

Introduction: the resonant object

Amy K. Hamlin and Robin Schuldenfrei



Figure 1 Stone Hill from a Clark Art Institute library study carrel, Williamstown, Massachusetts, May 2000. Polaroid photograph by Amy K. Hamlin.

This story of art history begins in a seminar classroom near the base of Stone Hill, Williamstown (Figure 1). A small group of graduate students are gathered around a table to discuss with their professor the methods and historiography of art history. The table is set with the students' books, pens, and pencils, along with a single deck of tarot cards. The text under discussion is Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. An unconventional choice, some thought, among the classic works of the discipline previously discussed in the course, texts by Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, and E.H. Gombrich. Calvino's narrative begins with an evocative description of a traveller in a forest who seeks shelter in a castle that appears, at the same time, to be nothing more than a tavern inn. The innkeepers, as lady and lord, play host to a banquet attended by a congress of travellers, strangers but for the forced intimacy occasioned by the circumstances of chance. Though they are mysteriously struck mute, exchange is encouraged via the imagery of the major and minor arcana of a tarot deck. Each of the guests selects a suite of cards that is translated by a narrator, who thus demonstrates the radical subjectivity of interpretation and the capacity to craft narratives that expand the contours of the imagination. An achievement of Calvino's allegory, the professor explains, is what it inspires for the practice of art history, within and beyond its institutional houses in the university and in the museum; Calvino's story invites each of us to contribute to

the practice of furthering the understanding of art's history while acknowledging our own position with regard to our time and place in that continuum. Such was our experience in the fall of 1998, not long after we, together with fifteen classmates, had arrived in Williamstown to study with Charles W. Haxthausen in the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art.¹

This issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* honours Haxthausen's visionary engagement with the methods, narratives, and historiography of the discipline. It takes stock in the legacy of his landmark conference 'The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University', while paying tribute to his tremendous influence as a mentor and scholar.² Haxthausen's work and teaching reverberates in his students' methodological and curatorial practices, in their intellectual pursuits and in their framing of what constitutes the past and future of art history. That framing, we would like to suggest, is an understanding of art history that Haxthausen imparts: pliable, open-ended, scalable, relevant, and political, but always with its own historiography in mind – art history as a discipline. In his fifty years in the field, Haxthausen has demonstrated to generations of students, through his pedagogical and research praxis alike, how art history is an evolving discipline underpinned by an expansive and deep understanding of the cultures that wrought its objects, coupled with an exacting intellectual and methodological investigation of those objects. Into this dyad he folds the performative aspects: the active and rigorous looking that is a key tool of the art historian, the thinking and framing aloud that can occur when in front of the objects themselves, a meticulous attentiveness to writing, and the formulating of a lecture with the receiver's ear in mind. An embodiment of the prodigious disciplinary nature of art history, he reiterates the importance of the both the academic and museum-based scholar's ability to communicate about art to its given and myriad audiences.

Haxthausen thinks with and through the object, its media, its culture, and its surrounding theoretical and contextual writing – in an artwork's time and beyond, and he does so with a particular attunement to language itself – in the necessity of translating German (back and forth), and in his own writing practice. In an increasingly rapid world of ever growing demands, Haxthausen's scholarship is a model of the necessity of careful attention. And yet, we would also like to highlight the nimbleness and flexibility in his thinking, which, when crafted into writing, solidifies. Haxthausen strays from art history where required, but then returns to it, evincing the pliability of the discipline at its best. Lest we lose sight of the object's multiple resonances, his work also reminds us not to privilege theory over the object,

¹ Haxthausen has himself reflected on the heuristic potential of Calvino's novel for art history. See Haxthausen, 'The Sovereignty of the Object', in Toshiharu Omuka, ed., *Symposia: University Campus as Museum*, Tsukuba, Japan: University of Tsukuba, 2013, 8-15 (Japanese); 16-31 (English).

² The conference took place at the Clark Art Institute in May 1999, and in 2002 the following edited volume based on the conference proceedings was published: Haxthausen, ed., *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts, Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2002; distributed by Yale University Press. See also Haxthausen's paper delivered in 2005 at the Institute of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba, in Japan, and reprinted in this journal in 2014: Haxthausen, 'Beyond 'the two art histories'', *Journal of Art Historiography* 11, December 2014, 1-11.

or, for that matter, other forms of inquiry, such as the concerns of art historians working in the academy over those in curatorial fields, and vice-versa.

In 1999, Haxthausen convened the conference 'The Two Art Histories'. It was an unprecedented and influential gathering of academic art historians and museum curators that brought *sotto voce* tensions to surface in the spirit of intellectual inquiry and what we might achieve as a discipline outside of our institutional silos. That gathering intentionally brought together representatives that primarily identified with the university or the museum and encouraged a thinking beyond the friction within the discipline that lay beneath the apparent detente between academic art historians and museum curators. The dialectic of inquiry between traditional and revisionist art historical scholarship continues to shape the discourse, practices, and goals of art history today. Itself an act of art historiography, the conference ultimately attests to how the discipline of art history continues to resonate in deep and meaningful ways. Twenty years later, it is time to reconsider the concerns that animated that congress through a deep engagement with the art object in social structures, and in terms of the broader agency of objects in politics, society, and culture. With this mandate in mind, we posed the following question: painting, artwork, art object, immersive installation, digital realm – how do we interact with art today and how have the approaches of academic art historians and museum curators to the object changed in recent years?

The four essays by Haxthausen's former students presented in this special issue constitute a microcosm of his impact on the discipline, earlier versions of which were first shared at 'The Resonant Object: A Symposium to Honor Charles W. Haxthausen', which took place at the Clark Art Institute on 18-19 May 2018. That event invited Haxthausen's former students to think about, with, and through art objects, in order to consider art history's many past bifurcations and convergences between the academy and the museum. Grounded in the present, but looking back through history, it asked: what are the paradoxical effects of media, image, and culture upon theory and art historical practice today? The symposium simultaneously reflected back on both two hundred years of art history as a discipline grappling with the object at the nexus of history, theory, and display object, and also aimed to include the most recent developments in the field. Taking the long view, the symposium sought to centre the object in relation to its particular historical period vis-à-vis broad changes in intellectual outlooks and shifts in frameworks of knowledge. Inviting multiple conversations across the many sub-disciplines of art history, yet tethered to the continued central importance of the object – and its ability to resonate deeply and widely outwards – the symposium opened afresh the question of how an art object resonates. By anchoring the symposium in this notion of the resonant object, we elicited stories from the field that evidence the singularity of close encounters with cultural artefacts and the necessity of careful attention.

The essays and objects featured in this issue – a selection of Kurt Schwitters' *Merz* collages from 1919 (Graham Bader), an anonymous eighteenth-century Peruvian depiction of *Our Lady of Bethlehem with a Male Donor* (Victoria Sancho Lobis), Dennis Oppenheim's marionette works from the late 1970s (Robert Slifkin), and a piece of chalk utilized by a contemporary art collective (Rebecca Uchill) –

recommend a more capacious art history by virtue of their interlocutors. Although richly varied, these four essays are stitched with a common thread, à la Calvino's narrator. Each author's interpretation of the object's resonance ultimately interrogates the *idées reçus* of art history's institutions and the narratives that shape them. Indeed, an achievement of these essays is the authors' awareness of the intersecting cultures of scholarship that attend the practice of art history in the university and the museum. They regard, revise, and refresh the institutional foundations of art historical scholarship by way of rigorous and original engagements with the art object. Written from singular vantage points in the university and the museum, and rooted in Haxthausen's classroom of situated narratives, these essays together countenance an expanded view of the field of art history. They testify to the rich idiosyncrasies, anxieties, and pleasures of contemporary art historical practice, while offering models for future object-based practices in the field.

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