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How is an Art Work an Agent?

Rita Felski *is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English at the University of Virginia, Niels Bohr Professor at the University of Southern Denmark, and the editor of* New Literary History. *Her most recent books include* Uses of Literature *(2008),* Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses *(2013),* The Limits of Critique *(2015) and* Critique and Postcritique *(2017).*

Abstract

A brief reflection on recent theories of art works as agents and a response to the essays published in this issue.

Keywords actor-network-theory, art, agency, Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell

Only a few years ago, a journal issue devoted to the agency of art works would have been regarded as utterly retrograde – a lapse into the worst kind of idealism. After all, it had been definitively established that a text is formed in, by, and through its contexts. The task of the critic was to show, via acts of interpretation and critique, how historical and cultural forces bring an art work into being. Traditional formalist methods had focused on the words on the page or the composition of a painting, taking as self-evident the intrinsic value and meaning of a work of art. According to the critical theories that held sway in the humanities over the last four decades, however, there is no unmediated encounter with the work itself; a text *has* no intrinsic value or meaning. Rather-- so the mantra went-- every interpretation of an artwork presupposes a theory.

These claims – confidently parlayed in seminars and conference papers, enshrined in numerous primers and introductions to theory – have now come to seem far less self-evident. Objections have been mounted from several directions. The much noted "return to beauty," initiated by Dave Hickey and pursued by Elaine Scarry, Alexander Nehamas, and many others, was an early expression of discontent. A one-sided stress on political interpretation and historical context, these critics charged, had lost sight of the sensory and pleasure-oriented aspects of aesthetic experience – the persisting desire for beauty could not be waved away, in Frankfurt School fashion, as nothing more than a retrograde love of kitsch. The rise of "affect studies" dealt another blow to the sovereignty of critical reading. Encounters with art works bring into play a dense swirl of emotions, moods, and sensations that prevailing academic techniques of deciphering or deconstructing are poorly equipped to address. Other frameworks grouped together under the broad rubric of "the new materialism" point to certain qualities of art works – their physical properties, sensory force, presence, and sheer recalcitrance – as exceeding or escaping the explanatory schemas of language and text. In short, we are seeing a growing sense of the limits of cognitive and interpretative approaches to works of art, as well as of standard forms of causal and contextual explanations.

Above all, it is the joint influence of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* and actor-network theory that speaks directly to the theme of this special issue. Approaching art as an anthropologist rather than an art historian, Gell is deeply interested in the question of how art of all kinds (Western and non-Western; tribal and avant-garde) has an impact on the world. "I view art as a system of action," he writes, 'intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it" (Gell 1998: 6). How do works of art succeed in captivating, fascinating, and entrapping spectators? What are their links to magic, enchantment, and power? Anthropomorphism, Gell suggests, is an inescapable aspect of thought: we cannot help treating art works as quasi-persons, equipped with intentions and desires, while the distinctions between human agency and the agency of art works are less clear-cut than critical theories have assumed. *Art and Agency* is a pivotal text in its emphasis on the affective force of artworks and the relational dynamics of art – one whose influence is increasingly being felt in fields ranging from art history to visual studies to cultural sociology. (See also the essay by Jochum and Putnam.)

Meanwhile Bruno Latour, riffing off Rem Koolhaas, has famously charged that "context stinks" (Latour 2005: 148); that standard models of historical and social explanation are disastrously reductive. History is not a series of stacked temporal containers (i.e., historical periods) in which objects are held fast, like flies trapped in amber; meanwhile there is no such thing as "society," defined as a monolithic mega-agent imposing its will by imperiously dictating the course of events behind the scenes. Instead of conceiving of an all-embracing yet amorphous "context" that encases and explains the meaning of a "text," we need to trace out the thick web of interactions between various human and non-human actors among whom agency is distributed. What kinds of connections exist between art and other phenomena? How are artistic networks created and how do they extend and increase their influence? As a way of thinking premised on ties and attachments, actor-network-theory rejects any strong idea of artistic autonomy. Even the most defiantly transgressive of art works is entangled with countless other phenomena: exhibition spaces and other institutional or para-institutional structures; advertisements, reviews, and other forms of dissemination; the desires, dislikes, and whims of audiences, whether large or small; coteries of like-minded artists, curators, reviewers. And yet the art work also plays a distinct part; it possesses its own reality, which is irreducible to economic, political, psychological or other forms of explanation. "A work of art *engages* us," Latour writes, "and if it is quite true that it has to be interpreted, at no point do we have the feeling that we are free to do 'whatever we want' with it . . . Someone who says 'I love Bach' . . . receives from Bach,we might almost say 'downloads' from Bach, the wherewithal to appreciate him" (Latour 2013: 241) Thinking of art works as non-human actors allows us to engage both their distinctive forms of agency and their entanglement with many other worldly phenomena.

The essays in this issue speak to these concerns in various ways. Elizabeth Jochum and Lance Putnam ask: how are new technologies transforming the relations between art work and audience? Their concern with what an art work *does* rather than what it *is* connects to a tradition of pragmatist aesthetics stretching from John Dewey to Richard Shusterman. As they show through the analysis of two salient examples, computer-generated and robotic art alter the qualities of aesthetic experience by allowing for new forms of interactivity; yet their stress on interaction and relation, motion and emotion, has broader relevance for thinking about art works. Materiality is a key word in the essay, as in the issue as a whole. But what does it mean, exactly, to talk about the materiality of an art work? Are we talking about physical presence, as manifest in time and space: its concrete, demonstrable "thereness"? Or is something else at stake? Technologies of musical reproduction, as Steen Ledet Christiansen points out, shape what we hear and how we hear it. And yet, as he shows via an analysis of the album *Dark Knights of the Soul*, older technologies may continue to manifest themselves in the form of "ghost effects" that are registered as untimely and hence uncanny. Matter would thus seem to be distinct and yet also very hard to separate from mediation. Related issues crop up in the medium of literature; Beate Schirrmacher's analysis of works by Gunther Grass and Elfriede Jelinek. Both authors, she observes, do not only draw on metaphors, but also materialize metaphors in distinct ways. As a result, their writings achieve an unusually vivid effect of actuality or "realness." Performance and presence are not opposed but connected; art's force is not attenuated by mediation, but made possible by mediation.

The performative aspects of language are also picked up in Jens Kirk's account of Robert MacFarlane's *Landmarks* as a striking example of the "post-pastoral" genre. Placing his analysis in dialog with recent accounts of awe and enchantment, Kirk draws out MacFarlane's interest in using language as an act of "counter-desecration" to revivify our sense of the natural world. Questions of agency come to the fore insofar as books "have the power to resist assimilation by the reader and force us to accommodate." Enchantment speaks to both the phenomenology and the sociology of art, to individual experiences of being enthralled, captivated, and spellbound as well as larger questions about the extent to which modernity has ushered in a secular and disenchanted world (Felski 2008).

We see a related interest in attunement, atmosphere, and mood in contemporary thinking about art, highlighting the ambiguous relations between affect and agency. In contrast to what we might call container theories of the emotions – a person having an *inner* feeling about an *external* object – such language blurs divisions between subject and object, self and world. Demarcations are fuzzy, causalities uncertain: do I have a mood or am I in a mood? Where do atmospheres come from? Why I am attuned to one piece of music and not to another that might seem, on first hearing, to be quite similar? Some of these issues are also picked up by Kim Moller in his discussion of experiences of looking at paintings. Combining phenomenology with neuroscience, he shows how preconscious frameworks of feeling shape aesthetic response in ways that we cannot fully register or control. These frameworks, in his apt metaphor, are "the boat we did not get to choose but still have to use when we try to navigate in the rough sea of a painting's interpretational possibilities." There is a related interest in combining humanistic and scientific frameworks in Anders Bonde and Birger Larsen's essay on the impact of advertising images. Combining semiotic analysis with physiological measurement of audience response (such as eye-tracking), they argue that such hybrid methods can enrich our understanding of the attentional and affective dimensions of aesthetic experience.

Meanwhile, in her vivid description of a contemporary Danish play exploring European anxieties about Syrian refugees, Birgit Eriksson draws explicit connections between aesthetic feelings and obstructed agency. Christian Lollike's *Living Dead* purposefully steers clear of empathy and feel-good rhetoric about humanitarian ideals in order to elicit feelings of unease and confusion in its audience. Through these strategies of emotional contagion and affective disorientation, Lollike argues, the demarcations between actors and audience, between refugees and righteous helpers are called into question. Liani Lochner also tackles the relations between affect and language. She draws on Derek Attridge's ideas about the singularity of literature to reflect on her response to Zoe Wicomb's *October*, combining an extended reading of the novel via themes of home and belonging with reference to her emotionally unsettled response. And Jodie Childers describes, in moving detail, the creativity of four individuals incarcerated in mental asylums during the early part of the twentieth century. Appropriating and reworking the found materials of the institution – hospital ledger paper, flattened paper cups, examining table cover sheets, broken spoon handles – hey were able to create extraordinary art works in conditions of severe deprivation and isolation.

Finally, I was especially intrigued by Katalin Halasz's essay, which blends a striking account of a video performance with some broader reflections on the relations between art and sociology. I am old enough to remember previous attempts to aestheticize sociological thought, such as Ann Game and Andrew Metcalfe's call for a "passionate sociology" and Andrew Abottt's manifesto for a "lyrical sociology." And yet such efforts seem to have made little dent on the mainstream of the discipline, which is becoming, especially in the United States, increasingly quantitative in its methods and ever plodding in its prose. Meanwhile, feminist theory is not immune to this trend toward ever drier styles of argument, larded with a highly technical vocabulary and excess of footnotes. In such a context, Halasz's visual meditation on the connotations of white femininity offers a suggestive alternative: one that may reach audiences uninterested in academic debates about intersectionality and that is less interested in critique that in composing new forms of relationality and affective response.

As these essays indicate, much of the innovative thinking about art is currently being done in the interstices of disciplines. The new inquiries into artistic agency, for example, are not coming, by and large, from aesthetes and litterateurs bent on safeguarding the autonomy of the art work. Rather, we are talking about a fundamentally interdisciplinary enterprise, whether we are thinking of art and anthropology (Gell); new work in cultural sociology (Benzecry, 2011; de la Fuente 2010); or even connections between art and religious studies. What these inquiries share is a conviction that the agency of art works does not separate them from the world, but connects them to the world; art is not just *against*, but also *with*. Agency is co-produced, rather than a solitary achievement. In the last few decades, bonds have often been associated with coercion and control; literature can only be valued, it seems if it can be shown to break bonds and rupture connections. What this new work offers is a more multi-faceted view of connections; not just as constraints, but also as sources of strength, and indeed as indispensable conditions of existence. In short, we are seeing a shift of emphasis from negative aesthetics to relational ontologies.

And here the work of the French cultural sociologist Antoine Hennion would seem especially pertinent to a number of the themes explored in this special issue. Via detailed analyses of the practices of art lovers, music fans, wine tasters, Hennion (2004; 2015; 2016) draws out the patterned yet also unpredictable ways in which tastes are formed and passions are created. Deeply attentive to both mood and materiality, to what art works do and why we come to care about them, he is a discerning guide to the richness and thickness of our attachments. As both Hennion and Latour insist, agency is not a zero-sum game; a matter of stressing either social determination or the resistive and iconoclastic power of the art work. Rather, it is a matter of tracing out how the force and impact of art works are coproduced. Relations are not just modes of regulation or encroachment, but inescapable conditions of being. In short, attachment and mediation, as this wide-ranging collection of essays amply confirms, are not obstacles to art's agency but essential preconditions of agency.

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