



The Material Life of Things: Symposium

Materiality and Life Metaphors: Three Dialogues

Friday 18 March 2011

15.00 - 18.30, Research Forum South Room

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN

ABSTRACTS

Material Value and the Language of Loss in Tudor Paintings and Time-based Media Works of Art

Tarnya Cooper (16th Century Curator, National Portrait Gallery) and Pip Laurenson (Head of Collection Care Research, Tate)

This paper compares the removal of a Tudor panel painting from its wood support and its re-assignment to canvas with the transfer of an artist's film to video. Drawing on examples of Tudor paintings and time-based media works of art, this paper considers how the location of the medium, in contrast to what is considered simply as physical support, influences decisions about the value and significance of the materials from which an artwork is made from these very different historical periods. The speakers will explore the emotionally charged language used to describe material disassociation and issues of loss in relation to the context and presentation of works of art throughout their histories.

Artists' Things: Lemoyne's Sword and Saint-Aubin's Joke Book

Katie Scott (The Courtauld Institute of Art) and Hannah Williams (St John's College Oxford)

In this presentation, we will each examine an object that once belonged to an eighteenth-century artist: the sword that François Lemoyne (1688-1737) used to commit suicide, and a joke book, known as the *Livre de Caricatures*, composed over several decades by Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin (1721-1786) and other members of his artistic family. Through analyses that focus on the objects' materiality and above all on how they were used, we explore what the lives of these objects can tell us about the lives of the people who owned them. The selection of these particular objects also raises questions about the limits and possibilities of a 'material' cultural history, because while the joke book remains intact, the sword is lost. How can we retrieve the material history of an object that no longer exists? Do lost objects fall outside the field of inquiry, or does the study of material culture have to accommodate those things that are now immaterial?

This presentation is drawn from a larger project on *Artists' Things*, which takes as its subject the material objects that mediated the relationships between artists, their lives and their works. Arranged alphabetically in the form of a dictionary, each short essay examines a different object once owned by an artist in eighteenth-century France: from items related to their professional practice, to things with more personal significance. In a series of material and archival studies, analysing actual objects or, where they no longer exist, the visual and textual traces of them in paintings, drawings and written descriptions, *Artists' Things* proposes an alternative social history of art that forges connections across the often distinct disciplines of art and material culture.

Balancing on the Borderlines: 'Life Cycles' in Nam June Paik's Legacy from the Perspectives of Art History and Conservation

Hanna Barbara Hölling (Faculty of Humanities, Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam) and Angela Matyssek (Art History Department, Philipps-Universität Marburg)

(Hanna Hölling) Admittedly, the greatest lessons taught by the video master Nam June Paik to the world was the implementation of video as art medium; but not exclusively. Paik's significant achievement in terms of art production was the one of lessening the rigid term of a singular authentic object and releasing it by the creation of its numerous versions, variations and clones. Moreover, the creative process became open-ended, allowing for modifications and interventions long after the artwork entered a (museum) collection. On the example of two installations, *Noah's Ark* (1989, collection of the *Centre for Art and Media* in Karlsruhe) and *TV Garden* (1974/2000/2002/2008, Collection of *K21*, Düsseldorf, the *Guggenheim Museum* in New York, *Nam June Paik Art Centre* in Seoul) I will attempt to illustrate how artwork's 'life cycles' may occur in non-linear form, constituted by its micro histories that are revealed in material transition of its isolated fragments rather than its entirety. From the point of view of a conservator, I shall also discuss how the transitory character of organic media and technology challenges the common understanding of a physical art object.

(Angela Matyssek) Analogies between artworks and human beings and, more precisely, the ideas of objects' 'lives' were implemented in various ways in the early modern period. They involve, among others, contemporaneous descriptions of breathing and pulsing figures of Raphael's paintings, the agency of Michelangelo's statues, and myths of procreation in art production. These notions were the subject of study within several art historical projects. But what about the 20th century, broadly considered as 'rational' and 'scientific'? What attitudes towards the 'life' of art may be found and how 'life' metaphors have so far been used? Starting out from Nam June Paik's *Robot K-456* (the most famous version of 1963) my investigation into metaphors of 'life' and 'death' in the 20th century will be questioning the role and functions of anthropomorphism in art, art history and conservation. Including further examples from other artists it will also attempt to shed light on some of the practices in the handling of art.

Organised by Drs. Francesco Lucchini (The Courtauld) and Kate Gerry (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore)