

# Revisiting Materiality's Material Conditions

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I'm grateful to Carla Benzan and Aldona Dziedziejko for their invitation to return to the lecture I gave at the "Material Affinities" conference they conceived and staged last February, along with Angela Zhang. A year after the fact, it's nice to have the opportunity to revisit the issues raised in that paper, and to reflect on how the proceedings of the symposium have impacted my thinking in the time since. The exercise is not a counterfeit one. My many conversations in Vancouver did leave an impact, and it's a happy occasion to recall those lively and instructive exchanges here – particularly those that indulged my thinking on the issue of "semiotic thingness."

When the graduate students at UBC first invited me to speak at the symposium, I was eager to have the chance to present the "findings" of my current book in more general terms than that project, a closely worked case study, has allowed. In *Machine Art*, 1934 (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), I examine the necessity of three-dimensional materiality to the intellectual project of twentieth-century modernism. It is the history of an explicitly "modern ontology" in which things are positioned as definitively "other" to subjects, made to serve as material supports for the thinking man's deductive empiricism, and exalted as physical manifestations of absolute truths. In other words, it is the history of an idea about thingness, as well as a history of how that idea compelled and shaped ideological formations at the dawn of corporate late capitalism. In the *Machine Art* show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1934, curators Alfred Barr and Philip Johnson displayed artifacts of modern American industry as works of art, arguing that each object was the perfect incarnation of Plato's pure *Form*. In this show, as in several others at MOMA in the early '30s, the abstract became concrete. A nice trick for teaching modern art to untutored museumgoers ("if you like ball bearings, you're prepared for Brancusi," as one critic observed), the move also amounted to a philosophical treatise on modern ontology. The attempt to show abstract values as already concrete in the real world, to re-tether particulars to governing ideals (Platonic Form in *Machine Art*), was an explicitly – even desperately – conservative ideological measure in the context of the Great Depression. In some ways, it marked a "last stand" or protest against the manipulations of marketplace relativity and the absolute arbitrariness of worth in the post-industrial age. But, in order to take this stand, the exhibition resorted to a modern ontology in which things appeared as tokens; as particular chips off a generalized block. In this logic, the self-aligning ball bearing on *Machine Art's* cover was not just an artifact of international mechanization, but the physical manifestation of circularity and – so also – a sign of formal perfection as such.

This brings us to the heart of my argument about semiotic thingness, about how thingness is made to underwrite signification. Under the condition of modernity, things operate as signs, because they are trafficked under the cover of thingness as general equivalent. In other words, materiality "as such" is made to serve as the guarantee for the various meanings that things come to have – both because materiality is so excessively knowable (here in our hands), and because it is so finally unknowable (everywhere and then some as the ubiquitous condition of being). Just like an invisible and unquantifiable monetary reserve that's used to legitimate and govern the coinage and exchange of money, the general equivalent of materiality-as-such works similarly as cover for the production and use of things as signs.

As my reference to money insinuates, this is an argument that follows Marx, that follows Simmel, and that follows Jean-Joseph Goux; especially in the instances where these writers are at their most historically curious. It is an argument about the operation of modern value production. It is not an argument that hopes to weigh in on the "true" source of value for the world, or about the "real" essence of thingness, especially in contemporary times. Such comment is above my pay-grade. Mine is an historical argument about modernity's philosophical engines, about the peculiar modern alchemy that turns things into signs of meaning. "Grids happen," Brian Massumi writes in *Parables of the Virtual*, referring to modernity's prime figure of general equivalence.<sup>1</sup> As an historian, it is imperative that I investigate just how.

When questions arose in response to my discussion of semiotic thingness last February, I think there was some confusion about my position relative to it – a kind of shoot-the-messenger situation in which my explanation of the historical, social, and ideological uses of thingness as a general equivalent was misunderstood as an endorsement for it. Still, to leave it at that would be an unsatisfying dodge on my part, and one that would fail to make a space for the very good reasons one might want to shoot modernity's messenger in the first place. To that end, let me think through some of the reasons I discerned for the resistance to my argument.

My move to return the brute stuff of materiality to the social operations of signification felt, to some, like a defeat – a failure to recognize materiality as a critical lever, a productive and palpable excess to the social, arbitrary, and deeply ideological world of signs. I hadn't accounted enough for the real pressure of things in the circuits of social determination, except to maintain that "realness" had been co-opted as homogenizing guarantee. And how depressing is that? It is important to account for the historical experience of things, and to pay attention to how those experiences have served as grounds for resistance to the workings of modernity. This is another social history of thingness, after all. When such alternative histories are accounted for (as in my own book's final chapter on John Dewey's pragmatism), the history of modern ontology reveals itself to be a chronicle long on failures: breakdowns occurring the moment people are interpolated between things and generalized thingness. As it happens (that is, in the context of happening), people have oblique perspectives on modernity's grids, deforming the elegance of that figure the moment they interact with it. This has been a problem for a long time. The best-loved parable from the twentieth century is the difference of regard that Alfred Stieglitz and Marcel Duchamp had for a particular piece of plumbing. If Stieglitz saw it as proof of pure truth (a "Buddha of the Bathroom," a Madonna of the Men's Room, an Ur-form for devotion, in which the truth of a governing god could be glimpsed in the S-curves of a chosen object); Duchamp was more interested in pissing all those habits of semiotic over-determination away.

This brings me to another dimension of the conversations I had at UBC. As I've come to understand it in the past year, the objection raised to semiotic thingness was also issued on behalf of what geographer Bruce Braun has usefully outlined as "nonmodern ontologies."<sup>2</sup> Arguing on the side of Michel Serres, Gilles Deleuze, and, especially, Bruno Latour, my interlocutors tried to usher me away from talk of signification and value, and toward action and agency – away from the closed-circuit correspondences

of thing-and-idea or materiality-and-meaning, and into an open-platform field of agentive extension, shared equally by living beings and material things, both now liberated from any ponderous Heideggerian suffixes. This is a world populated by "human agents" and "non-human agents," as Latour would have it.<sup>3</sup> And it is a world in which material phenomena compel and organize how activity unfolds – not as a set of limits outside and over-there, but as a crackling horizon of immanent action: a soccer pitch, Serres tells us, in which agency is a baton passed and pulled between rolling ball, opposing goal posts, and running humans. I've said here that my job as an historian is not so much to take sides on the debates between modern and non-modern ontology. But the fact is: history is a cozier bedfellow for the latter. Necessarily implicit in my historical concern with the production and use of semiotic thingness, is an admission of its fashioning – a from-the-get-go assumption that semiotic thingness is neither natural nor required in the course of human interactions with the object world. It is a produced and highly mediated mode of interaction. But an important one, with real historical effects: it made a difference, as William James would say. But, if modernity produced materiality as a guarantee (Kant's noumenon giving cover to all our petty phenomena), and if twentieth-century American modernism has been keen to draw on the same bank to legitimate the incarnation of abstraction in the world (so much paint on a canvas, so much steel on the museum floor) – well, these productions are not only not natural, they are also not complete. Historicizing the emergence of semiotic thingness necessarily leads to skepticism; reconstructing the fabrication of absolutes will always reveal their seams.

But, of course, any history of the social use of thingness would be wise to maintain skepticism for non-modern ontologies, too, and the uses to which they might be put. Indeed, for my tastes, there's still something dangerous about an immersive field of agency in which "human agents" are relieved of full responsibility for their actions, too much the prosthetic extensions of the world, too much the blinkered bodies of irreducible – and so also inescapable – particularity. Yes, the non-modern antagonists are right: it's never the value imposed by the general equivalent that determines what your paper dollar will buy you. Instead, worth derives from the point of transactional reckoning, a concatenation of factors and agencies beyond the capture of a priori fiat or a single individual's intentions. This perspective, besides having a certain anecdotal truth to it, affords us the chance to re-value local productions of differential meanings – and this all to the good. But what might be gained politically in the recognition of transactional particularity, and the agency-sharing partnerships therein, is potentially lost again, I think,

in the ready availability of this micro-transactional field to ideological capture, too. If modern ontology offends by dint of its attempts to issue absolute meanings from above, non-modern ontologies disappoint in their promiscuous ability to lend worth to whatever. The local feels too much like the atomized, and the intimacy of subject-object power-sharing too much like the wish fulfillments of commodity fetishism. It needn't be thus. But it might be – enough so that our historical skepticism must not slacken.

In the end, I am still convinced that a social history of things is incomplete without a comparable history of thingness. By necessity, it ought to be a diverse one; accounting for the wide variety of cultural and intellectual practices that help make meaning of the object world... or impose social normativity through it... or tap it for sources of critique... or, or, or... We're nowhere near a complete list. Art history is lucky to have an especially well-developed method for investigating the meanings made by materiality. The conceit of the conference was right-on, too. We must also take seriously the affinities cultivated for thingness that compel and underwrite these meaning-making processes in the first place.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 8.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Braun, "Nature and Culture: On the Career of a False Problem," in *A Companion to Cultural Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 151-179.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).