

**Melville, Stephen, ed. *The Lure of the Object*. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (Clark Studies in the Visual Arts), 2005 (pp219). Distributed by Yale University Press. ISBN (Clark) 0931102618, (Yale) 0300103379.**

The conference that lent its name to this book was a gathering of “art historians, curators, conservators [and] students of material culture” (viii). According to its convenor, Stephen Melville, it was provoked by a “poverty of the ideas of objectivity” in today’s art history (vii). Melville opens the volume with a helpful framing of what the object is *not* in this context - it is not “the image,” for example, and nor is it “the thing” - and expresses his hope that the enquiry be not objective in a rationalist or analytical sense, but “fully freighted with objects” (vii), a beautifully ambivalent phrase whose promise is, sadly, not always kept by the book’s contributors. The fact that representation “does not emerge as a leading issue” here may not be as accidental, as Melville suggests (viii). Certainly, the authors steer clear of that well-worn philosophical and polemical field; but this is perhaps a result of the *a priori* instability of art history’s object in the context of this conference. From a less embedded perspective, it still seems that very little of what these people do - as viewers and as writers - can fairly be exempt from such considerations. Nevertheless, *The Lure of the Object* does offer a space for rethinking *objectivity’s* place in art history.

The first few papers of this collection are disappointing, and underscore the problems of publishing conference proceedings as books. The discrete chapters imply, but cannot deliver, the more interesting questions and correspondences that must have arisen amongst them, a shortcoming Melville admits in closing the volume. John Brewer’s “The Lure of Leonardo,” for example, recounts a legal stoush over attribution of old master paintings in inter-war America, and contains interesting insights into art capitalism’s efforts to shrug off the old world system of connoisseurship. But it is hardly an essay. What should really be at issue here, for art historian and cultural theorist alike, is what the case exposes about the systems of taste and cultural capital, and the market system with which they were, and are still, interwoven. Unfortunately, this can of worms remains unopened until Brewer’s concluding paragraph, in favour of clear but inconsequential reportage upon the trial. This is a pity, because the latter highlights a peculiar sort of object: the objecthood of that which, while not without value, is expelled from the market into a sort of “attribution limbo.” Unfortunately Brewer’s text is little more than a conversation-starter.

I would like to have heard, and read, the discussions it raised at the symposium.

Emily Apter's paper on New York conceptualist Dan Graham starts with the obligatory, jargon-heavy "theoretical framework." Grounding her argument in John Locke's notion of self-possession, she sets up the idea of "subjective property," or property in the self, via the fetishism of Marx and Freud. But despite her indebtedness to Althusserian Marxist Etienne Balibar, she largely by-passes (here, at least) the decades of cogent critique of this concept inaugurated by *inter alia* Foucault's disciplinary selfhood and Deleuze and Guattari's volumes on capitalism and schizophrenia. Turning then to conceptual art, Apter raises (albeit too briefly) the slippage between the name, the thing, the work and the artist. Graham's work does demonstrate her theoretical proposition, but comparisons with some other strategies of knowing alienation - by any number of twentieth-century artists - would have afforded a finer articulation of it. She hints several times that the politics of self-property are being contested in the sphere of intellectual property (e.g., around genetic engineering, and the name economy of the internet). The last decade has indeed seen plenty of debate on this, much of it online, but also amongst cultural theorists such as John Frow, whose 1997 book, *Time and Commodity Culture*, covered much of this ground. Unfortunately, these arguments seem to lie beyond the reach of the art historian.

Edward J. Sullivan presents a paper on eighteenth-century Mexican "casta" paintings, a peculiar sub-genre of portraiture that encased a normative ethnography, in the form of a labelled, racial taxonomy of New World inter-breeding. Sullivan draws attention to the images' marginalia, typically depictions of natural bounty, or *copia*, carrying geographically (and iconographically) specific overtones. Yet we never get a sense of how these paintings resonate other than as articles of "fine art." Sullivan's approach shows how a certain art history's descriptive and comparative tendencies can take the fun out of even the most fascinating objects. In the context of this book, he offers the least reflexive version of the art historical object.

The strength of the papers increases as we read on. Mark A. Meadow offers a fascinating framing of the Baroque Wunderkammer as a "system of objects" marked by taxonomic flexibility and ambivalence rather than rigidity. Martha Ward's investigation of some progressive magazine layout from 1930s Paris touches too lightly on montage and film theory, though her consideration of George Bataille's journal, *Documents*, adds an interesting anti-disciplinary tilt to her contribution. Yet Ward, too, struggles to see beyond her disciplinary context. The mirror she holds to her object is the visual

---

literacy of the era's art historians, including Aby Warburg. Again, worryingly absent are the frames of today's visual languages - hypertext, digital image production, and how these re-frame art history - about which the older innovations would surely have something to tell us. (Similarly frustrating is the fact that, of two essays devoted to connoisseurship and its dubious currency, attribution, neither offers a single word about the contemporary crises of authenticity, plagiarism, and property rights in the era of digital media.) Ward should not be made to answer for her profession's general unpreparedness to look at contemporary media culture. But she passes over the fact that the journals which are her "object," while they mediate fine art and *its* objects, are themselves, as formats, instrumental forces in another stratum of communication - that is, mass media.

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth's "The Object as Subject" examines the gambit of representation as a fraught engagement and identification of the painting subject with the painted object. It has everything a stand-alone art historical essay should have: the requisite bows to uber-theorists (Deleuze, Lacan); polite nods to the author's art historical peers; written reflections - critical and non-critical - from artists and their contemporaries; references to the aesthetic and institutional contexts that gave rise to the works; and no less than 15 plates, yielding half a dozen dual slide comparisons. Lajer-Burcharth writes with economy and an impressive thoroughness; but at no point does she hint at how her argument could be relevant to anyone other than art historians. Symposia should be places where such disciplinary solipsism is broken, rather than reinforced.

The highlight of this compilation is George Baker's essay on "Photography in the Expanded Field." While stuffed with confident and enlightening theoretical argument, it retains just enough speculative openings to be a truly thought-provoking piece, as we have come to expect from the likes of Baker and Rosalind Krauss, whose 1979 essay on sculpture lends him a framework here. Notwithstanding his redundant diagrams of the "expanded field," Baker's exegesis is cogent, and it is easy to see the importance of the issue he adroitly tackles: how do we address photography's pivotal place in recent art history - amidst the myriad different deployments and displacements of photography within contemporary visual art - whilst avoiding disciplinary fixations on "the medium"?

Margaret Iversen's paper, "The Surrealist Situation of the Photographed Object," also takes up Krauss - in particular, her ideas about the "indexicality" of photography - and borrows from Dennis Hollier the suggestive concept of an anti-literary "performative realism." Iversen takes

Breton as a starting point, specifically, for “a kind of literature that would be both imaginative and verifiable” (184). The Surrealists’ “automatic writing” is read alongside the model of photography as an engine of chance aesthetic output (such as in Man Ray’s intuitively “produced” accidents), rather than as a mimetic recording. If only obliquely, this concern with chance suggests a deeper history to the development, after photojournalism, of reality TV, infotainment, scripted reality, docudrama, mockumentary, etc. Iversen demonstrates a wide and deep familiarity with the period and its literature, moving with great agility between art, literary and intellectual history.

The proceedings finish strongly, with Helen Molesworth’s scrutiny of Duchamp’s erotic objects, and their neglect in the mainstream American art historical narratives, pitting the readymade against the commodity. Molesworth sheds new light on Duchamp’s decision to allow hand-made reproductions of his readymades.

As I’ve been critical of the book as a rendition of the real-time meeting, it would be fair to stress that its shortcomings are not lost on its editor. In his Afterword, Melville offers a useful summary of the lines of enquiry that the project might at least help to “renew” and “prolong.” In doing so, he alludes to many of the key problematics facing art history (and curatorship): for instance, the relativity or porosity of its *episteme* amongst others with which it increasingly overlaps, versus the interiority it requires of its objects and objectives, as well as the “objectivity” that it can hope to profess whilst subject to these cross-cutting forces. But despite Melville’s openness to these important questions, we can still detect a certain defensiveness, if not indicative of his own posture, then perhaps of that which he anticipates in his peers - in the face of art’s continuing declassification as a privileged set of objects. This expresses a fear that art history risks some kind of demotion towards a “merely” anthropological or literary pursuit, a fear that it could do without. The strongest contributions to this volume certainly suggest that confident outreach beyond “objective” art history is both more relevant, and more interesting, than disciplinary gate-keeping.

*David Teh*  
*Independent Scholar*

### Works Cited

- Frow, John. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Iversen, Margaret. "The Surrealist Situation of the Photographed Object." *The Lure of the Object*. Ed. Stephen Melville. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005. 181-92.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 3-44.
- Melville, Stephen. Introduction. *The Lure of the Object*. Ed. Stephen Melville. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005. vii-x.