

Robin Tanner, eds., *Art History's Agency* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); and Matthew Rampley, "Art History and Cultural Difference: Alfred Gell's Anthropology of Art," *Art History* 28, no. 4 (2005): 524–51.

7. Elsje van Kessel, *The Social Lives of Paintings in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2011); Joris van Gastel, *Il Marmo Spirante: Sculpture and Experience in 17th-Century Rome* (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2011); and Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag; Leiden: Leiden University Press, forthcoming). The books resulting from the art and agency project will be published as part of a series, *Art and Agency/Kunst und Wirkmacht*, published jointly by the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg and Leiden University by Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, and Leiden University Press. See also the Website of the program at <http://www.hum.leiden.edu/research/artandagency/>.

8. Charles de Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (Geneva, 1760); Octavien de Guasco, *De l'usage des statues chez les anciens: Essai historique* (Brussels: Chez J. L. de Bourbers, 1768); Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Dresden, 1764); and Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *Le Jupiter Olympien . . . , ouvrage qui comprend un essai sur le goût de la sculpture polychrome* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1814).
9. Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); and Lawrence Barsalou, "Grounding Symbolic Operations in the Brain's Modal Systems," in *Embodied Grounding: Social, Cognitive, Affective, and Neuroscientific Approaches*, ed. Gün R. Semin and Eliot R. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9–42.

Finbarr Barry Flood

In Henry James's short story *The Last of the Valerii* (1874, revised 1885), the eponymous Conte Valerio falls in thrall to the charms of a malign statue of the goddess Juno, excavated at his villa. Enchanted by the marble sculpture, the count revives a form of polytheistic worship inflected by amorous desire. Revealing the situation to the count's hapless wife, the narrator explains: "In a word, dear child, Marco is an anthropomorphist. Do you know what that means?" Fortunately, the count's wife understands perfectly and saves the day by ordering the reinterment of the enchanting statue. Despite the occultation of the object of the count's desire (not entirely, since he retains the marble hand of the goddess), the narrator concludes that he "never became, if you will, a thoroughly modern man."¹

To be an anthropomorphist is, it seems, to be at odds with modernity. The first recorded English use of the term *anthropomorphism* is in 1753, during the height of the Enlightenment, when it was used to denote the erroneous ascription of human form to the deity. This imputation of religious error was informed by new and specifically European formulations of the rational, but its polemical thrust was common to cognate terms deployed much earlier in monotheistic polemics to name conceptual errors often associated with idolatry. The pejorative connotations of "anthropomorphism" (and its cognates) in both theological and secular polemics highlight the generally tendentious nature of the term as applied to two distinct problems of iconicity. Historically, the most fundamental of these has been the conceptualization and representation of divinity, specifically, the question of whether a transcendental deity or deities could be embodied or should be depicted in embodied form. The issue is not exclusive to monotheism; polytheistic cultures have always had dissenters on this question.

Even within Judaism and Islam, seen as the most aniconic of faiths, biblical and Qur'anic verses apparently impute not only form (and, thus, spatial qualities) to a transcendental deity but also attributes common to man, including eyes, feet, fingers, and hands. Readings that took these passages as transparent descriptions were generally rejected as literalist errors. However, anthropomorphic conceptions of God may have been relatively common in the early Islamic world; one early tradition (considered heterodox, if not heretical) even

identified a mark on the rock within the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692) as the footprint of God himself. Similarly, the anthropomorphic language of mystical Judaism provided ammunition for Christian polemicists such as Agobard, the bishop of Lyons (writing about 840), who accused the Jews of idolatry by virtue of their literal investment in a corporeal God who resembled man in all respects except that the fingers of his hand did not fold, since he had no need to work with them.

One notable aspect of anthropomorphist traditions in monotheism is their presentation of the divine body in discrete parts: hands, fingers, feet. Perhaps not serendipitously, this is a quality that scriptural and mystical evocations of the deity share with the profane phenomenon of premodern prosopopoeia, in particular, the inscription on factured objects of poetic and other texts written in the first-person voice. Insofar as these texts anthropomorphize the objects to which they give voice, they usually offer a fragmented evocation of the body—referring to breasts, faces, mouths, and so forth—that frustrates the conception of a corporeal whole. This reticence brings to mind the role that the fragmentation of the (re)presented body has often played in satisfying the desires of both iconophiles and iconoclasts, Conte Valerio's retention of Juno's marble hand being a case in point.

The production of objects as actors in prosopopoeia highlights a second series of phenomena integral to "anthropomorphism" and perhaps more directly relevant to the discipline of art history. These entail the ascription of agency to apparently inanimate objects. The "presence effects" associated with crafted images that reproduce the human form and are capable of taking on a life of their own as a result are perhaps the most familiar facet of this aspect of anthropomorphism.

In *The Last of the Valerii*, both modes of anthropomorphism—humanizing the deity and animating material forms—are projected onto a remote polytheistic past that erupts into modernity through the ambiguous mediations of an embodied fragment of antiquity. Associating anthropomorphism with pagan fetishism, the tale subscribes to a view of anthropomorphism as a category error contravening distinctions between subject and object, animate and inanimate, agentive and passive that have been naturalized and universalized in post-Enlightenment thought. As an irrational con-

fusion of animate life with inanimate matter, the anthropomorphism disdained by moderns resembles the idolatry denounced in the Old Testament as a misapprehension of humanly crafted things that lack breath.

Discussing the ascription of agency to images of divinities, the anthropologist Alfred Gell insists on a distinction between biological and social life, an approach that has inspired recent attempts to explain "living presence response," the experience of life associated with the perception of anthropomorphic sculptures.² However, approaches to anthropomorphism at the level of cognition and culture also highlight an important distinction between the anthropomorphism disdained by premodern theology and modern rationalism, a distinction that operates at the level of ontology. In many pre-Enlightenment traditions, the inanimate idols taken for omnipotent beings find their inverse not in the figure of the deity but in man himself, fashioned from clay (or other matter) and then infused with breath by a divine artist. In Judaism and Christianity at least, the man thus fashioned is made in God's image, a "living icon," as Christian theologians of the post-Iconoclastic period put it. In Christianity, the chiasmic paradox of man made in God's image found its ultimate logic in the Incarnation, which provided a powerful imprimatur for anthropomorphic depictions of the deity.

The attempt of man, as the living, breathing creation of God, to offer worship to inanimate images crafted by his own hand entails a double hubris that reveals the inadequacy of human artistry. The contrast between human and divine ability in this respect is an ancient theme; after all, Pygmalion's love for Galatea could be consummated only through the intervention of the goddess Venus, who, unlike Pygmalion, possessed the ability to transform his marble creation into a flesh-and-blood woman. The transubstantiations central to these kind of creation narratives in both monotheistic and polytheistic traditions admit the possibility of enlivening inanimate matter. Within these narratives, the *anthropos* of anthropomorphism is therefore always already constituted in a manner that blurs the oppositions between art and nature, subject and object, *physis* and *techne* integral to the modern usage of the term.

Although anthropologists and psychologists often see the ascription of agency to nonhuman actors, whether transcendental deities or alluring marble statues, as a recalcitrant anachronism (albeit one essential to religious belief), they disagree about whether or not anthropomorphism is intuitive.³ The jury is also still out on the related question of whether the distinction between animate and inanimate is hardwired or acquired (or both), although it has been noted that humans tend to ascribe agency and intentionality to moving forms in general, including even self-propelled dots on a screen. Recent suggestions that it is not merely form *tout court* but specific elements of form—chief among them markings resembling eyes and faces—that are crucial to the development of this distinction in complex animals, including humans, hold an obvious interest for the history of reception.⁴

The importance of eyes was noted by Sigmund Freud in his classic essay on the uncanny, a condition manifest, in Ernst Jentsch's classic formulation (which Freud rejected), by "doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate

and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate."⁵ Jentsch's insight that the greater the degree of verisimilitude, the more intense the feeling of the uncanny aroused by anthropomorphic forms has been validated by recent work on robotics, which has identified an "uncanny valley," a realm of negative human emotional response to sophisticated simulacra that, counterintuitively, increases rather than decreases beyond a certain point in direct proportion to the degree of verisimilitude. The locus classicus of the uncanny is, of course, the corpse, and one likely explanatory factor is that the gap between expectation and performance reminds the observer of her or his own mortality.

In *The Last of the Valerii*, a return to the earth, the ultimate fate of all animate beings, also solves the "problem" of anthropomorphism. Whether one sees this as the pragmatic dispatch of a fetish object or a live burial depends, of course, on whether one identifies with the count or the narrator. From the point of view of the narrator, the statue's disappearance into its tomb heals a rupture that began with its emergence, restoring both the ontology and temporality of modernity (although not entirely—the severed hand remains to frustrate the undertaking).

However, the tale's ending also suggests that the polemics of "anthropomorphism" are rooted in more extensive anxieties about our own agency and mortality. These anxieties constantly threaten to undermine the ontologies asserted to assuage them, despite the naturalization of the latter as commonsensical and universally valid. Most of us have had the experience of feeling "thwarted" by machines, usually cars and computers, devices with which we have a close haptic relationship and that function in effect as prosthetic extensions of our distributed personhood. The attribution of agency in extremis may seem cute or quirky. Yet it provides a practical instance of the subversive ontological hybrids of nature and culture, human and nonhuman that Bruno Latour has argued necessarily result from the ontological stratifications that characterize modernity. Ultimately, the complex entanglements of mortality and ontology may be relevant to the creation of all images of (potentially) animate beings, and to the tensions between reference and presence that inform their function and reception. Such tensions undermine attempts to relegate anthropomorphism to a dim and distant past. As W. J. T. Mitchell (paraphrasing Latour) puts it: "When it comes to images . . . we have never been and probably never will be modern."⁶

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Notes

1. Henry James, "The Last of the Valerii," available at http://www.henryjames.org.uk/lastv/LVtext_inframe.htm (accessed July 3, 2011).

2. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Caroline van Eck, "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's Art and Agency, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," *Art History* 33, no. 4 (2010): 642–59. The cognitive dimension of "living presence response" recalls the role ascribed to empathy (*Einfühlung*) in the animation of form in earlier German writings on aesthetics, most obviously those of Robert Vischer (1873). For Vischer, empathetic identification is "the natural mother of religious personification"; Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," in *Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, Calif.: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 105, 109, 119.
3. Pascal Boyer, "What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontol-

ogy and Cultural Representations," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 1 (1996): 83–97; and Stewart Elliott Guthrie, "Anthropology and Anthropomorphism in Religion," in *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlow (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 37–62.

4. Susan A. Gelman and John E. Opfer, "Development of the Animate-Inanimate Distinction," in *Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognitive Development*, ed. Usha Goswami (London: Blackwell, 2002), 154.
5. Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1996): 11–12.
6. W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Surplus Value of Images," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 35, no. 3 (2002): 19–20.

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"Anthropomorphism" is an explanation I encountered often while researching the artistic use of visual ambiguity for my book *Potential Images*.¹ A "potential image" is a way of seeing and interpreting visual data that becomes actual with the viewer's subjective participation. When a potential image bears resemblance to a human being or a part thereof, its existence can be attributed to the artist's anthropomorphism, to his or her tendency to attribute humanlike traits to non-human realities. If the existence of this image is disputed, then the claim for its existence can be attributed to the interpreter's anthropomorphism.

In the latter case, anthropomorphism is rejected as the source of a misguided perception. In the former—for example, in landscape paintings of the Renaissance—it may be accepted as expressing a historically documented worldview.² But it is a worldview that is obsolete, and for a long time, anthropomorphism has been at best tolerated. It is regarded as an illusion and has accordingly been condemned since at least 1620, when Roger Bacon defined the "Idols of the Tribe" in *Novum organum*: "And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it."³

While there is no doubt that perception can be misguided, by construing accidental configurations as significant patterns or by attributing one's own properties to beings and things devoid of them, the validity of all that is subsumed under the term *anthropomorphism* should not be dismissed without examination. Epistemology pleads against this: there is no object of knowledge without a subject, and even resorting to mechanical prostheses and mathematical tools does not dispense with the eventual need for the interpretation of data, nor does it rid interpreters of their human characteristics. As far as art is concerned, the late nineteenth-century "aesthetics of empathy" located the basis for aesthetic communication in the interaction between object and recipient before John Dewey spoke of "art as experience" and the phenomenologists of "embodied perception."⁴ The conditions of this interaction, now studied experimentally by neuroscientists, are not an impediment but a resource that must be harnessed to the study of sensory phenomena.⁵

"Anthropomorphism" also suffers from being an umbrella

term, broad and vague, and often a misnomer. The characteristics imputed to its effects are often not specific to humans but are shared by other animals, by bodies in general, or by all animate entities. In such cases, one should rather speak of "anthrozoomorphism," "somatomorphism," or simply animism. During a recent study of the work of Paul Gauguin, I was struck by the frequency with which his depictions of animals, humans, and deities incorporated plantlike features (Fig. 1). In order to describe this trait, I resorted to what I thought was a neologism, "phytomorphism," until I realized it is in common usage among specialists of other cultural traditions, including Americanists studying Moche ceramics (Fig. 2), a major source of inspiration for Gauguin.⁶

Pascal Boyer has proposed to distinguish, within anthropomorphism, between the "projection" of anatomical structure, physiological processes, personal identity, social organization, and intentional psychology, as well as between the various "source domains" of anthropomorphism, its different types of representations, and the effect of these representations on its "target domains."⁷ Such distinctions are welcome, but Boyer's terminology expresses a unidirectional understanding of the epistemic process epitomized by the notion of "projection," introduced in psychology by Sigmund Freud and generalized by Lawrence K. Franck.⁸ Hermann Rorschach, author of what is now regarded as the quintessential projective test, never spoke of projection; instead, he aimed at providing a "diagnosis of perception," and he regarded interpretation (*Deutung*) as a part or moment of perception (*Wahrnehmung*) itself.⁹

For Boyer, anthropomorphism originated in religion. This restriction, which I find problematic, permits him to explain how it could survive, over many cycles of cultural transmission, as a "salient counterfactual speculation," opposed to intuitive ontological categories and principles. The evidence I encountered so far in my own research does not support this view but agrees, instead, with Stewart Elliott Guthrie's account of anthropomorphism as an effect of the cognitive dimension of perception and "our need to find whatever pattern is most important": "The most important pattern in most contexts is that with the highest organization. The highest organization we know is that of human thought and