg, too, Freedberg jumped from one period and culture to another, deliberately avoiding any sense of chronological development. Like the wide-ranging comparisons Warburg drew between such diverse examples as the Laocoon, the Hopi serpent ritual, the iconography of Italian fascism, the Arch of Constantine, fifteenth-century Burgundian *arazzi*, and Mesopotamian divination, Freedberg examined practices *across* time and space in order to demonstrate the prevalence of certain general features of human affectivity.

The Power of Images coincided with a revival of interest in Warburg on the part of scholars in Germany.[24] In contrast to Ernst Gombrich's intellectual biography of Warburg, for a long time the only substantial study on the scholar, this revival had a very specific focus: the anthropological themes in his work.[25] In place of Warburg the scholar of the classical tradition, reflecting the way his legacy was maintained by the Warburg Institute in London, the new wave of interest was preoccupied above all with Warburg the cultural theorist. His art historical concerns were treated as secondary to his anthropological explorations. Indeed, Horst Bredekamp, one of the key figures of the Warburg Renaissance, has since tried to situate Warburg in a tradition of 'liberal ethnology' instantiated in the work of authors such as Franz Boas, Karl von den Steinen and Adolf Bastian.[26] It was indicative of this general outlook, perhaps, that the first of Warburg's works to be re-published in a modern accessible edition was the lecture on the serpent ritual, both in German and a new English translation.[27]

The implications of this focus require interrogation, however. Broadly speaking, Warburg understood anthropology to be the study of primitive mentalities – as part of the project of examining the evolution of human cognition. This approach was common around the turn of the century, but it also had long been criticised as entangled in contradictions. Already in the 1960s and 1970s authors such as Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas moved the focus of anthropology towards the study of systems of signification, and subsequently scholars such as G.

[24] Werner Hofmann, Georg Syamken and Martin Warnke, *Die Menschenrechte des Auges: Über Aby Warburg*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1980; Roland Kany, *Mnemosyne als Programm: Geschichte, Erinnerung und die Andacht zum Unbedeutenden im Werk von Usener, Warburg und Benjamin*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987; Dorothee Bauerle, *Gespenstergeschichten für Ganz Erwachsene: Ein Kommentar zu Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Münster: Lit, 1988; Dieter Wuttke, *Aby M. Warburgs Methode als Anregung und Aufgabe*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990; Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, Charlotte Schoell-Glass and Andreas Beyer, eds, *Aby Warburg: Akten des internationalen Symposiums Hamburg 1990*, Weinheim: VCH, 1991.

[25] Sir Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1970.

[26] Horst Bredekamp, *Aby Warburg, der Indianer: Berliner Erkundungen einer liberalen Ethnologie*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 2019.

[27] Aby Warburg, *Schlangenritual: Ein Reisebericht*, ed. Ulrich Raulff, Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988; *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. Michael P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

E. R. Lloyd, for example, identified the inconsistencies that talk of 'mentality' produces, not least, the difficulty it has in accommodating the plurality of often incommensurable ideas and beliefs observable in any single culture.[28] Lloyd proposed interpreting cultural practices in terms of social contexts of communication rather than as the expression of some collective mentality.

At first sight it would appear anachronistic to criticise Warburg for adhering to an approach that was so widespread in the early 1900s, but there are two reasons for maintaining a sceptical stance. The first is that even in his lifetime, contemporaries were proposing alternative models of anthropological research. Franz Boas's *The Mind of Primitive Man* of 1911, for example, demolished the idea of the evolution of cognition on which Warburg relied. The difference between 'primitive' and 'civilised' man, he argued, was a function of cultural inheritance and learning, not some basic psychological difference.[29] A few years later Bronisław Malinowski redefined anthropology as the analysis of social relations, precisely because he deemed talk of collective mentalities problematic.[30]

Even if we suspend criticism of Warburg on this issue, we might be less generous to those authors involved in the reception of his work in the 1980s and 1990s, for doing little to move beyond the conception of anthropology with which he was working. In other words, where most anthropological research has been oriented towards the discursive and social contexts of cultural practices, the reception of Warburg continued to be sympathetic to his forays into a naturalistic theory of human culture concordant with much anthropological thinking in his own time. Indeed, Otto Werckmeister launched a fierce invective against the emphasis on anthropology in the Warburg Renaissance.[31] It represented, he argued, a collective loss of nerve on the part of radical art historians in Germany, which was all the more surprising given Bredekamp's role as a pioneer of social art history in the early 1970s.[32] Warburg professed to be concerned with the social milieu of art, albeit in a somewhat unsystematic manner, but the focus on the latter's anthropological investigations were, for Werckmeister, a turn *away* from inquiry into art as a social practice, and an embrace of an ideologically problematic, naturalistic, notion of culture and the image.

Freedberg's disavowal of social 'conditioning' and his emphasis on the 'general relations' between images and people can be seen in this context. Indeed, a

[28] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973; Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Cresset Press, 1970; G. E. R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
[29] Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man,* New York: Macmillan, 1911. See, especially 'The Mental Traits of Primitive Man and Civilized Man' (pp. 95-123).
[30] Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922; *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1927.
[31] Otto Werckmeister, 'The Turn from Marx to Warburg in West German Art History 1968-1990' in Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, London: Pluto Press, 2006, 213-20.
[32] Bredekamp's *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte. Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, was a crucial text in this regard.

parallel enterprise was evident in Hans Belting's project of an anthropology of the image, with which he also launched the idea of a science of the image (*Bildwissenschaft*), with the goal of analysing the universal and trans-cultural functions of the image.[33] The basis of this project was the idea that the image is a double of the body: 'a change in the experience of the image is the expression of a change in the experience of the body. For this reason the cultural history of the image is reflected in the cultural history of the body.'[34] Certain types of image, ranging from death-masks to effigies, *moulages*, portraits, served as paradigms of the image in general, since it expressed a universal concern with historicity, death and the body. Indeed, to cite Belting: 'The image of the dead is no anomaly but rather the primal meaning of the image *per se*. The dead are always absent, death an unbearable absence that one fills with the image in order to render it bearable.'[35] Belting's focus differed from Freedberg, but common to both was the attempt to sketch out the contours of a naturalistic theory, and the connection to the body betrayed, too, the Warburgian roots of the idea. Like Freedberg, too, Belting's study was conceptually underdetermined. Whereas, *Likeness and Presence*, his much-admired discussion of late antique and medieval image cults, offered a rich and comprehensive history of his subjects, the implication being that presence and agency in images was culturally framed, he abandoned this in *Anthropology of the Image* in favour of a concern with *universal* features of experience and the body, but one that lacked theoretical specification.[36]

The lack of overarching conceptual narrative in *The Power of Images* may explain why, some fifteen years after its publication, Freedberg gravitated towards the growing interest in neuroscience. For he co-authored a number of papers with the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, well known for having discovered 'mirror neurons.'[37] The latter are a class of neurons activated both when a subject *performs* a specific action, and also when the subject observes *another* performing the same action.[38] To observe is the same as to do. As Gallese notes, 'To observe objects is therefore equivalent to automatically evoking the most suitable motor program required to interact with them. Looking at objects means to unconsciously "simulate" a potential action.'[39] According to this theory, viewing paintings and

[33] Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Munich, 2001.
[34] Ibid, 23.
[35] Ibid, 144.
[36] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, trans. Edmond Jephcott, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994. In a subsequent study of the face and the mask, Belting drew back from this embrace of naturalism and studied the face as a semiotic object. Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J, Hansen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.
[37] David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, 'Motion, Emotion and Empathy', in Esthetic Response', in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11.5, 2007, 197-203; 'Mirror and Canonical Neurons are Crucial Elements in Esthetic Response', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11.10, 2007, 411.
[38] G. di Pellegrino, L. Fadiga, L. Fogassi, V. Gallese, and G. Rizzolatti, 'Understanding motor events: a neurophysiological study', *Experimental Brain Research*, 91, 1992, 176-80.
[39] Vittorio Gallese, 'The Inner Sense of Action: Agency and Motor Representations', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, 2000, 31.

sculptures evokes a physical reaction (mimicry) through the operation of the mirror neurons that replicate the original neural processes that underlay the original acts of artistic creation.[40] Observing the brushstrokes of Franz Kline, an artist Freedberg discusses at length in one his essays co-written with Gallese, activates the same neural networks Kline mobilised when he first painted his works.[41]

For Freedberg neuroscientific research, and mirror neurons in particular, suggested that the power of images could be attributed to a causal relation linking image response to a basic neurological mechanism. Its attraction is understandable, since it offers a theoretical underpinning for the concern with the 'general relations of people and images' that he had outlined in his earlier work. Others have shown a similar interest in the heuristic potential of mirror neuron theory for the humanities. In *Getting Inside your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture*, Lisa Zunshine has postulated that the avidness with which literary fictions are read is attributable, in part, to the operations of mirror neurons, which make us cognitively 'hungry.' Specifically, we project ourselves eagerly into the minds of fictional others in literary works in order to imagine the intentions both of the author and also of fictional characters, for 'we must have neural circuitry that is powerfully attuned to the presence, behaviour and emotional display of other members of our species … the functioning of mirror neuron systems underlies everyday mind attribution.'[42]

Pathos formula and affect

The embrace of specifically neuroscientific theories remains a minority, albeit growing, pursuit in the history of art; nevertheless, it exemplifies a broader recent interest in naturalistic accounts of image response. I noted earlier the work of van Alphen, whose theory of affect, informed by Deleuze, is based on the central role of physiological states; while affects can lead to psychological states, they are not psychological, they are physiological transformations.[43] Warburg's notion of the *pathos formula* has become the object of especial interest in this context. The pathos formula is a representation of the emotions that have crystallised into a repeatable form through the medium of bodily gesture; it designates, to cite Giorgio Agamben, 'an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in

[40] David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, 'Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience', *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 11.5, 2007, 197-203.
[41] Beatrice Sbriscia-Foretti, Cristina Berchio, David Freedberg, Vittorio Gallese, and Maria Allesandra Umiltà, 'ERP Modulation during Observation of Abstract Paintings by Franz Kline', *Plos One*, 8.10, 2013, 1-12.
[42] Lisa Zunshine, *Getting Inside your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, 4.
[43] Van Alphen, 'The Affective Operations of Art and Literature', 25. See, too, Ernst van Alphen and Tomá Jirsa, *How To Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, Leiden: Brill, 2019.

which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content.'[44] What has caught the attention of many commentators is not merely the pathos formula as a stylised representation of the human body, but also the implications of its role as a vehicle of the emotions and collective memory. It preserves primitive emotions from the past but, given the central role of empathy in aesthetic viewing, it is also capable of transmitting those preserved emotions to the viewer and thereby reawakening them. For Warburg the work of art is an emotional relay from the past to the present. One can detect here structural similarities to Freud's essays on mourning, melancholia and traumatic repetition, although Warburg appears to have been hardly aware of Freud.[45] The submission to the pathos formula's ability to transmit traumas of the past parallels Freud's analysis of the instinctual compulsion to repeat 'the repressed memory traces of [the patient's] primeval experiences', based on the 'urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things ….'[46]

Conceived in this way, the pathos formula has also been taken as demanding reflection on notions of historical time in art history. Georges Didi-Huberman has highlighted Warburg's heightened sensitivity to the disorder of historical time, to the constant irruption of atavistic Dionysian emotions into the world of Renaissance humanist leaning, or to the 'eternally recurring beast' of anti-Semitism and its reliance on ancient mythic stereotypes and images of Jews.[47] As Didi-Huberman has stated: 'No longer imaginable as an unbroken river, where accruals are carried from up- to downstream, tradition should, after Warburg, be conceived as a tense dialectic, a drama that unfolds between the river's flow and its whirling eddies …' [48] Didi-Huberman has drawn on Warburg to launch a more general criticism of art history. Taking Erwin Panofsky as representative of the discipline as a whole, he has criticised what he called the exorcism of 'impure time' in Panofsky, by which he means the latter's concern to place historical and art historical events in an objective chronological framework that guaranteed 'a meaningful relation between events that occur in different subjectively experienced times.'[49] The basic system of iconological analysis presented in the introduction to *Studies in Iconology*, with the tripartite scheme of pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological interpretation,

[44] Giorgio Agamben, 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 90.
[45] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', and 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, 251-72 and 275-338.
[46] Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 308.
[47] See, on this topic, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus: Kulturwissenschaft als Geistespolitik,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998.
[48] Didi-Huberman, 'Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of impure Time', *Common Knowledge* 9.2, 2003, 276.
[49] Erwin Panofsky, 'Reflections on Historical Time', trans. Johanna Bauman, *Critical Inquiry*, 30.4, 2001, 691-701. Originally published as the untitled epilogue to 'Über die Reihenfolge der vier Meister von Reims', in Ernst Gall, ed., *Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin and Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1927, 77-82.

is also relevant here.[50] It is not necessary to explore the details, but rather to consider its purpose: namely, the construction of a systematic and scientific history of art that helped tie down the meaning of individual works of art and establish their historical place. For Didi-Huberman, works of art are thereby 'tamed' and disciplined as objects of scientific knowledge.

Didi-Huberman is perhaps the best-known exponent of this rethinking of art historical time, but the idea of trans-historic relays, of the disruption of the ordered chronology of art, is now an increasingly familiar topos. It functions on a number of different levels. On the one hand it relates to Moxey's insistence that 'historical time is not universal but heterochronic … time does not move at the same speed in different places. The history of art faces the disconcerting possibility that the time it imagines, history's very architecture, is neither uniform nor linear but rather multivalent and discontinuous.'[51] In other words, societies do not change and develop at a uniform rate and in a uniform manner; in the place of a single narrative that can encompass all societies on a global scale, one has to contend with the irreducible plurality of histories at a local scale. On the other, it means that the works of art themselves are in possession of properties that enable them to transcend the temporal limits of the time of their making. Hence, Moxey states, the 'aesthetic power of the work of art transcends its location within any particular historical structure or sequence' and, further, 'Synchrony, the contemporaneity of aesthetic experience, outweighs diachrony, the location of that experience in a historical continuum. Anachronism, once the historian's greatest sin, becomes the means by which to allow the past to speak.'[52] The work of art's ability to speak to the emotions of the viewer, *at any time*, constitute its agency and ability to transcend the limitations of history.

The pathos formula is central, too, to Griselda Pollock's exploration of the sacred and the feminine. Pollock characterises Warburgian *Kulturwissenschaft* as a 'visual psychology of the persistence of paganism through the image', a psychology that places us at the 'crossroad between human consciousness and imagination, on the one hand, and the mysteries of life and death on the other, between thought and body, corporeality and meaning.'[53] Time and anachronism are central to her project, for, she argues:

> Warburg proposed a different concept of time - not directional, developmental, and historicist but bending, recurring, repetitive, and, above all, traumatic. Warburg thought the nascent discipline of art history failed

[50] Erwin Panofsky, 'Introductory', *Studies in Iconology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, 3-17.
[51] Moxey, *Visual Time: the Image in History*, 1.
[52] Ibid, 30-31.
[53] Griselda Pollock. 'Sacred Cows: Wandering in Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Anthropology', in Pollock and Victoria Turvey-Sauron, eds, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, London: Routledge, 2007, 12-13.

> because it was plotting out the histories of art without returns or that which resurfaces and recharges, that is, without *Nachlass*.[54]

There is a confluence too, she suggests, of his rethinking of art historical time with feminist attempts to rethink temporality, such as Julia Kristeva's idea of 'women's time.'[55] For in place of time as 'project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding, time as departure, progression and arrival – in other words, the time of history', Kristeva posits a time of female subjectivity marked by 'repetition and eternity … cycles, gestation and the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm.'[56] Agency are affect are intertwined, for it is through the transmission of affect that the work of art exercises agency. The pathos formula, for example, as an 'engram of affective experience', possesses agency; it imposes itself on the viewer and summons up the Dionysian past. The *pathos formula*, a 'dense focal [point] of nonconventional, nonarbitrary signification … has the power to persist through all the corruptions of contingent history.'[57] The artwork-as-agent, disrupting art historical time, is no longer a mute artefact, it speaks to the present from the past, often in disturbing ways.

For Moxey, time, that 'inscrutable force that passes through all things …' is also an agent, but this is also related to the agency of works of art.[58] Specifically: 'Anachronic (not anachronistic) time, on the other hand, refers to the power inherent in objects to exceed the parameters of their chronological circumstances … It is the time of "enchantment," most often partnered with the aesthetic reception of works of art—their capacity to entrance viewers beyond their own temporal horizon.'[59] Enchantment is the guiding concept here rather than affect, but the argument is the same.

Not all authors explicitly invoke affect theory when they talk of agency. Horst Bredekamp has also developed a wide-ranging account of visual culture on the basis of the idea of the image as agent. *Image Acts*, subtitled *A Systemic Approach to Visual Agency*, echoes Warburg's interest in evolutionary theories by referring to the active *enargeia* of the image (a term from classical Greek poetics denoting the ability of rhetoric to stir the imagination of the listener) that renders it more than the merely passive object of the viewer's gaze.[60] However, Bredekamp speculates that the agency of the image derives from an originary process of reification. In the distant past the objects of human creative production 'were subsequently encountered – in a process that recalls the echo-orientation employed by bats – as

[54] Griselda Pollock, 'Whither Art History?' *Art Bulletin*, 96.1, 2014, 13
[55] Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *Signs* 7.1, 1981, 13-35.
[56] Ibid, 16.
[57] Christopher Wood, *The History of Art History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, 287.
[58] Keith Moxey, 'What Time is it in the History of Art?' in Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey, eds, *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, London: Routledge, 2018, 27
[59] Ibid.
[60] G. Zanker, 'Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 124.3/4, 1981, 297-311.

part of an autonomous objective world.'[61] They took on a life of their own, leading to the conclusion that:

> Images do not derive from reality. They are, rather, a form of its condition. Images, through their own potency, empower those enlightened observers who fully recognise this quality. Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action relation to perception. This is the quintessence of the image act.[62]

More than 20 years ago W. J. T. Mitchell noted that 'Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface but a *face* that faces the beholder.'[63] As Mitchell argued, such fetishism is not merely a feature of an ancient stage in the evolution of human cognition. On the contrary, 'we are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures, and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them.' Even though art historians know that images are just 'material objects … marked with colors and shapes' they still discuss them *as if* they had some kind of desire, consciousness and agency.[64]

This move towards the ascription of agency is fraught with problems, however, and these become apparent once some of the arguments are explored a little more closely. Shortly after *The Power of Images* was published, Sir Ernst Gombrich published a long review that took issue with some of Freedberg's claims.[65] He argued that, contrary to Freedberg's claim that art historians had consistently evaded the affective force of images, there has been a long tradition of writers attending to precisely the question of emotional responses to images. This issue is less important here, though, than a further criticism he voiced, namely, that the emotional impact of images was less due to their innate power and more a matter of the imaginative projection of the viewer. This is not the point to resolve that dispute, but it is worth considering its terms. For one might conceive of the opposition between Freedberg and Gombrich, indeed, the fascination with art's putative agency more generally, in reference to the basic philosophical issue outlined by Michael Podro nearly 40 years ago, specifically, the problem that 'I cannot look at anything and know where my mind's contribution to its qualities ends and the qualities that belong to it in itself begin … '[66] For Podro this problem stemming from Kantian aesthetics preoccupied the tradition of art history, from Hegel to Panofsky and Warburg, and scholars sought to resolve it in increasingly

[61] Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, 282.
[62] Ibid, 283.
[63] W. J. T. Mitchell, 'What do Pictures "Really" Want?' *October* 77, 1996, 72.
[64] Ibid, 72-73.
[65] Sir Ernst Gombrich, 'Review of David Freedberg, The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response', *New York Review of Books*, February 15, 1990, 6-9.
[66] Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 215

inventive and sophisticated ways. One might suggest that the emergence of what, for want of a better term, one might call 'agency theory' is one more attempt to resolve this ambiguity, in favour of one of the key terms (the work of art) over the other (the viewer). Bredekamp pointed towards this same issue, when he suggested in *Image Acts* that artistic agency is a product of reification, of misrecognition of the active role of the viewer.

Many instances cited by Freedberg and Bredekamp would appear bolster their claims, and the prudish initial scholarly reactions Freedberg observed arose on publication of Leo Steinberg's famous discussion of the sexuality of Christ also seem to bear out his argument about the repressive instincts of many art historians.[67] Other examples they mention, however, are open to somewhat different kinds of explanation. For in cases such as attaching first-person inscriptions on objects, the affixing of poems to sculptures, *tableaux vivants*, or the use of *tavolette* (small images of the passion) by priests to console prisoners while being executed, the putative agency of images was clearly expressed as a part of ritual behaviour, a tradition. Viewer responses were also ritualised. Indeed, the very fact that Freedberg and Bredekamp could analyse certain traditions and *categories* of example suggests that rather than generating insights into 'general relations' of people and images, they had identified socially sanctioned and framed practices in which viewer responses had a *performative* dimension. Understanding how this might apply to a condemned person about to be executed imposes a considerable demand on the historical imagination, yet even here there were (and remain) social norms governing the *expected* behaviour of the condemned, e.g. that they would ask for absolution, in which holding up the *tavoletta* was an element of the ritual.

Moreover, in addition to the possibility of alternative readings of such historical examples, one can point to theoretical difficulties, above all in the notion of affect that has been so central to the theory of artistic agency. Teresa Brennan, one of the most influential theorists of affect and an important conceptual source for van Alphen, draws a distinction between feelings and affects. Feelings are 'sensations that have found the right match in words.'[68] Affectivity, in contrast, is the domain of pre-subjective sensation based on the 'transmission' of energetic intensity, a process where cultural mediation is secondary. The reference to 'transmission' is key to the emphasis on artistic agency of works of art, yet neither Brennan nor any other affect theorist defines what 'transmission' means or offers a convincing *theory* of transmission or of how it takes place. Various possibilities are suggested; mirror neurons, as suggested by Freedberg, might be one mechanism, while others have pointed towards hormones, or to sound.[69] But these are all *ad hoc* explanations, and none of them are embedded in a more systematic or coherent theory of affect. Yet if they wish to ascribe agency to artworks and, in an inversion of traditional theories of art response and aesthetic judgement, deprive the spectator of autonomy vis-à-vis

[67] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
[68] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, 5.
[69] See the brief summary in Dominika Wanda Ferens, 'Silence, Sound and Affect', *Re Rhetorica* 7.4, 2020, 37-39.

the work of ark, such a position has to be able to describe the process, including a theory of transmission that goes beyond physicalist accounts of the impact of sound waves or photons striking the retina.

Further, if affect constitutes a domain of raw emotion opposed to that of interpreted feelings, it is difficult to see what analytical role it can play in the history of art, given that it lies outside the boundaries of discourse. It is possible to bring to bear Todd Cronan's criticisms on this issue, too. For Cronan argues for an analytical distinction between affect and intended effect.[70] Specifically, he states, 'A sensory experience is "disqualified" if it's not made in light of what you think the work means (however provisional that might be). A sensory experience is qualified (but it still might be wrong) if you think it has something to do with what the work means. That's the difference between an *affect that belongs to you* (disqualified) and an *intended effect*—yours, it is happening to you, but an experience the artist could have meant you to have.'[71] Cronan emphasises the role of artistic intention; in other words for a sensation to be art historically significant, it has to be related in some way to the effect intended by the artist. This is vulnerable to the criticism of arbitrarily privileging artistic intention, but we can formulate the problem in a different way. Specifically, even if we accept that the artwork 'transmits' an energetic intensity to a spectator, a secondary judgement has to be made as to the relation between that impact and the artwork. For example, is the fact that fauvist-era paintings of Matisse induce a dizzying and destabilizing visual effect warranted by their visual properties, or a reflection of the fact that I have impaired vision, or that I suffer some neurological condition, in which case my emotional response may have no intrinsic relation to Matisse at all? In other words, assuming that art history is more than the study of individual subjective responses, there has to be some way of ascertaining that this is not an arbitrary response, that it is somehow related to art as a social practice.

It is possible to gain a sense of other difficulties associated with the use of affect if we consider some of the ways in which Waburg's notion of pathos formula has been understood. For Griselda Pollock it is the bearer of a traumatic archaic memory; it is, as she puts it, an 'affective intensity, that breaks the bounds of language and inhabits the body as its site and its expressive alphabet.' [72] However, the very idea of it being a *formula* suggests something else entirely: that it is a *conventionalised* depiction, in which that affective intensity has been tamed and contained (even become a 'feeling' to use Brennan and van Alphen's distinction) in a manner that allows for its repetition through time. To cite one recent summary, 'a pathos formula *enables* affectivity to circulate … Only by formalization can affective events become simultaneously analytically accessible and affectively repeatable …'[73]

[70] Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism*, 1-22.
[71] Cronan, '*October* Aesthetics and Is There Such a Thing?' *non-site* 16, 2015. N.p. URL: https://nonsite.org/against-affective-formalism-matisse-bergson-modernism/ (accessed 17 May 2021).
[72] Pollock, 'Whither Art History?' 11.
[73] Kerstine Schankweiler and Philipp Wüschner, 'Pathos Formula', in Slaby and von Scheve, *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, 221.

For Pollock, too, 'The term "formula" usefully includes the idea of form, which reminds us that pathos is a formal operation, not a content that can be detached from its formulation.'[74] But this means that the pathos formula has *always already* made its appearance in art as a mediated, formulated, representation. Pollock locates its disruptive power in the fact that it is a vehicle of traumatic *excess*, and this lies in a conception of gesture as phylogenetically generated, in other words, as operating outside the domain of culture and representation. Yet once it becomes a 'formula' subject to historical repetition this excess has already been bounded and, therefore, its affective agency has also been contained. Indeed, the very idea of a formula's being analytically 'accessible' means that the first step has been taken away from immersion in affect. The pathos formula can only perform its two contradictory functions by relying on what Hal Foster once termed, in a different context, the 'expressive fallacy', in other words, the 'quest for immediacy' based on 'the belief that there exists a content beyond convention … '[75]

Even if we ignore this difficulty, there is the question as to *how* the pathos formula, the image, exercises its intrusive, disruptive power. I have already pointed to the fact that there is no theory of transmission, but further questions are pertinent. What is it about the image that exerts such power over the viewer? For Warburg and for affect theory more generally the image can mobilise the embodied memories of the spectator by *bypassing* representation and speaking *without mediation* to human affectivity. More recently, Freedberg and others seemed to suggest it lay in the causal relation between creating and observing effected by the operations of mirror neurons. The problem with this position is that there are plenty of historical examples, starting with those discussed by Warburg, where pathos formulae manifestly *failed* to speak to the body. A central aspect of Warburg's work consisted of documenting how artists, from Dürer to Manet, were able to sublimate or 'invert' the energy of those pathos formulae. He also discussed cases where that energy was simply misread or misinterpreted. For example, the sculptural friezes of Trajan defeating his enemies on the Arch of Constantine were, he argued, a powerful symbol of Roman imperial violence parallel to Dionysian intoxication: 'whereas the maenad brandishes the goat, torn apart in madness, in honour of the god of intoxication, the Roman legionaries deliver up to Caesar the decapitated heads of barbarians.'[76] At the same time he notes, however, that in the Middle Ages the Arch ended up being read in a completely different way; incredibly, the figure of Trajan fighting the Dacians came to be seen as Constantine showing mercy towards his enemies.[77] Warburg cited, too, Winckelmann's misreading of the Laocoon group; instead of it being an image of the violent death of the priest and his son, Winckelmann and the classical tradition sees it as embodying the still grandeur of classical art in order to illustrate the difference between the sensibility of his own

[74] Pollock, 'Whither Art History?' 11.
[75] Hal Foster, 'The Expressive Fallacy', in Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1985, 63.
[76] Warburg, 'The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past', 278-79.
[77] Warburg, 'Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance', in Warburg, *Werke*, 281-310.

time and that of the eighteenth century: 'For us the Roman triumphal style lacks precisely that which, since Winckelmann, we have been accustomed to admiring as the essential character of classical art.'[78]

Few would contest this latter judgement, but its logic should make such differences and 'misinterpretations' impossible. If the agency and power of the image lies in its ability to express *and awaken* in the spectator traumatic primal memories, how is it that at certain times, it manifestly failed to do so? The embrace of a notion of the image based on its capacity to express and mobilise a universal, biologically inherited, language of gesture and emotion has to rule out the possibility of deviant and varying readings.

This touches on the question as to the emotions and how they are represented. Avinoam Shalem has recently highlighted the issue in relation to the depiction of astonishment in Islamic art.[79] On the one hand, astonishment would appear to be one of the core emotions at the heart of the inquiry into image and affect. Shalem notes, however, that in Islamic art astonishment is not only depicted using an alternative rhetoric – it can be symbolised by depicting figures as biting their finger – in addition, it has different *meanings*. For, he observes, 'whereas the depiction of amazement in European art emphasizes the moment of being petrified and paralyzed as a preparatory stage, just before reacting, either defensively or aggressively, to the unknown marvel, the biting of fingers suggests perplexity or hesitation, a suspended state of mind, indeed a pause to rethink the unknown.'[80] Even an apparently simple emotion such as amazement or astonishment has different analytic moments, depending on whether it is linked to fear or wonder, and different cultures, even those as closely linked as those of Islam and Christian Europe, interpret (and represent) it in different ways.

The agency of art

The debate over affect leads to the additional question: what does it mean to talk of 'agency' in art history? To make it a central methodological analytic category would require, at the least, a *theory* of agency. Two basic presuppositions would seem to be essential for the definition of agency (in order to distinguish it from causal effect). First, it necessitates autonomy. Even those social theories that emphasise the restrictions on autonomy – such as Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* or Anthony Giddens's theory of social structure – recognise the capacity for autonomous human action. Giddens's social theory, for example, is based on the interaction between structure and agency. Indeed, structures are maintained through the autonomous reflective action of agents; in this vein Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, authors of one of the most important subsequent accounts of social agency, refer to the 'selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social

[78] Ibid, 305.
[79] Avionam Shalem, 'Amazement: the Suspended Moment of the Gaze', *Muqarnas* 32, 2015, 3-12.
[80] Ibid, 10.

universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.'[81] In other words, structures are maintained through agents' ability to exercise autonomy in their relation to the past. Emirbayer and Mische describe this as involving the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment.

Second, agency involves the capacity to act *intentionally*, towards a goal – in contrast to a purely causal chain of events. In other words, it is related to a set of mental representations, desires and beliefs.[82] This standard view has not been uncontested. It has been argued, for example, that one can talk of non-intentional agency, involving habitual actions (such as driving a car) as well as spontaneous and skilful action (in sport, for example), and even the behaviour of bacteria and other simple life-forms. Such objections, while important, do not necessarily undermine the standard theory, since they simply involve recognition that there exist different *kinds* of agency. Indeed, even where one might refer to 'minimal agency', as in the example of simple life forms, to be an agent involves having goals, even if there is no conscious mental representation of those goals.[83] Amongst human actors, habitual or non-conscious behaviours, such as those mentioned, are embedded in the longer-term conscious goals of the agent (i.e. getting to the destination in the car, playing a game successfully). And if they are not to be reduced to purely causal physical reactions, all actions involve decision-making. No matter how circumscribed the alternatives and the conditions of the choosing may be, being an agent also means making a selection between them.[84]

What does it mean, in such a context, to talk of visual agency or the agency of art? There has been no shortage of attempts to attribute agency to inanimate things. Bruno Latour's actor network theory is the best known, perhaps, but other authors, such as Jane Bennett, have proposed the notion of 'material agency.'[85] In this context the idea of agency is based on a vitalism – Bennett frequently invokes Spinoza – which leads her to talk of rock formation, for example, as 'creative agency.'[86] This seems tenable only by means of a special understanding of the meaning of the term 'creative.' But we may also feel compelled to ask in this case: in ways does magma select from alternatives and act on the basis of intentions and (conscious or unconscious) goals? This is more than just a rhetorical question, for while it is difficult to imagine magma – or even works of art – being able to act as agents in this way, the point is that advocates of expanded notions of agency fail to

[81] Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What is Social Agency?' *American Journal of Sociology* 103.4, 1998, 971.
[82] For a still influential formulation of this kind see Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, 3-20
[83] Xavier Barandiaran, Ezequiel di Paolo and Marieke Rohde, 'Defining Agency: Individuality, Normativity, Asymmetry, and Spatio-Temporality in Action', *Adaptive Behavior,* 17.5, 2009, 367–386.
[84] Philip Pettit, 'Deliberation and Decision', in Timothy O'Connor, ed., *Companion to the Philosophy of Action,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, 252-58.
[85] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press., 2010.
[86] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 11.

offer an alternative *theory* of agency. They merely seek to extend the range of objects that can be considered to be agents.

Moxey writes in terms of 'secondary agency,' and this may well be implicit in Bredekamp's study, too. In other words, agency is attributed to artworks based on a reification of images and other kinds of artefacts. Various authors have explored agency on this basis. Undoubtedly the most prominent is Alfred Gell's anthropological study, *Art and Agency*, but others, too, such as Hans Belting's work on early Christian medieval images cultures in Europe before the 'era of art.'[87]

Belting explored in considerable depth theological ideas of the image in the late antique and early medieval Christian worlds, in which visual representations of, for example, saints or the Virgin, were seen not merely as depictions but as their living presence. It was due to this that icons could be prayed to as sources of divine grace and power. Gell examined the ways in which art objects function as proxies for human and / or divine agency. He also constructed a typology of the different bases on which agency was attributed to them. In some cases, he argued, it was due to admiration of the artist's skill, in others it was the power that flowed from the divinity represented (the prototype) to the image, in yet others it was due to the power of the patron, of which the image was an expression. In all instances, while Gell emphasised the active role played by artworks in social relations, the basic argument was nevertheless that their roles were circumscribed by specific belief systems and practices in different cultures. Personal agency could become socially distributed through the medium of objects and images; this did not amount to seeing them as agents in their own right, although, as Robert Layton has suggested, Gell is somewhat vague about *how* artworks act as agents or indeed why they should be used as substitutes for human beings.[88] Nevertheless, the important issue here is that the agency attributed to art is variable and culturally specific, and his theory of the art nexus mapped out the different possibilities using a set of variable factors and functional relations.

Gell's work has informed a more recent exploration of agency: Caroline van Eck's study of living presence, i.e. the practice of treating representations as living objects. Van Eck expanded his ideas by focusing on the 'experiential character' of this phenomenon, something he deliberately avoided. It is important, she argues, because 'Most people, at some stage of their life or in some situation, have reacted to, or treated objects as if they are living beings' with 'the power to act or influence actions and beliefs.'[89] She grounds this phenomenon in a broader evolutionary theory, stating that:

> Man is also primed to attribute life to inanimate objects, because in evolutionary terms it is safer to act on the assumption that inanimate objects

[87] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
[88] Layton asks: Why bother with images, if people will do? Why not have someone sit or lie motionless in the place of a statue of the Buddha? Why not station people along the roadside to shout at each passing car 'road works ahead; elderly people crossing?' Robert Layton, '*Art and Agency*: A Reassessment', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, NS 9. 2003, 457.
[89] Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence*, 52.

> such as trees or stones are animate beings and therefore potential animals, than on the opposite assumption, that living beings are dead objects and cannot harm us. There is, one might say, an ongoing conflict between *homo repraesentans* and *homo animans*, between the tendencies to create distance and to attribute life, which man needs both to survive. Since they have such old roots, they are not easily dissolved, disciplined or even balanced in an aesthetic attitude towards art.[90]

This explanation comes close to Warburg, and her book was published under the auspices of the Warburg Haus in Hamburg. Not only does it echo his interest in evolutionary theories of cognition, it also makes use of his binary opposition of distance and proximity. Nevertheless, it stops short of placing agency *in* the image. Instead, agency is always *attributed* to images and objects, and her book is concerned with the ways in which this occurs 'at particular moments in history.'[91] As such, it is also an implicit recognition of the limits of naturalistic theories of the image.

Common, therefore, to Eck, Gell and the earlier Belting is a concern with the social construction of agency. This is quite distinct from a cultural science based on a master concept of the image as a transhistorical and transcultural agent which, through the sheer force of its presence and display of sedimented memories, is able to reawaken (repressed) facets of human affectivity. In mentioning them I am not advancing them as the basis of a possible counter-theory of agency in art, even though it is arguably only on this basis that agency might feasibly play a significant role in art historical analysis. Rather, the point is merely to argue that theories of pictorial agency that seek to replace circumstantial, historical, explanations with naturalistic accounts, and in particular, give a fundamental significance to affect, run into difficulties. This applies not only to the understanding of image response, it also raises broader questions to do with the shape of art history. While the idea of artworks having a transhistorical aesthetic impact offers a seductive vision of an intellectual landscape unrestrained by the drudgery of compiling chronological sequences and historical relations as envisaged by Didi-Huberman (which is, any case, a caricature of art history), there are considerable problems when it is based on the idea of a certain power or agency on the part of artworks. Not only is it questionable whether or how the transmission of affect – if it occurs at all – might figure in art historical interpretation role; it is doubtful, too, whether works of art can be meaningfully said to be able to exercise agency. And even if they could, this would not obviate the need for a theory of reception, in other words, an explanation of how and why agency has such different effects at individual times and places.

Conclusion

This essay began with the straightforward questions: what does it mean to talk about agency in art? In what ways is a work of art an agent and how does this relate

[90] Ibid, 208.
[91] Ibid, 55.

to the affectivity of the spectator? Examination of the burgeoning literature on this topic suggests that we some way from finding a satisfactory answer. Even though agency and affect have become terms of increasing interest, it is striking that there is an absence of basic conceptual analysis. Most of the advocates of agency in art history posit an (implicitly) naturalistic theory of art, based on the idea that art exercises certain effects on spectators that are not circumscribed by issues of cultural reception and framing.

Clearly, they are motivated by the desire to emphasise the emotional quality of the aesthetic encounter and it is important to remain to open to the somatic dimensions of this experience. Nevertheless, as the foregoing discussion suggests, it is not clear that recognition of these dimensions warrants talk of artistic *agency*, especially when the notion is so theoretically under-determined. In addition, it is not clear what role these dimensions might play in the historical study of art, in a discourse for which they are, by definition, not historically or culturally bounded. This is not to dismiss agency as a category of art historical analysis out of hand. It is, however, to suggest that it can only function as such as part of an inquiry into the historical conditions and framing of responses to works of art. To do otherwise is to undermine it as a theme or programme of research.

Matthew Rampley is a research fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. Recent publications include: *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2021) and *Liberalism and Design Reform in the Habsburg Empire: Museums of Design, Industry and the Applied Arts, 1864-1918* (2020), both co-authored with Markian Prokopovych and Nóra Veszprémi, and *The Seductions of Darwin: Art, Evolution and Neuroscience* (2017). He is currently principal investigator of the ERC-funded research project *Contintuity / Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe 1918-1939* (https://craace.com) which is concerned with post-imperial legacies in the visual cultures of the successor states to Austria-Hungary.

rampley@udu.cas.cz