

INTRODUCTION

In 1790 the French playwright Michel de Cubières wrote an account of his visit to the Villa Borghese in Rome. Like many who went there before him, he claimed he fell in love with the statue of the *Crouching Venus*, could not restrain himself from touching the marble and described how he felt her body breathe and move under his touch (*fig. 1*). She seemed to open her arms to him, and the cold, inanimate stone burned him ‘avec tous les feux de la volupté’. Unlike many previous visitors he did not dwell on the mimetic qualities of the statue, or the illusion of lifelikeness the sculptor had achieved as the cause for his reaction, but on the capacity works of art and love share to inspire desire and affection. When a woman has to return the portrait of the man she loves, he observes, she will always have a copy made, and put it next to her bed. Sometimes, he adds, one is just as jealous of a statue as of one’s mistress.¹

Whereas the *Crouching Venus* made him forget the demarcations between art and life, the *Borghese Hermaphrodite* was for him transgressive in a more unsettling way (*fig. 2*). Cubières is so disconcerted by the sexual ambiguity of the statue that he is taken over by a painful doubt which prevents him from forming any definite judgment, and even suspends all his powers of judgment. His absorption by the statue ends in a loss of self. Bernini’s delicate treatment of the mattress makes him touch it; but when he feels the cold marble terror overtakes him, so that he has to walk past the statue without looking at it, like a schoolboy who is terrified of a dark corner where at night he has perceived some sinister object: ‘Quelque bien couché que soit l’Hermaphrodite, je ne serai jamais tenté de coucher avec lui.’

The statue of Venus, like that of Narcissus or Apollo and Daphne in the same collection, invited him by their lifelikeness to engage in a play of self-delusion.² Enchanted by their



1 Crouching Aphrodite, Roman copy after Greek original of the third century BC, marble, H. 0.78 m., Paris, Musée du Louvre

beauty and suggestion of real life, he allows himself to go along with the fiction that he is in love with a statue, that the statue loves him, and to give in to the urge to touch the object of his desires. In the case of the Hermaphrodite however, the combination of convincingly realistic details and sexual ambiguity disrupts this illusion, robs him of his powers to draw on his usual repertoire of reactions in front of statues, frightens him off, and reduces him to the state of a schoolboy frightened in the dark.³

In his insistence on the life, lovability and power to arouse and frighten of these statues Cubières' account plays on the myths of both Pygmalion and Medusa: the dream of the stone mistress who becomes alive shifts to the nightmare of the sexually ambiguous being that reduces the viewer to a state of abject fear, unable to look again at the statue. It also



2 Borghese Hermaphroditus, Roman copy in marble of a Greek bronze original of the second century BC, mattress sculpted by Bernini c. 1620, marble, L. 1.47 m., Paris, Musée du Louvre

stands at the end of a long tradition of statue lovers, from the admirers of the *Cnidian Venus* in ancient Greece who arranged to be locked up in her sanctuary during the night to the Grand Tourists who spent entire days gazing into the eyes of her Roman copies, and claimed that the *Venus de' Medici* in the Tribuna rested her eyes benevolently on them, or discussed the qualities of her body as if she were a concubine.⁴ Classical poetry is full of cases of viewers kissing works of art as if they are living beings; it is one of the recurrent themes in the *Greek Anthology*, which would exert so much influence on ekphrastic texts, in antiquity and the early modern period. To cite just one of the more suggestive poems:

What pleasure, Heliodorus, is there in kisses, if you do not
press against me with passionate lips, but only on the tips [of mine]?
with yours closed and unmoving, as an image of wax at home
kisses me, apart from you.⁵

Such reactions were informed by the viewing habits fostered by classical rhetoric. They singled out vivid likeness, or *enargeia*, as the summit of artistic achievement and visual persuasion. Viewers also entered into the affective relationships with portraits of their absent loved ones usually reserved for living persons; or they destroyed their painted eyes.⁶ The ambivalence, unease, desires, and fears underlying such responses are recurrent themes in Western mythology, fiction and art theory. The myth of Pygmalion for instance is a figuration of the desire that statues become alive; that of Medusa of the fear for the living image. They both thematize the oscillation between living beings that are transformed into statues, and works of art exercising the powers usually reserved for living beings. Often these reactions were part of a highly conventionalized, social game of going along with the fiction



3 Minerva Giustiniani, Roman copy in marble after a Greek original of the end of the 5th century BC, H. 2.23 m., formerly in the Giustiniani collection, Rome, Musei Vaticani

that the statue was a living being.⁷ But here, in the account by Michel de Cubières, something changes. Real-life fears and desires intrude and make him deeply uncomfortable.

In the decades around 1800, with the rise of aesthetics, the development of academic art history and the birth of the modern art gallery, which were all predicated on some form of aesthetic distance, looking at and engaging with a work of art as if it was a living being became increasingly unacceptable. The account by Michel de Cubières exemplifies this shift in attitude. He paraphrases the account of the *Borghese Hermaphrodite* by François de Raguenet first published in 1701, which had been copied and plagiarized by many subsequent Rome guides and travel accounts. Raguenet observed how every viewer was seduced into touching the mattress and was surprised and even horrified when the material did not yield like the soft wool it represented, but instead felt cold and hard to the touch.⁸ But this was a common experience, presented as a matter of physical cause and its psychological effect. Cubières clearly used Raguenet's account, but transforms it, from a perfectly acceptable conventional exercise of art criticism informed by rhetoric, into a personal account of a

4 Simon Louis Boizot (1753–1809), Bust of Marie Antoinette, marble, 1743–1809), mutilated during riots in the Tuileries in 1792, private collection



psychological experience. Gazing at the *Borghese Hermaphrodite* moves from a comfortable fiction of an erotic encounter with a work of art into a very different realm of experience, that of the sinister and the uncanny.

In the same period Goethe and Herder also testify to this increasing unease in their accounts of viewing classical statues. While in Rome in 1787 Goethe observed how viewers kissed the hand of the statue of the *Minerva Giustiniani* (fig. 3). The wife of the guardian asked him whether he had a girlfriend that looked like the statue, ‘since the statue attracted him so much’. Despite his disdain for such adoration of a statue, where there should only be ‘brotherly admiration for a human spirit’, he confessed that he did not want to leave the statue.⁹ That other author of an *Italian Journey*, Johann Gottfried Herder, moved in his unusually frank description of the *Borghese Hermaphrodite* from an analysis of the way the sculptor had represented this subject to an account of a living, breathing body that aroused him sexually, but at the same time did not hide the mixture of fascination and discomfort he felt while gazing at the statue.¹⁰

Although reacting to works of art as if they are living beings did not disappear as a result of this change in attitude, such responses became increasingly discredited and marginalized in aesthetics, art history and the museum setting as the dominant mode of art viewing. Nonetheless, they did not die out. They occur very frequently, all over the world, in many different situations, and in response to very different art genres. During the French Revolution many royal images were destroyed or defaced, witness this particularly poignant case of a bust of Marie Antoinette (fig. 4). Paintings are damaged, as in the case of the London Suffragette, subsequently nicknamed ‘Slasher Mary’, who attacked the *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery in London with a knife in 1917 (figs. 5 and 6). A museum visitor threw a mug at the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, threatening that he would ‘wipe that grin off her face’.



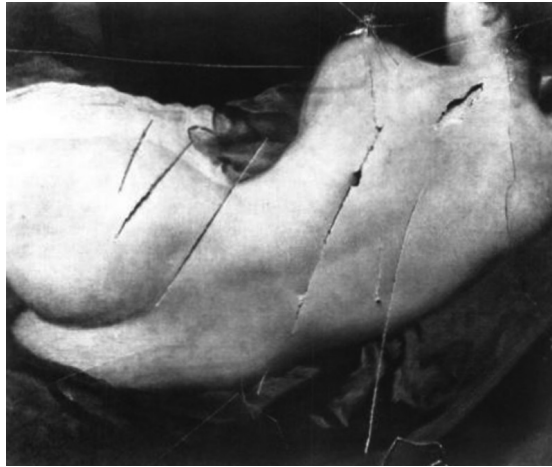
5 Diego Vélazquez (1599–1660), *Rokeby Venus*, 1647–1651, oil on canvas, 122.5 by 177 cm., London, National Gallery

A few years ago a widower from Thailand had a statue made of his late wife, in which her ashes were put, and took it to bed with him every night. The Vietnamese artist Randy Sam felt so overcome with passion for an entirely white Cy Twombly canvas that she had to cover it with red lipstick kisses.¹¹ A recent enquiry by two French anthropologists has documented how highly educated, middle-class collectors of non-Western art claim that they do not choose their art works, but that the art works select their owners by turning their gaze on them, that the masks in their collections look at them and possess a character and personality, and that the collectors take their items with them to bed when they feel anxious or depressed.¹²

In fact these kind of reactions, in which works of art are treated in a wide range of respects as living beings, is so well documented, and so wide spread, both chronologically and geographically, that it may even be considered as much closer to the default mode of engaging with art or images than the modern Western museum setting for looking at art. That is based on aesthetic distancing, and favours an appreciation of formal, stylistic or iconographic qualities, without feeling the emotions or showing the reactions we normally reserve for living beings.

At the same time such responses are fraught with uncertainties, puzzles and contradictions. Do viewers ever really believe that a work of art lives? Do they really feel the same emotions for a statue as for a living person? What do they mean when they say so? Can we discern qualities of the work of art, in the viewing conditions, and mindset of the viewers that creates such reactions? How did viewers themselves account for them, and how can we today understand such beliefs? In a way, saying that a work of art is alive, or that a statue excites the same feelings, desires and fears as a living being, is the ultimate testimony to the importance a work of art can have for a viewer. Such responses are also extremely complex and many-sided, and touch on almost all aspects of art making or viewing, from issues of

6 Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Rokeby Venus*, damaged by Slasher Mary photo circa March 10, 1914, London, National Gallery



realism and naturalism to the question what makes an artefact an image and a work of art. They question conventional, and widely accepted viewing habits and settings, and the aesthetic theories on which these are based. They are also a central theme in Western discourse on art, from the second commandment in the Old Testament, through the debates on idolatry and iconoclasm in the Church Fathers and Byzantine theologians to studies on fetishism of the past two centuries. Recently anthropologists have also returned to the topic. To attempt to add something new to this vast field therefore seems, and probably is, foolhardy. Yet the combination of two, at first sight very different disciplines, classical rhetoric and contemporary anthropology, has sparked off a way of thinking about viewers attributing life to images that has not been pursued before. Since attributing life to art works transcends the boundaries between the inanimate object and animate beings, it calls for a new understanding that moves beyond the traditional boundaries between the disciplines that deal with the image, to integrate the artistic, art historical, psychological, and ultimately anthropological aspects of such attributions, since this is a universal feature of the way human beings interact with images.

Put in the briefest terms, the aim of this book is to pursue the origins and ramifications of one way of conceiving such response as caused by representations that are so vivid, and possess such agency, that to the viewer they seem somehow to dissolve into the living being they represent. We can discern a shift in ideas about the animated image that starts in the late 17th century, moving from rhetorical theories on how to achieve the utmost vivid lifelikeness to anthropological and ultimately psychological theories about what makes artefacts, including art works, exercise such agency or excessiveness that viewers believe they possess significant characteristics of life.

RHETORIC

A passage in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* was in many respects the inspiration for this inquiry. In it he tried to define figural speech, its effects and its role in persuasion, by comparing the effect of figures of speech such as antithesis, asyndeton, or metaphor, with the movements and torsions of Myron's *Discobolus*. It is also one of the first attempts in Western thinking on art to analyse the relation between the effect of a work of art or speech on the public, and living presence:

The body when held bolt upright has but little grace, for the face looks straight forward, the arms hang by the side, the feet are joined and the whole figure is stiff from top to toe. But that curve, I might almost call it motion gives an impression of action and animation. So, too, the hands will not always be represented in the same position, and the variety given to the expression will be infinite.¹³

According to classical rhetoric, the animation of both speech and art is achieved through the use of figures. Most rhetorical attempts to define figures of speech draw on a system of visual metaphors, all playing on the original meaning of the Latin *figura*, which etymologically is related to the verb *fungo*, to form or shape: form, shape or figure, and by extension a sketch or drawing.¹⁴ Accordingly *figura* can refer to two ways of modifying normal usage. In a general way it is used for any form or shape (*forma*) in which thought is expressed, just as *figura* can be used to refer to any shape or attitude of the body. The use of visual and spatial metaphor when trying to describe the process by which thought is expressed has become so widespread and ingrained that it has almost petrified into a dead metaphor by now. But it is nonetheless a metaphor, and actually forms the bridge to the second, more restricted way in which *figura* is used. It then means 'a [...] change in meaning or language from the ordinary and simple form, that is to say, a change analogous to that involved by sitting, lying down on something or looking back', and more specifically poetical and rhetorical changes. The changes in a body's aspect caused by motion are here used to illustrate modifications of normal use and meaning. Hence *figura* can refer to all expressions that have 'received a new aspect'.¹⁵

Figures of style are thus first connected to the gestures of the human body; but next they are defined in terms of visuality: as shapes and aspects. Quintilian did not stop there. Figures are among the strongest means of persuasion an orator has at his disposal, particularly to arouse the emotions. Their force surpasses that of gesture and the expressive use of the face or eyes, because, as he puts it, the 'vultus orationis', that is the face of speech seen as a whole surpasses the power of its parts. The 'vultus orationis' serves in particular to establish a bond with the public. Most translations normalize this metaphor, translating 'vultus' as aspect, which can be used of dead matter and living beings alike. But the Latin 'vultus' was used almost exclusively of the human face, its countenance or features.¹⁶

Cicero called it the ‘image of the soul’ and the ‘silent language of the mind’.¹⁷ Just as the gestures of the hands can give visible form to the emotions, the expressive movements of the face offer a visual statement of what goes on in the mind. Following the same line of thought the figures of style can be called ‘the face of speech’: through their movement away from ordinary usage they highlight and thereby give visible shape to the emotions of the speaker.

The brilliance – another visual metaphor, caught by Cicero when he called striking arrangements of words ‘quasi lumina’, almost lights or even eyes – lent to speech by figures of thought and speech ultimately results in an illusion of life.¹⁸ In the visual metaphors Quintilian and Cicero use speech becomes alive: it has hands that gesture, eyes that see and a face that expresses emotion. Without figures speech is lifeless and without force; but if rightly used they endow a speech with life and the power to act on the public. One stylistic strategy that was considered particularly effective to achieve this was *enargeia* or *illustratio*, description that is so vivid and lifelike that the audience believes they are seeing what is described, not listening to somebody speaking. This effect can be achieved both by the use of figures of speech or thought, in particular metaphors that represent inanimate objects as animate, and by what we would now call narrative techniques, such as detailed description constructed with telling details, the introduction of an eye witness, or a sudden address of the public.

Quintilian argued that ‘oratory fails of its full effect [...] if its appeal is merely to the hearing [...] and not displayed in [its] living truth to the eyes of the mind’.¹⁹ The orator should act on the eyes not the ears of the public, and should excite vivid images before their mind’s eyes. ‘*Enargeia*, as Quintilian put it, ‘makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.’ As we have seen, Quintilian literally calls figures of speech the gestures and face of oratory and ‘the lights or as it were the eyes of eloquence’. Eloquence itself comes alive.²⁰ If successful, speech appears to dissolve into what it describes. We have here one of the first conceptualizations in Western thought of works of art appearing to be animated, and the effect of this on the public.

AGENCY

Considered in these terms, the rhetorical approach to the living presence of art works can be tied to a very recent anthropological theory of art, the late Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*, another major conceptual pillar for this book’s consideration of viewers reacting to works of art as if they are alive.²¹ Gell’s aim was to construct a truly anthropological theory of art, not another aesthetics of non-Western art; that is one that considers art not primarily or exclusively as an object of beauty or a bearer of meaning, but as an actor functioning in a network of social relationships.

It offers a new departure for the kind of viewers' response that interests us here, because it singles out precisely that aspect of the impact of works of art on their viewers that makes them similar to living beings: their agency, the power to influence the spectator, to make the latter act as if they are engaging not with dead matter, but with living persons. Or, put slightly differently, one way of defining such response is by singling out the phenomenon that viewers report that the work of art acts on them, makes them feel or act in certain ways. Like real living persons they act upon the viewer; they exercise agency.

Gell's theory is not a theory of art or an aesthetic. He rejects both the semiotic and structuralist perspective of most current anthropological work on world art, and the aesthetic attitude towards art. For him, aesthetic enjoyment of the formal beauties of a work of art is a founding fetish of Western society, and should not be the basis of any anthropological study of world art. Instead, in Gell's anthropology of art, the stress is on the art nexus, the network of social relations in which art works are embedded, and in which they act upon their viewers; that is, on agency.²² It considers objects of art not in terms of their formal or aesthetic value or appreciation within the culture that produced them. Neither does it consider them as signs, visual codes to be deciphered or symbolic communications. Instead, Gell defined art objects in performative terms as systems of actions, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. Art works thus considered are the equivalents of persons, more particularly social agents. To understand why and how art objects exercise such influence on their viewers, Gell took art to be a special kind of technology. In an earlier article he had called them 'devices for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed'.²³ Technology fascinates the viewer because it is the result of barely comprehensible virtuosity that exemplifies an ideal or magical efficacy we try hard to achieve in other domains. Just so the stylistic virtuosity of the orator enables him to change the views of his audience and impose his views.

The task of the anthropology of art according to Gell is therefore to 'explain why social agents in particular contexts produce the responses they do to a particular work of art'. It is Gell's stroke of genius to develop such a theory by replacing social agents by art objects. His anthropology of art thus becomes an anthropology of the agency of objects.²⁴ One could even argue that by replacing persons by art works as the core of the art nexus and the object of anthropological study, Gell's theory is in fact one big living presence response. But it avoids the paradox underlying such response, because it is built upon a definition of personhood whose defining characteristic is not life in the biological sense, but agency.²⁵ The core of living presence response in Gell's theory thus is transformed from the *explanandum* into the *explanans*. From this perspective the novelty and explanatory power of his theory of art as agency resides in that it develops a theoretical account of the field of social relationships in which art works are made, viewed and commissioned, or, as Gell put it himself, their 'production, circulation, and reception'. It provides a theoretical framework with global scope of how art can act on people, and it offers an explanation for the paradox that

people believe inanimate objects share qualities with living beings while they are perfectly aware of the difference between dead matter and living beings in the biological sense. That is, Gell takes as his starting-point the logical and factual impossibility of dead matter being animate, and solves it by arguing that objects can indeed be seen to share considerable characteristics with living beings if we consider them not as alive in the biological sense, but as agents.

His explanation of idolatry illustrates this. He argues that the distinction between what he calls ‘animacy’ and ‘inanimacy’ does not overlap with that between being alive and not being alive in the biological sense: devotees believe for instance that the idol in whose eyes they gaze also looks at them, just as we can say, and see, that a camera looks at something without claiming at the same time that it is alive. That is, idolatry can be understood if we distinguish between attributing human characteristics to an animate object – in Gell’s terms animacy — from believing the object is alive in a biological sense. So, if animacy does not need to be defined in biological terms, how can we understand what worshipers believe is the nature of the mysterious capacity cult objects possess? How do they reconcile their awareness that the objects of their devotion are dead matter, with the belief they hold simultaneously that they can act, listen and see? The solution is to consider the idols as *social agents*, because social agency does not depend on a biological basis of being alive.²⁶ Money is the supreme example of this, but one can also think of the effectiveness of performative speech and of official documents like passports, or the functions of heraldic or military insignia: they all make those who see or hear them act, but we do not consider them therefore as living beings.²⁷

EXPERIENCE AND MEMORY

Rhetoric thus provides a framework of theoretical precepts on how to achieve vivid life-likeness, and some reflections on the impact of blurring the boundaries between life and art on viewers, which from antiquity to the late 19th century has shaped viewing competences and the way educated viewers analysed art.²⁸ *Art and Agency* offers some building blocks for a more systematic, a-historical analysis of living art and its effects on the viewer in terms of agency, animacy and the art nexus. When we return for a moment to Michel de Cubières’ account of the Borghese *Crouching Venus* and *Hermaphrodite*, we can now see how it displays a series of traditional rhetorical features, ranging from figures of speech such as the asyndeton ‘c’est un marbre froid [...] qui m’a brûlé’, to the topos of the representation that is so lifelike that it miraculously seems to dissolve into the living being it represents, when Cubières is misled by Bernini’s artistry in chiselling the *Hermaphrodite*’s mattress to believe it is made of wool, and touches it. At the same time, a Gellian reading solves some of the paradoxical, not to say counterfactual aspects of his account, with its mix of willingness to go along with the fiction of art’s living presence and real fear when confronted with the

conundrum of the *Hermaphrodite's* sexual identity, which robs him of his power to draw on his usual repertoire of reactions. Gell's notion of animacy is particularly illuminating here. Just as the Indian devotee attributes some traits of being alive to the idol whom he believes returns his gaze, without attributing to it the full panoply of biological features of life, Cubières' responses are triggered by a few characteristics which the statue shares with what it represents, such as the softness of the surface of the marble. His remarks on the woman bereft of her fiancé who projects her love on his portrait instead, and on being just as jealous of a statue as of one's mistress, also show some awareness of the complexities of the responses he describes, with their singling out of some characteristics that statues may share with living beings. At the same time he never goes so far as to state that the statues are actually alive. Yet although rhetorical discussions of *enargeia* and Gellian accounts of agency and animacy contribute towards an understanding of living presence response, they are not sufficient. They illuminate artistic aspects of the works of art that cause such responses, and by redefining the life attributed to art they clarify in what respects works of art can act in ways that are similar to living beings.

Neither *enargeia* nor agency and animacy, however, can account fully for a defining characteristic of such responses: their experiential character. Even though Enlightenment theories about the religious origins of art played an important role in the way early modern viewers themselves tried to make sense of viewers treating statues or paintings like living beings, one aspect is crucial in understanding these reactions that is not taken into account in religious explanations: the experiential character of such responses. Unless the viewer suffers from hallucinations, or the work of art has been tampered with, providing it with hidden mechanisms to make it move or speak, works of art only become alive in the viewer's experience. Bernini's *Hermaphrodite* does not breathe and move; it is the viewer who, because of the sculptor's virtuosity, is led to attribute, in his or her viewing experience, significant aspects of life to the cold marble, and thus relive, while gazing at it, earlier experiences with actual living beings.

The experiential aspect of living presence response was already noted in Antiquity, in Stoic epistemological accounts of viewers being taken in by the vividness of art works, and by ekphrastic writers such as Callistratus, who showed that the words making up a vivid description do not miraculously dissolve into what they describe. Homer's words describing the shield of Achilles do not somehow transform themselves into the events they evoke. Instead, what happens is that such description makes the listener (re)live the experience of looking at what the orator or poet describes. In the 17th century this account was further developed by Sforza Pallavicino, a Roman theologian and friend of Bernini, to give a psychological account of viewers reacting to a statue as if it were a living being. He is one of the first thinkers to attempt to understand, rather than dismiss or develop a theological rationale, for such behaviour. Although his account was not taken up at the time, he offers the historical basis for the third element in the account of living presence response to be developed here: the role of experience, and, as we shall see, in particular of memory in such

responses. Accordingly, both Gell's theory of art as agency and rhetorical analyses of *enargeia* have to be extended. We will see that in the 17th century rhetorical accounts of *enargeia* become the starting point for analyses of such responses that draw on psychology and theories of memory, to find their most ambitious expression in Aby Warburg's vision of art history as a process of the survival of antique art forms in the collective memory of mankind, that is, as a process of recurring life and remembrance.

Usually 19th century attributions of life to art are considered within the context of the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* or empathy. According to its best-known proponent Friedrich Theodor Vischer, the properties associated with life we think we experience when looking at nature are in reality projections of our own feelings and thoughts. When we admire a landscape, we lend our bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts to nature and in the process of doing so give it life and even a soul.²⁹ Empathy was taken up by his son Robert Vischer, who considered the symbolic animation of form to be the result of empathy, defined by him as the 'projection of one's own bodily form – and with this also the soul – into the form of the object'. Theodor and Robert Vischer's aesthetic and psychological researches were the inspiration of a series of late 19th century studies into the experience of art and architecture, including Heinrich Wölfflin's *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* of 1886.³⁰

Stressing the importance of the viewer's experience to understand the attribution of life to images may suggest that the argument of this book is an exercise in the aesthetics of empathy or *Einfühlung*. Although 19th century empathy theorists appear to address the same issue, that of attributing, or in the terms of empathy aesthetics, lending human feelings to inanimate nature and objects, they are in fact concerned with a different problem and response to art. Their concern is to explain the significance of natural or artistic forms by assuming the process of empathy; in other words, attributing animation is for them the explanation of the meaning of art or nature, whereas our concern here is with understanding that attribution. Their explanation is our problem. Also, empathy theorists, particularly in architectural theory, often limit the feelings and sensations that are lent to inanimate forms to an awareness of physical processes, for instance when Wölfflin uses the bodily awareness of load and stress, or the struggle with gravity to explain the forms of the Doric order and why they are still meaningful to us.³¹ They do not venture into the attributions of life, personhood, an inner life or biography that interest us here.

THE ANIMATED IMAGE: A GROWING FIELD

Many of the concepts developed after 1750 to account for viewers attributing life to art works – fetishism and empathy for instance – disappeared in the course of the 20th century from the research agendas of the disciplines concerned: art history, anthropology and psychology, to make way for a positivist approach. Just as empathy disappeared from psychology and was replaced by behaviourism, the agency and life of images disappeared from art

historical research agendas to be replaced by formalism, stylistic inquiry and iconography.³² After a brief spell of interest in such response around 1900, in the work of Aby Warburg, Julius von Schlosser and Rémy Clerc, it disappeared from art historical consideration, to be revived by David Freedberg with his book *The Power of Images*, published in 1989, and Hans Belting's *Bild und Kult* of 1990. Both books, with their wide-ranging collection of illustrations of the powers of images, aimed to deconstruct what they saw was the foundation of Western academic art history and aesthetics, a formal and aesthetic appreciation of works of art that, severed of their religious and persuasive functions, ended up in a museum vitrine bereft of their living presence and agency.

This book looks at a category of responses outside the relatively easily definable borders of response in religious contexts, determined by the sacred character of images. We look at viewers' responses to works of art, in secular contexts, in particular the erotic, the political and the aesthetic, the latter used here in the sense of viewing and appreciating art in a wide variety of settings, from the salon to collections such as the Borghese and papal collections, to museums and other public exhibitions of art. In this wide range of settings and contexts doctrinal and behavioral constraints do not operate in the way they do in ritual contexts of image viewing. Accordingly it is less easy to fall back on theological conceptualisations of such responses in terms of iconoclasm and idolatry, on which the majority of existing studies on such responses concentrate. They are based on religious definitions and regulations produced in the course of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The accounts they offer take their starting point in religious doctrine, the Eucharist and Transsubstantiation, the Second Commandment in the Old Testament, and the vast corpus of texts produced by the successive waves of iconoclasm in the early stage of Christianity, the Byzantine Empire and the Reformation.³³ David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* for instance assembles a world-wide corpus of cases illustrating the power of images, often very akin to that of living beings, and developed an analytical framework that starts from the theological considerations surrounding the use and impact of images in religious contexts. The recent collection of essays on idolatry and iconoclasm edited by Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd is called *Presence. The Inherence of the Prototype within the Image and Other Objects*, and defines the problem in theological terms as well, that of the relations between divine prototypes and their representations.³⁴

In the 1990s and 2000s much work was done on such responses, and the wider issues they raise. Georges Didi-Huberman has questioned conventional borders between living bodies, medical images and art; William J. T. Mitchell has offered a semiotic and metaphysical analysis of pictures considered as living beings. In *Presence* Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd have brought together many cases of identification or elision of the being represented by an image with its representation.³⁵ Marina Warner has recently illustrated in *Phantasmagoria* the many ways in which people have tried to capture the soul so vividly that the borders between dead matter and living beings dissolve into phantasms and simulacra.³⁶ In the *Iconoclasm* exhibition and catalogue on iconoclasm and idolatry in art

and science, curator Bruno Latour has extended discussions of these phenomena from the world of art and religion into that of science, and thus redefined a new field of inquiry. His short book on fetishism, *Sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, originally published in 1996, is like this book in part an attempt at recovering what one might call the prehistory of fetishism, before Marx and Freud gave it the definitions that still dominate discourse on it.³⁷ But Latour's interests and aims differ from those of this book in that his concern is ultimately the constructed nature of objectivity and subjectivity in Western science, not understanding the response of individual viewers to particular works of art. Most recently Horst Bredekamp developed an account of the life and agency of images based on the speech act theory of Austin and Searle, which is in many respects a synthesis of the work done in the past two decades inspired by Freedberg and Belting.³⁸

These books share a tendency to give an account of viewers attributing life to art works that concentrates mainly on the work of art and its qualities that may elicit such response.³⁹ Existing studies also tend to focus on definitions of the life that viewers appear to attribute to works of art. The studies by Jacobs and Cole on such Renaissance responses are conspicuous examples of this approach, reconstructing the development of medical definitions of life, or of the role of magic in shaping and accounting for them.⁴⁰ When they do consider what goes on in the viewer, they tend to define or label such reactions in present-day terms. Many accounts circle around varieties of paraphilia such as fetishism in the Marxist and Freudian sense of endowing an object with a material or emotional value that surpasses its real value: the viewer who kisses a painting or claims to love a statue – Théophile Gautier for example, who famously declared that he preferred statues to women, and marble to living bodies – takes a work of art as the object for feelings that should be reserved for living beings. Fetishism plays an important role in this book as well, since it is one of the central notions in Western thought about such responses. But unlike the recent studies by Pietz, and to a lesser degree Böhme, this book attempts to go back beyond Marxian and Freudian definitions to understand what early modern viewers meant when talking about fetishism in the context of animated cult objects and art works.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Although over the past twenty years the catalogue of individual cases of such behavior towards art has increased immensely, there are few attempts at formulating a general theoretical account of them, or writing the history of how such responses were considered, defined or understood at the time they occurred. That is what this book sets out to do: to reconstruct some crucial chapters in the history of thought about such reflections in Western Europe, and to offer some building blocks towards a theoretical account of such responses. To do so the historical part of the book concentrates mainly on responses to sculpture, since statues by their very corporeality seem to elicit the strongest and most

varied kinds of living presence response, and on the histories of sculpture that were written from the 1650s to c. 1800, in a tradition of religion critique that was independent of Winckelmann's aesthetic and archeological project, and has hardly been studied until now. In the course of the book, the rhetorical and anthropological approaches will be extended by theories on memory and experience, since next to rhetoric and anthropological or ethnographical accounts, ways of understanding such responses increasingly show an awareness of their experiential character and the role of memory in them.

The aim of this book is therefore not primarily to add to the growing corpus of viewers' responses in which works of art are treated as living beings. Instead, it aims to contribute towards an understanding of such responses, both by analyzing them by means of concepts developed in classical rhetoric and Gell's anthropology of art and agency, and by retracing the history of attempts to understand – or even excite – such response. It therefore combines a history of Western thought about viewers' treatments of statues as if they are living beings, from Quintilian to Warburg, with a theoretical framework that employs both concepts developed at the time these responses occurred and a present-day anthropological perspective. Since one of the arguments of this book is that a fundamental change in understanding and appreciating such responses took place in the period 1750–1800, evolving from a rhetorical instrumentalization of *enargeia* to a dismissal of the attribution of life to images as the sign of a primitive or diseased mind, the historical part of this book concentrates on a reconstruction of this shift and its causes.

Accordingly, the first part presents the three main conceptual building blocks: vivid representation or *enargeia*, agency and memory. The second part offers a reconstruction of 17th and 18th century understandings of living presence response, starting at the same incident that led Pallavicino to formulate his psychological account of such responses: the public debate caused by the Roman people's offer to erect a statue to Pope Alexander VII, during his lifetime, in gratitude for his containment of the plague. Both Andrea Borboni's *Delle Statue* (Rome 1661) on Alexander VII's refusal of a statue erected in his honour by the Roman people on the Capitole, and François Lemée's *Traité des Statues* (Paris 1688), a defence of the statue erected by a courtier to Louis XIV to commemorate the Peace of Nijmegen, and in particular of the inauguration ritual, take the shape of a history of sculpture that locates its origins in religious ritual. Both books connect sculpture with the origins of society and civilization and with idolatry. Lemée offers a particularly interesting account, because, drawing both on Borboni and the Swedish antiquarian Figrelus' compilation of Roman sources on sculpture, he extends the scope of his work by including testimonies of idolatry and adoration of statues from all over the world, arguing in a proto-ethnographic and semiotic argument that often, 'le figurant est confondue avec le figuré'. The representation is confused with what it represents; but that in the case of the Catholic trinity and saints, or Catholic princes, this should not be considered as idolatry. Instead, he argues for an understanding of idolatry in a proto-Gellian account of royal images exercising agency.

Building on this proto-ethnographical account of viewer response 18th-century Enlightenment authors developed an account of the origins of society in which sculpture plays a major role. Religion is the foundation of society; its primitive form is the adoration of stones, shells, or artefacts as the deities they represent. The Président de Brosses introduced the concept of fetishism to describe what he called primitive idolatry in ancient Egypt and contemporary Africa, in which agency and life is attributed to inanimate objects. Building on his *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (published in 1760), subsequent Enlightenment thinkers such as Guasco, Quatremère de Quincy and Dulaure developed this anthropological account of the origins of society in religion and the role sculpture played in it, to extend it to Western attitudes to art, and eventually suggesting that the viewers in Europe who treat their art works as living beings are not really that much different from African adorers of fetishes.

The second part ends with the transition from a religious and ethnographical analysis of the attribution of life to objects towards a dismissal of such attributions because they ignore, or counteract, the attitude of disinterested enjoyment that became so important in the new discipline of aesthetics, and particularly in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Michel de Cubières's account of his visit to the Borghese collection illustrates this transitory moment full of aesthetic ambivalence: at the same time he is perfectly prepared to use all the staples of traditional rhetorical art criticism, and uneasily aware of the transgressional nature of living presence response when taken not as a rhetorical genre, but at face value. The rise of this aesthetic ambivalence is traced through Herder's texts on sculpture, Goethe's catalogue of living presence responses in *Der Sammler und die Seinigen* (1799), and an analysis of the role of attributing life to inanimate objects in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as both an epistemological barrier against fetishism, and a condition for any understanding of art and nature.

With the third part we enter the 19th century. As a result of the drastic and traumatic break with the past caused by the French Revolution, the character and context of living presence response changes as well. It is dispelled from the art gallery and the museum because it runs against the aesthetic attitude of disinterested formal enjoyment on which these institutions are now predicated, and finds a new outlet in new genres of multimedial popular visual culture such as the phantasmagoria, the *tableau vivant* or the wax exhibitions produced by Madame Tussaud. With this change of setting their character also changes: increasingly, the living presence viewers experience is not that of a desirable living being, but a return of the dead, or a resurgence, or intrusion, of the past into the present. Finally in Aby Warburg's work many, if not all of the aspects of living presence response discerned here come together: living presence defined as vivid lifelikeness (even in the introduction to *Mnemosyne* he spoke of 'Pathosformeln' as a '*restitutio eloquentiae*'); the anthropological approach to such responses as a worldwide phenomenon, that is part of both the early development of humanity as a whole as well as the individual's development;

and living presence associated with the revival of the past of art, in his key notion of the 'Nachleben der Antike'.

The resulting book, one might say, is a contribution towards a historically-informed ethnography of European responses to art. In the Epilogue the various aspects of living presence response that we have elucidated in the course of this book are tied together and placed in yet another perspective, that of 20th-century developmental psychology, since such responses are not isolated aberrations, but a fundamental component of that universal human characteristic, making representations and endowing them with life and agency.