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# ANIMISM, MATERIALITY, AND MUSEUMS

## HOW DO BYZANTINE THINGS FEEL?

by  
**GLENN PEERS**

**ARC** HUMANITIES PRESS

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## **COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES**

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## INTRODUCTION

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

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> See Bird-David 1999 and Peers 2012a.

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

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

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

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2 Latour 1993.

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

4 I tried arguing this position briefly in Peers 2015.

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

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

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

### Animism and Relationalism

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

—Isabelle Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism"

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Olsen 2012, 213–14.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Soller et al. 2011.

<sup>8</sup> I provide some of this background in Peers 2012b.

<sup>9</sup> Stengers 2011, 188–89.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the frequently cited Ingold 1998. See also Malafouris 2007.

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

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

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

**12** Ingold 2007a, 12.

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

**14** Ingold 2007a, 15.

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

## Humans: From Subject to Object

OUR WRITING TOOLS are also working on our thoughts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Posthuman Condition

WE HAVE ALWAYS been posthuman but are only just learning to think that thought.

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Braidotti 2013; and Braidotti and Vermeulen, 2014; as well as Parikka 2014 and Parikka 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Peers 2012b.

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



## Byzantine Things as Subjects

WE HAVE INVADED not only the space of the world, but, if I dare say so, ontology.

—Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*

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

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

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

**21** Serres 1995a, 16.

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

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

**24** Serres 1995a, 37.

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

## The Language of Things

THE CLOSER WORDS get to things, the more they fall apart. Say them. Unsay them. Say them again. Listen to the clamor of voices!

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

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

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

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

**26** See Zabala 2017.

**27** Serres 2008.

**28** Serres 2008, 102–3.

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

### The Material Basis of Our Pasts

SUCH ARE THE strange powers of the material: its plasticity cannot be reduced to the canonical passivity of Madame Matter subjected to the blows—and the striking of seals—that Monsieur Form eternally imposes on her.

—Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals:  
Art History Put to the Test by the Material"

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

<sup>29</sup> Peers 2017.

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

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



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

Dirt might be the last place to look for a culture's meanings, but Byzantine dirt is another locus of transformation and meaning making at the lowest level of our direct knowing. The widespread and highly popular tokens of the stylite saints, those pillar-sitting Olympic-athletes of God, were formed from baked dirt and sealed with impressions, most often images of those saints (Figure 1).

The matrix for the impressions, like wax for seals, bore and made meaning in the very dirt gathered at those holy spots and activated as extensions of the saints' power. Indeed, they became valued, treasured, guarded for their power constellating from the saints. If the dirt had ever been considered inert and passive, these mobilizations of the saints' holy reach prove the limitations of that view, for the tokens were empowered to spread holiness beyond the saints' limited bodies. When Symeon the Stylite blesses and sends his baked-dirt tokens out into the world, he sends himself there to work in his own behalf. In that way, he is a worm, just as he is a friend and cultivator of worms, who dig his body:<sup>32</sup> he relates to the world through soil and works to find homeostasis in his world, just as worms use soil to create external kidneys. That dirt's surplus or excess is in relation to him and to the world simultaneously, and it relies to some partial degree on the stamp or seal, but the material was the means by which the saint as organ entered into the social, devotional networks of that world.<sup>33</sup>

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

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

**32** Burrus 2018, 219–31, *inter alia*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Bissera Pentcheva on Icons

ART IS THE context in which thinking becomes problematic. "Don't think too much" about a work of art. Some art-related abstractions or concepts to avoid were connotation, classification, and context itself.

—Richard Shiff, "Watch Out for Thinking (Even Fuzzy Thinking):  
Concept and Percept in Modern Art"

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

<sup>37</sup> Hamilakis 2014, 113 and 197, for example.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Robertson 2012.

<sup>39</sup> See Franke 2011 on self as gift of the other. See also the excellent Diederichsen 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Jahren 2017, 261.

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

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

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

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

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

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**41** Pentcheva 2006, 631.

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

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

**44** Pentcheva 2006, 632.

**45** See also Peers 2012a.

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

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

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

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

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**46** Peers 2013, 38.

**47** Pentcheva 2010, 185.

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

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



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

### Pentcheva on Byzantine Buildings

ALL BUILDINGS ARE predictions; all predictions are wrong.

—Stanley Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens to Them after They’re Built*

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

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

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

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

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

**53** His most influential work is Gell 1998.

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

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

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

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

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**54** Hamilakis 2014, 78.

**55** Pentcheva 2017, 132.

**56** She cites only Barber 2013 and no other source.

**57** Pentcheva 2017, 10.

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

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

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

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

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

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**59** Haines-Eitzen 2017.

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

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

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

**63** Kohn 2013, 227.

**64** See Peers 2018a.

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

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

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

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

<sup>65</sup> Papalexandrou 2001, 281.

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

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

<sup>68</sup> See Derrida 1993.

<sup>69</sup> *Pace* Haldon and Brubaker 2011, 230–32.

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

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

## Modes of Experiencing the Divine

AN INTIMATE, ALIEN swarm of feeling, felt *things*.

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

**70** Chin 2017, 20.

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

**72** Wharton 2015.

**73** Wharton 2015, 211.

**74** Wharton 2015, xxi.

**75** Miller 2009.

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

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

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

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**76** Miller 2009, 171–73; Peers 2012b.

**77** Peers 2013, 66.

**78** Miller 2009, 171.

**79** Miller 2009, 154–56.

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

**81** Miller 2009, 155.

**82** Bahrani 2014, 127.

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

## Exhibition Practices

THINGS PERSIST, BY leaving traces of themselves.  
Material remains: traces, relics, fragments. Ruins.

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

<sup>89</sup> Wittgenstein 1958, section 212e.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Limits to Championing Things

ANTHROPOMORPHISM IS A useful conceptual tool and also has its limits; it must ultimately be negated but so too must the negation be negated.

—Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**94** See Peers 2018, 93–97.

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

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

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

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

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

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