

**BACK
TO
THE
FU
TURE**

*Towards New Histories
of
Materialist Art*

With a great deal of simplification and naiveté, we may claim that the most significant shift within the art world to take place in recent years – or at least within its theoretical basis – has been the dissipation of (post)conceptual art and the rise of diverse strands of materialisms heading in the opposite direction. This materialist orientation is therefore not simply a trend, but an entire strand of art history. Moreover, the focus on these anonymous materials in art unravelled topics such as the temporality of the work of art, the relation of the visible and the invisible, and the virtual dimension of artworks.

Contemporary art since the 1960's – when it was first labelled as “contemporary art” – privileged the invisible and the immaterial under the banner of (post)conceptualism.¹ This was not adequately challenged until the 21st century when various new avenues to materialism have been heralded.

Paradoxically enough, one of the most notable vectors is an internet-aware art. While the first generation of artists to speak of net.art who went in this direction wanted to resort to the internet as a free platform for experimentation but also exposure itself, the second generation, generally referred to as post-internet artists, heads in the opposite direction – drawing our internet-oriented aesthetics and agency back to the gallery space. In this respect, they revisit the materiality of art with different perspectives and experiences.

This is the case of Katja Novitskova, whose well-known cut-out images try to tackle the circulation of images online and redeploy them in the gallery space. With this course of action, she exposes the poignant elusiveness of photography, but she

1 Peter Osborne, for example, claims that essentially all contemporary art is post-conceptual art. See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not at All*, London 2013.

also gives it material weight. Apart from notorious pictures of animals, we should see in her *Patterns of Activation* series this weird pictorial circulation intertwining with economic circulation.

A related strand of material art practice resorts to digital technologies and algorithms. Even from this angle the material

is revisited from the position of material and sub-creative and forces. Oliver Laric, in particular, has explored the possibilities of 3D-printed objects mixing of diverse materials. Moreover,



from the the immature subjected to its manipulative Laric, in particular, explored the possibilities of 3D-printed and the mixing of materials. in his *Icon*

series, he points to religious art of the past and its own capacity to (re)produce objects and images with a particular material basis.

Another and even more serious vector is a focus on the anthropocene and ecological issues. Rather than draw attention to some of the well-known projects of Olafur Eliasson referencing natural phenomena such as

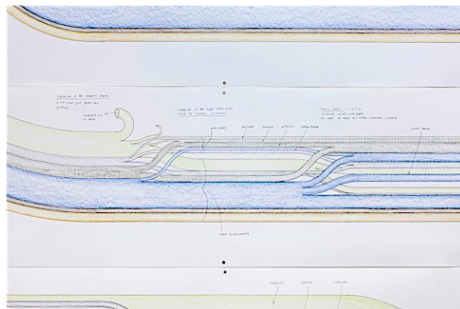
waterfalls or we want to the work of His long-search proj-
Syndromatic traces genealogy of



melting ice, emphasise Paul Chaney. term re-
ect *Donetsk Diagram-*
the entire coal and iron

as related not only to geological history but also to the region of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, which has suffered an ill fate, disputed precisely on the basis of its material riches.

However, there are political aspects to materiality as well. For instance, the ZIP group, originally from Krasnodar, continually works with wood as a construction material for utopian spaces, self-organisation, or even architecture for protests. In the same vein, materials are becoming more and more of a point of reference for anti-colonial, non-he-identipractices, plified by



local, or gemonic ties and as exem-
Postcom-



modity, Otolith Group, or Slavs and Tatars.

Of course, materiality can also be directed towards more affective or sensual effects. Anicka Yi, for example,

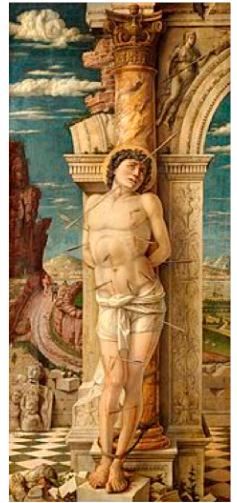
explores various ways in which scents and flavours work, and in doing so, she brings together the world of humans, animals, and even plants.

Anicka Yi, *The Flavor Genome*, 2016



On the other hand, whatever anonymous materials could be characteristic for contemporary artistic practice, it is also possible to look upon artworks of the past through a materialist lens. During the Middle Ages, a vast archive of objects from classical antiquity was ready for re-use in new creations. For instance, the reliquary cross made in 1370's for Charles IV has nine antique engraved gems inserted into its body. These *spolia* were used to claim continuity with antiquity, but their original symbolic or factual meaning was almost forgotten. In fact, engraved gems were valued more than gemstones commonly used for reliquary decorations because they bear not only economic, but also historical value, and therefore they can refer to a blurred past. Furthermore, the historical references of objects were common throughout the Renaissance. The rebirth of classical antiquity in 15th century Florence also meant the rebirth of lust for antique objects or material references to that time.

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The virtual presence of the past in the form of *anonymous materials* such as draperies or clouds are shifters which expand the visible

Through materials, transcend world. present of *Saint*



into the invisible.

anonymous materials, it is possible to transcend world. Such an idea is present in the painting *Saint Sebastian* by An-

drea Mantegna (1456-1459), which depicts the martyrdom of the saint as well as an avenue to Greek philosophy. In the top left corner is an informal group of clouds, which – subject to more detailed scrutiny – appears to be a rider in the clouds. This detail is commonly interpreted in light of the Book of Revelation as a Horseman of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:1–8), but it could be a reference to Greek philosopher Philostratus (170/172–247/250 BC). He had wondered about the clouds above and the possibility of figuration in those informal forms¹– a kind of figuration known as *pareidolia*. Not only did the painter directly reference antiquity by placing the martyrdom of the Christian

Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian* (detail), 1456-1459, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna

Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, 1456-1459, Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna

¹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Conybare 1912, pp. 176–177.

saint into the scenery of pagan antiquity, but moreover, he quoted the antique aesthetician pictorially.

The virtual in works of the past communicates uncertain, highly conceptual, and also simply artistic values. Abstraction within the figurative arts which might be considered virtual is a rupture through which we can reach metaphysics.

George Didi-Huberman focused on this point precisely. He calls the virtual in figurative art *informal form* [*forme informe* in French]. In the case of four marbled panels below the *Madonna delle Ombre* fresco by Fra Angelico in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, Didi-Huberman has demonstrated that those panels function as shifters to metaphysics, therefore the abstract, which he has anachronistically defined in relation to abstract expressionism and the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock.²

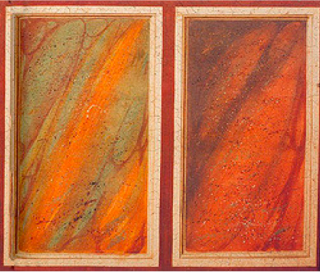
Although the anonymous materials are connected to a virtual past, they could also connect material with the immaterial. That idea of transcending from the immaterial

Fra Angelico, *Madonna delle Ombre* (detail of marbled panels), ca. 1450, Convent of San Marco in Florence



² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration*, Paris 1995, p. 86.

to the material was commonly used in religious painting. Therefore, in pictorial space, we could distinguish multiple ways of transcendence from virtual to material: via Alberti's window, through pictorial rupture in the sky, or via drapery.



In his treatise *De Pictura* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti introduced the idea of painting as a *window*.³ For him, the painting was an open window to another world through

which we enter into pictorial space. Carlo Crivelli took this idea literally, and on several paintings, we find a windowsill which guides us to the virtual (*Madonna and Child*, 1480; *Pietà*, 1476). Those strange material barricades between real and unreal worlds are the interface of our daily life and biblical scenes. Thus, the windowsill allows us to share the properties of both material and immaterial.

Similarly, the virtual transcends to the material through pictorial rupture in the sky (e. g. Hans Bal-



3 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin text of De Pictura and De Statua*, London

dung, *Saint John on Patmos*, ca. 1511). In Fra Angelico's painting of the *Annunciation* (ca. 1426), incarnation unity of material and light is achieved via the connecting sphere and the light beam. The light material presence of logos, the word incarnate. Thus an extremely abstract idea gains a material form through this symbolic expression.



the scene of presents the material and light beam the heavenly Virgin Mary. beam is the essence of lo-

Hans Baldung, *Saint John on Patmos*, ca. 1511, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In some cases, the drapery acts as anonymous material and stands at the borderline of the two worlds. Joos van Cleve et al., in the central scene of *The Crucifixion with Saints and a Donor* (ca. 1520), depicted crucified Christ as a mortal man, but also as a saviour. On the one hand, he painted Christ's body realistically with the greyish face of a corpse, but on the other, the martyr's body is surrounded by floating drapery which cannot be considered merely decorative, but also reminds us of his supernatural origin, as it defies the laws of gravity.

Another example of drapery materialising the immaterial is an effigy on the veil of Saint Veronica. The Master of Flémalle used semi-transparent drapery for the depiction of the real face of Christ in order to underline the virtual presence of Christ in the material world. Or in another case, the semi-transparent draperies allow the painter to portray a reality which was otherwise restricted. Lucas Cranach the Elder portrayed nude *Venus* (1532) covering her body with semi-transparent drapery which is morally acceptable but also shows her virtual nakedness. In these cases, the drapery is the anonymous mixture of two different realities.

To conclude, we must point out that anonymous materials characteristic of today's artistic practice could also be a new perspective from which to understand to uncanny depictions in the paintings of the past. Those weird materialisations are distant or understand eerie and materialisation not only difficult to for contem-



porary culture, but paradoxically, they may be closer and more intimate in relation to contemporary art. On the other hand, the contemporary post-conceptual/post-internet condition naturally asks for new historical revisions as well. Material-oriented art both today and in history engage both, the material and the virtual dimension; therefore, we might say we are hurrying “back to the future” through our past.

We are more than grateful for financial support from the IFF (Institute of Fictions and Futures, Prague), without which we would not have been able to gather the artworks, particularly concerning the extraction of Fra Angelico's frescoes from the Convent of San Marco. And last but definitely not least, we would like to kindly ask all the artists of the future to contribute to redefining the past.

Curated by
Václav Janošík & Eva Skopalová
Designed by
Markéta Mášová

KATJA NOVITSKOVA

OLIVER LARIC

PAUL CHANEY

ZIP GROUP

ANICKA YI

FRA ANGELICO

ANDREA

MANTEGNA

CARLO CRIVELLI

HANS BALDUNG

JOOS VAN CLEVE ET AL.

MASTER OF

FLÉMALLE

LUCAS CRANACH

THE ELDER