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**Author:** Vékony, D.
**Title:** Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art
**Issue Date:** 2017-04-11
Chapter 2 - Beyond representation

The aim of this research is to explore where precisely the force of contemporary art relevant for the pressing times of the 21st century might lie. As it has been suggested, certain contemporary art practices might be able to create a situation in which we find ourselves in a free, non-teleological space that is an alternative for the hegemonic structures that define the world of production; a different kind of attitude in order to imagine the world ‘otherwise’.

In Chapter One this space was associated with the term ‘ground zero’. It was argued that these spaces might have a potential for revaluating how we make decisions regarding our future. This kind of free space can emerge through various practices and it is hypothesized that contemporary art might be one of these platforms. The question that now needs to be answered is how to get to this state of empty, non-teleological space through art? How is it possible for any art to create such a distinctive state of consciousness? Is it not asking too much of art?

In the previous chapter the various aspects of the force of art were demonstrated. In this chapter, I take a step back, and explore if and how an art object that seemingly is not more than a portrait of something or somebody might be capable of inviting the beholder into a realm that could have further potential for how we grasp the world ‘otherwise’.

2.1 Outline

What needs to be explored first is how it is possible for contemporary art to take us into any space at all. The assumption that an artwork is able to take the viewer anywhere calls for two approaches: one is the representationalist approach, assuming that there is a ‘depth beyond the surface’ and that deeper, other than artistic meaning can be reached through decoding surface messages. The other approach suggests that the artwork is an entity in itself, and therefore a distinctive phenomenon from what it represents. In the latter case one can argue that the artwork is ‘other than’ representation, it points beyond representation and what it seems to mirror. Let me explain this distinction.
How can one grasp this ‘going beyond’? Is it ever possible to let go of representation? My suggestion is “yes it is”. Let me present an example. The inside of the small church on the top of Mount Pantocrator on the island of Korfu, Greece, which dates back to the sixteen-hundreds, is covered with silver plates and paintings in the Greek Orthodox style. Given that the impact of Baroque did not reach that far, the iconic simplicity of the figures reveals the Byzantine influence. To me, someone who was not raised in the tradition of religious Christianity, generally icons are icons, namely figures portraying saints and angelic figures and no more than that, in other words they are representations that are beautiful, pleasant to the eye, interesting stylistically and so on. However, when spending time at that church, looking at the ceiling and the murals around me, I had a different experience: the figures all of a sudden started to disappear. In a sense, it became irrelevant whether I was seeing Mary, John or angels on the walls, what started to glow through the figures was some kind of saintly energy. This energy was not contained in the figures, but somehow it was the figures themselves.

How is this possible? This experience made me wonder how a painting, drawing or any other media can point beyond what it represents. In order to explore how an artwork is able to draw us into a space in which it inspires us to imagine the world differently, we need to examine these two approaches, namely representationalism and ‘the beyond’.

I start with the argument that when we approach images, we want to find out what they ‘mean’. As a cornerstone of this argument that is not general, however widely adopted, there is the assumption that images stand as mimesis of a reality; they are seen as representations of things outside themselves. In these cases, various art historical theories can be applied to specific artworks in order to reveal the set of meaning embedded in the image. It is assumed that the image can be somehow grasped through these theories and one can thus come to understand the image. The classical method applied in this case is the Panofsky-based model of a three strata reception of an image: perception, iconography and iconology. As Holly, - while contesting this approach – points out, when thinking of art as representation what the art historian looks for in the image are “its allure, its formal structure, its iconographic program, its resonance with similar artifacts” (1996:69). In order to see if/how images can be comprehended through this analytical attitude, she explores a Raphael painting.

Further on in the chapter, Holly demonstrates how and why this analytical
approach falls short. Some art theorists such as David Freedberg, WJT Mitchell, Didi-Huberman, Alfred Gell from anthropology or Martin Heidegger from philosophy suggest that this interpretive attitude freezes the image as historical evidence in the service of representation. Instead of treating the artwork as passive evidence of history, they suggest treating images as ‘agents’, in other words as entities in themselves, revealing what it is that they want and what they require from us. A shift from the theory of representation to that of agency is therefore introduced.

Furthermore, it is argued that whereas in the case of certain images representationalism might seem to be satisfactory in order to grasp the image, in the case of some contemporary artworks this attitude leaves the beholder empty-handed. Moreover - as demonstrated through specific artworks - the limitation of this analytical approach emerges not because we, practicing art historians, realize that we cannot look at artworks as carriers of steady meaning frozen in time, but because the artworks themselves invite us beyond representation. I argue that some artworks cannot be understood in ways other than agency. Finally, the question that needs to be answered is what specific agency might those artworks that have relevance for the 21st century exercise? In other words, what is needed, what kind of agency is necessary to point the beholder to imagine the world ‘otherwise’?

2.2 Representation

The common approach with which art historians – or interested observers in general – relate to art in the European tradition is through a representationalist attitude. They relate to the image with the assumption that it is an embodiment of things of the world ‘out there’, therefore they look at the image as some form of text that can be interpreted and within which meaning can be found. Holly (1996:69), points out that this approach towards images is not only practiced generally by art enthusiasts but it has been the case in many schools of art history as well; there is the image that is observed, described, defined stylistically, identified within a specific socio-cultural context, and a comparative analysis is provided with other artworks and artifacts. Questions and answers are raised in relation to the theme represented, the artist, the style and so on. This approach is in line with the
Panofsky-model used by people schooled in modernist European settings with which to approach artworks. Although it is not a given that this is how art should be looked at, this approach is the most widely recognized in our rationalism-based European world-view. The Panofsky-model suggests that there is ‘meaning’ in the image that can be revealed. This meaning is not only steady and definite, it is also ‘larger’ than the artwork itself, suggesting aspects of culture and civilization we know or can learn about. In the subsequent paragraphs I will demonstrate how representational art history treats well-known works of Old Masters such as the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) (fig.3.) by the high Renaissance painter, Raphael.

![Madonna of the Goldfinch](image)

Fig. 3. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506)

Art history from a representationalist viewpoint treats artworks as a means to picture and deliver meaning that comes from ‘outside’ the artwork, and is representative of the given socio-cultural era, style of making art, the artist’s persona and so on. The artwork in this sense becomes a presentation of the value-system of the epoch it was made in. When following the Panofsky-model, the first thing is to detect what is actually seen, then begins
an excavation for meaning through iconography, an exact description of the perceived experience, and iconology, a matching of the image with the cultural data available. Thus the art historian moves between what is seen and other biographical and cultural data, and connects this knowledge with what is presented in the picture. There is a lot to be learnt from such an investigation, and the art historian works as a detective, slowly revealing the times that are hidden and encoded in the artwork. Let us look at the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* by Raphael as an example.

In analysis as such, the starting point is always representation – what is seen – and immediately iconography and iconology follow. What is seen here? The three figures appear in a vast landscape beneath a cloudy sky. Iconography follows: Mary, John and Jesus forming a triangular composition are identified in an idealized landscape. Then iconology steps in and it is argued that the artwork is from Raphael’s Florentine period during which he had become known as the painter of beautiful Madonnas (Gombrich 2005:34-35). This trio defines most art historical analysis. For instance, an iconological claim would be art historian, Robert Huerta’s, observation (2005:31) that the pictorial composition of the *Madonna* is evidence of Raphael’s interest in classical art, especially the Greek antiquities, as the pyramidal composition Raphael uses is an essential element in classical art. Another iconological finding by art historian, Ernst H. Gombrich, relying on perception and iconography, states that although the connections between the figures look spontaneous, the importance of structured design (*disegno*) is visible. From him we learn that Raphael was a careful designer of his compositions and, by using other drawings as comparative evidence, Gombrich (2005:34-35) demonstrates how Raphael spent quite some time designing idealized compositions, such as the *Madonna*, before deciding on which version of his drawing to use in the painting.

In order to complete the iconological picture, art historians also often comment on how beauty is treated in the works of Raphael. By relying on letters written by the artist, one also learns that, indeed, when creating his famous *Madonna* paintings Raphael moved away from the use of live models and came up with a concept of beauty that was independent from the good looks of any particular model, thus painting his divine-looking figures by relying on the Platonic Form of the idea of Beauty itself (Gombrich 2005: 316-322).

This portrayal of ideal beauty is in line with the Neo-Platonist principles of the times as “Raphael’s art represents an attempt to achieve, in visual form, the Neo-Platonist
ideal of enlightened individuals living in a rational, ordered world. ... he tried to fuse classical ideals with Christian philosophy to bridge the gap between earthly and divine...” (Huerta 2005:31).

This striving for a perfect utopian state of being in the world in which the human being is central, is juxtaposed by the use of symbols in painting. In the Renaissance, symbolism was of crucial importance and, in order to broaden the iconological picture, art historical analysis often seeks out the symbols hidden in the picture in order to be able to decode the specific meaning and references of the work. The goldfinch, for instance, with its colorful feathers was a popular caged bird in Renaissance times, but most importantly it carried religious significance as “its red face is said to be caused by a drop of Jesus' blood: during the Way of the Cross, a goldfinch pulled a thorn from Jesus' forehead and a drop of blood fell on its head” (http://www.artbible.info/art/large/874.html).

The scene is therefore a reference to the awaiting crucifixion, which is why it is more than just a playful act between children. Additionally, the placing the Madonna in nature, on a rock or on the ground adheres to the theme of the ‘Madonna of humility’ referring to the virtue that was much valued by Franciscan piety. The word humility originates from the Latin *humus*, meaning ‘ground’ and was a popular subject-matter throughout the Renaissance. When investigating the image, further symbols can be found in the painting, such as daisies representing innocence, violets as references to humility, John with a bowl attached to his waist as an anticipation of the future events of baptism (Niyazi 2013).

Many volumes have been written on the art of Raphael, and books and studies are still being published today.¹ Their comparative approach, in-depth analysis and the showing of the artist as an exemplary figure of his times in the light of other artworks and artists is a journey back into history and a revelation of what until then were unknown segments of culture. However, the question that arises is whether one needs all this information in order to let the artwork ‘work’ on us, 21st century observers. Today, the contemporary viewer, without knowing much about Renaissance symbolism, the message of violets, daisies, the

¹ Notable authors are James H. Beck, Pierluigi de Vecchi or Carlo Pedretti among others and the book *The Cambridge companion to Raphael* edited by Marcia B Hall (2005) contains contemporary insights on the oeuvre of the artist.
color codes or even what the goldfinch stands for, may still be captivated by its stillness and peace. It is as if time had stopped and we are taken back into another world away from our noisy reality, tormented by inner (and outer) turmoil. Let me juxtapose this argument with an example and continue the investigation of the realm beyond representation.

Fig. 4. Lucian Freud, *Sunny morning with eight legs* (1997)

Fig. 5. Raphael, *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505)
I shall never forget how I happened to accidentally spot a similar work by Raphael also painted in his Florentine period: the *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505) (fig.5.) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. I had gone to see a Lucian Freud retrospective in the same museum, and the last exhibition room opened into the museum’s permanent Renaissance collection. The dynamic, tense, anxious and tormented figures of Freud, full of neurosis, narcissism and the tragedy of the human condition fascinated me with their force and despair (fig. 4.). Having gone through that, catching sight of the *Madonna* in the other room came as a shock. It was like being dragged into another world, one of calm, peace, order, stillness and divinity.

The force of the image simply stunned me. What matters from the point of view of this research is that I did not know much about Raphael’s oeuvre; I was not armed with the art historical knowledge that would have helped the engagement. Knowing the facts and theory in connection with an image can undoubtedly help to open up an artwork and see it in context. Yet, what that work of art from the Renaissance has to say to us, contemporary viewers, today, in the 21st century, and how it ‘works on’ us, might not need a strong contextual, historical and stylistic analysis. Having left the Lucian Freud show and caught sight of the Raphael, the malady of our 21st century reality struck me. Seeing the Raphael all of a sudden, I noticed how tired I was of witnessing, and also living, the torment that is evoked by the works of Freud, and how I longed for the purity, peace and calm that emerges from the Raphael. It is possible that if I had started to look at the artwork as a piece of historical evidence, the force of this impression would have disappeared. It might even be true that this type of analysis could have distanced me from the piece, as in the very moment of contextual analysis, the artwork travels back in time becoming historical evidence, thus causing its active agency for today’s world to fall away.

How can we look at art other than representation? How can we approach it if not through a stylistic, historical, iconographical analysis? If this representationalist approach – as Didi-Huberman suggests - possibly ‘castrates’ the force of the artwork, with what attitude can we, theorists and observers, approach art?
2.3 Overcoming representation

Many art theorists as well as philosophers find representationalism problematic, so let me present a brief insight into possible criticisms. Philosopher Daniel Doneson explores Martin Heidegger’s take on representation (further discussed in Ch.3). Although when one reads Heidegger it might not be fully obvious, Doneson emphasizes that Heidegger goes as far as saying that the nature of the artwork is *misunderstood* in its identification with representation, so the representationalist approach actually harms the artwork. He argues that, in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, the artwork is looked upon as a fabricated thing whose task is always to refer to something other than itself. This is misleading as it diverts the attention from the *Dasein* of the artwork that, as a relational entity, exercises a special presence on the viewer. In other words, the very being of the artwork is curtailed if treated as representation (Doneson 2011).

Having read his *Confronting images*, I assume that Didi-Huberman (2005) would probably note that representationalism is the legacy that characterized art history from Vasari through Panofsky and onwards. The problem with this approach is that art is seen as allegorical in nature, meaning that it manifests something other than itself: it is seen as ‘matter plus message’; the matter and form carrying the message is the essence of the artwork. In other words, as in the case of the Madonna paintings, the suprasensible appears in the sensible. This approach of representationalism leads to the conclusion that the artwork - no matter how skillfully executed - is inessential in its nature, it is not more than material conveying a message that can be interpreted, analyzed and decoded. Therefore, art history should be written differently.

Didi-Huberman presents an other-than-interpretive take on Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation* (1440-1441) (fig.6.) in the San Marco monastery in Florence.

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2 Also see Doneson 2011:169-73 for detailed analysis.
When engaging with the artwork, Didi-Huberman recognizes that an interpretive approach for decoding artwork according to cultural evidence, especially the sacred texts produced in the Renaissance, cannot work. The artwork falls short when it is forced into a representational framework, whereas it may reveal its manifold references, a multiplicity of associations and a flow of fantasies and impressions that float along one another simultaneously. When consulting the texts that shaped the vision of Fra Angelico, such as the *Artes Memorandi* or the *Summae de exemplis et similitudinibus rerum*, Didi-Huberman recognizes that these texts are far from “compilations of knowledge”. Instead, they are “rather labyrinths in which knowledge loses its way and becomes fantasy, in which the system becomes a great displacement, a great multiplication of images. Theology itself is not construed here as a knowledge such as we understand the word today, which is to say as something that we can possess. … If there is any knowledge at all, it is not ‘caught’ or grasped by anyone…” (Didi-Huberman 2005:21).

In other words, Didi-Huberman concludes that *The Annunciation* was never made to be rationally understood. Therefore, rather than freezing an artwork into art history or discourse, he encourages us to let art work, by simply looking at it, or just being with it in “suspended attention”. In this space of contemplating (and not thinking about) the image, “self-evidence” breaks apart and those boxes into which we squeeze images in order to ‘master’ them, collapse (Didi-Huberman 2005:7).
According to Didi-Huberman, in this “suspended attention”, the ‘striking whiteness’ of the image takes precedence and the experience of being with the silence of the artwork becomes a completely different state of mind from the analytical hunt for meaning.

Holly also calls for an other-than-representationalist approach. In her book, *Past looking. Historical imagination and the rhetoric of the image* (1996) Holly follows the path of post-structuralism in the sense that she calls for images to be treated outside the domain of fixed meaning. She does this to prevent the image from being locked within a specific narrative narrowed by a given path of understanding. She starts her exploration with the attitude that images should be treated as texts with manifold meaning and various readings. Along with that, viewers should also think of themselves as texts with complex and never steady frames of references. Consequently, what actually takes place when the two texts - the image and the observer - meet, is the emergence of a collective of various meanings in a flux resulting from the unpredictable encounter.

Holly continues her argument with the exploration of historical images. She argues that history can never be recollected and the past can only be imagined through our own current projections. This means that there is no such thing as an objective look at the past or a decoding, mapping of objective meaning in which we treat the artwork as a timeless object and ourselves as impartial context-free observers. She claims: “Different times produce different readers who ask different questions. The swing between past object and present subjecthood is the domain in (…) which meaning is produced” (1996:26).

Holly acknowledges that not all branches of art history embrace this approach and she argues that currently – referring to the 1990s, though it still applies today - art history has two distinctive directions: “Either we dig our heels into the unfamiliar terrain and resolutely refuse to acknowledge that we have genuinely been expelled from the garden

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3 I paraphrase her argumentation by using Derrida’s vocabulary. It is important to mention here that the post-structuralist understanding of a text is not the structuralist, Saussurean model in which the word is a sign that signifies the signified, in other words is able to ‘carry’ and cover a particular meaning. For the post-structuralists, meaning is always in a flux based on the fact that even the relationship of word and thing (signifier-signified) is indirect, relative and always deferred.

4 It has to be noted that - true to this post-structuralist argument - Holly does not regard art as a phenomenon with ontological status. However, - and she would probably agree with this argument - one must not deny that there are certain qualities to art that are the property of art regardless of subjective apperception. It is as if one was looking at the night sky in which the stars are unquestionably there. What constellations we notice, if any, is a matter of subjective perception, but the presence of the stars is undoubtable.
where the timeless work of art reigns supreme, or we take those objects as they appear before us in the shimmering atmosphere of the new world and use their visible deconstruction as the occasion to remap our own disciplinary universe” (1996:5, italics, DV).

In other words, although Holly acknowledges that these two approaches exist, for her the times are gone in which the art historian could still behave as if under the spell of the artwork as a timeless entity to be studied through an objective gaze. Instead, we should look at what the artworks we explore are doing for us, today, and how they inspire us to rethink our world.

The question that follows takes this different attitude from theory to practice. “If images refuse fixity, how are we going to identify and catalogue them and, by extension, write their history and tell their pictures?” (1996:7). What Holly is asking here is how can we write about or rather ‘tell art’ if we do not treat it as some timeless object or fixed evidence of the past? She suggests the following approach: “... I want to consider the ways in which the binary opposition between subject and object can be regarded as perpetually unfixed, as historically ‘on the move’” (1996:7).

In other words, as opposed to looking at the artwork as the passive ‘other’ and the observer as active self, a different mentality should be adopted. In my reading, this mentality plays with how and in what way the two parties are empowered. Although ‘empowered’ might sound like a strong word it is the right one to use, as in the former representationalist approach there is no power given to the artwork, it is looked upon as an object of curiosity; it is like an interesting corpse waiting to be dissected. However, in the latter case, as Holly also points, “art instructs us in telling” (1996:11).

This is an important observation from the viewpoint of this research, as if ‘art can tell’, it means that it has an active agency. And indeed, subsequently she argues that “the object of art also possesses a subjecthood, in the sense of an agency distinct from the artist who made it – an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways” (1996:11).

The idea of agency that Holly is referring to here, is the concept extensively explored through the ideas of the anthropologist, Alfred Gell, and it is this view, namely that art is an empowered, active agent that is the core principle of my approach. In the

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5 With the word ‘agency’, Alfred Gell immediately comes to mind, and his ideas are explored later in this chapter. It has to be noted that Gell published his book on art and agency in 1998, whereas Holly’s text was published in 1996, therefore it is understandable that no reference is made to Gell.
paragraphs below I explore Gell’s theory as I place the emphasis mostly on what the artwork can do and what it communicates to the contemporary observer and not so much on – as Holly does in her book (1996) – how the artwork is grasped by the subjective attitude of the observer. I argue that if we grant full agency to the artwork, it is able to impact us in ways that we do not necessarily foresee, expect or welcome; this encounter, as Malabou notes, is non-teleological. From here, the unexpected agency of contemporary art, the kind of agency that makes us, contemporary beholders, imagine the world differently would be just one more step.

The following sub-chapter presents theorists who treat art as agency. Although they are all distinctive voices, they call for an end to representationalism when looking at art, and instead to treating it as some kind of agency. The reason for exploring these thinkers and their ideas of art as agency is because it is my contention that art can only help to imagine the world ‘otherwise’ if force is given to it and it can make the observer grasp the world differently.

2.4 Agency

What is an artwork if it is not representation? How does the artwork overcome its own objecthood? As Doneson says when explaining the theories of Heidegger, the philosopher believes the statue of a god is not something made after the god as a representation of the god. The statue of the god is perceived as the god itself. Similarly, tragedy is not the telling of a battle, but it is taken as the battle itself. While watching the tragedy enacted in a performance, we experience the battle taking place, we feel it on our own skin. It is in this moment of engagement that the artwork works on us or as Heidegger expresses it, a “setting-into-work of truth” (Doneson 2011: 169-173).

I can identify with this approach when looking at the Madonna of the meadow. The artwork, through its straightforward, open intention takes the viewer by its presence, by – as Heidegger would say – its “truth”, and captivates us by the force of its beauty, peace and harmony. This approach is explored extensively in Chapter Three – From presence to absence.
The philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, points out that a picture is an ontological event. For Gadamer certain images show full ontological power, meaning that he sees a picture not as the representation of the represented, not as a signifier of the signified, but as a picture identical with the signified. In his seminal book, *The power of images: Studies in the history and theory of response* (1991) David Freedberg seems to go along Gadamer and argues that artworks indeed fully embody and manifest the power of the represented. This relationship of the signifier becoming identical with the signified is best seen in religious practices of the past and present, for instance in the case of the Yoruba customs associated with the famous brass heads found in Benin. The ceremonial heads (fig.7.) shaped in the likeness of kings and nobles were not simply representative sculptures *that looked like* the diseased king but actually *replaced* the king in his everyday life and function while the new king was being elected (Lawal 2001).

![Copper head from Ife (12-16th century)](image)

In this relationship, the king (signified) is identical with the brass head (signifier). This approach seems to suggest that the signified actually comes to life via the signifier, assuming that there is a concrete object/subject that stands as signified. It is from this assumption on the relationship of representation-represented that Freedberg (1991) bases his analysis. He maintains the assumption that images ‘live’, and presents the role of images in indigenous cultures as well as contemporary reactions to images of authority in order to
demonstrate the complexity of the relationship towards these powerful entities. Freedberg states, for instance, that the statue of Artemis at Pellene was covered throughout most of the year and was only revealed on certain days and shown to the public during a procession. No one was allowed to look directly at the image, as it was considered to be too powerful (1991:32-36). Artemis in Sparta was also regarded as extremely dangerous and was thought to have the power to drive men mad (1991:73). In The power of images there are numerous recitations of images that have healing powers; they almost work like relics. Statues of Madonnas cry real tears, one Madonna painting by Altdorfer (1519) apparently had miraculous qualities that would heal the sick (1991:112). For Freedberg, the tearing down of political monuments in the 20th century comes from an urge similar to the covering of the Artemis statue; an acknowledgment that these creatures (artworks) are the signified per se. The statue of the political leader (Stalin, Lenin and other) does not simply represent, but is identical with the political leader; with the signified.\(^7\)

Although the above mentioned examples are connected to religion and politics, I do not think we have to go this far to understand how powerful and animated images are, even for us in the 21st century. Why would no one dare to poke a pin into the eyes of the photograph of one’s mother? Even tearing the photograph to pieces would seem like a brutal act. We animate images to the point that we almost identify them, in this case, with our mother.\(^8\) Although Freedberg acknowledges the extreme power of images, he does not do more than diagnose the different effects and affects various artworks from different eras have on past and contemporary audiences. Furthermore, he seems to argue that all artworks fully embody the represented, be they a god, a political leader or the Virgin Mary.

\(^7\) Although we would think that this intense relationship with images characterizes pre-Enlightenment societies only, it is actually not the case. Even in today’s 21st century, western culture images, for instance, are thought to help healing and to obtain desired objects. While I visited the island of Crete, I noticed votive offerings in the small Greek Orthodox church: metal plates that were carefully placed next to icons. They featured body parts such as limbs or objects such as cars, houses or a computer. It was explained to me that people put these plates next to the saints because they believe that the saints will help them obtain the desired objects or they are given as gifts for curing an illness.

\(^8\) In order to show how long, historically, the debate on images has been around, it is enough to look at the Second Commandment. Straight after declaring that God and only God exists (First Commandment), there is a need to ban images, which is exactly what happens in the Second Commandement. If images did not have force, why would there be a need to prohibit them?
Another seminal theoretician, Hans Belting, has devoted several books to the power of images, especially in a religious context. Within the context of this discussion I do not intend to elaborate upon his important arguments, let it suffice to say that Belting also raises the question as to what extent a representation is identical with the real thing. Neither Belting nor Freedberg, though, comment on the specificity of the effect, in other words, the force of different artworks arising from varying socio-cultural contexts.

In order to come up with an answer to the question ‘where do images stand’ in the likeness and similarity debate, iconologist WJ Thomas Mitchell looks at images, without distinguishing art from non-art, from the viewpoint of anthropological concepts. In his collection of essays, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images* (2005), Mitchell argues that we – just like many pre-Enlightenment societies, or communities of ‘presence-culture’ – create idols, fetishes, totems, taboos, and they, in return, regulate our lives. Mitchell evades the question this research is targeting, namely the quest for the power of contemporary images, as he argues that today’s culture does not differ in viewpoint from traditional societies or ancient civilizations that openly claimed that images are alive. Images, irrespective of history, have lives, loves, needs and desires.

Mitchell appears to treat all images as animated beings and examines the sculptures of contemporary artist, Antony Gormley, and the representations of dinosaurs from the same perspective. He seems to attribute the same type of subjectivity to art and non-artistic representation. In contrast, I argue that something radically different happens to me when I am with a Gormley sculpture than when I look at a picture of a dinosaur. What type of impact are these special entities that we call art able to make on us? What does art really do to me when it works on me? Most importantly, what is it that contemporary art is able to do?

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9 To what extent is representation merely a signifier of the represented and up to what point is it identical with it? This debate is at the core of the power of images, namely is the statue of Jesus Christ the Messiah himself or is it just a replica of his image, a harmless representation? This debate reaches back to an even more fundamental question, namely to what extent Jesus Christ is identical with God; *homoousion versus homoiousion*. The dilemma was first raised at the Nicene Creed of the 4th century during which theologians and the heads of the Church attempted to clarify whether Jesus Christ is the *same as* God or *similar to* God, meaning he carries God-like qualities but in his essence, because he is the son in a human body, is only similar to the Great Transcendental. We can translate this to the debate of images, which Hans Belting devoted an entire book to; notably to the ‘real’ and ‘true’ image and representation of the divine (*Das echte Bild* 2006). In order to avoid such complex arguments, or maybe because of the extreme power of images, many religions put a ban on representation.

10 Outlined by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht elaborated in the chapter *From presence to absence* in the thesis.
Even though, in my understanding, Mitchell (2005) is too ‘democratic’ when it comes to defining the power of images, among all the theories listed, it is his reading on the relationship of representation and represented that comes the closest to understanding the power of contemporary art. Mitchell argues that our dualism of representation-represented is false and all representations have a life of their own that is other than the life of the represented. Signifier and signified form a fusion and as one entity, this union lives a separate life, existing independently yet connected to the represented.

This is the closest to how I see the agency of contemporary art, which is also in line with Alfred Gell. Reading Gell’s *Art and agency. An anthropological theory* (1998), one is confronted with the claim that the engagement with art is a relationship, that artworks have a personhood and act like cultural agents. In order to outline this agency, Gell draws up a nexus of encounters between the following participants of the art experience: the artwork that he calls index, the recipient, namely the observer, the prototype that is the subject-matter of the index and the artist, the creator of the index. For Gell, artworks are neither signs nor symbols, but indexes. They do not symbolize or refer to an entity behind the artwork (e.g. picture and sitter), there is not a signifier-signified dualism that would characterize the structuralist idea of language, but the index is somehow part of the entity addressed, like smoke is part of fire. Smoke is not simply a sign of fire, but more than that, it belongs to fire, smoke is therefore the index of fire (1998:11-66).

The artwork (let us say an icon) is therefore an extension of the thing it stands for, yet it has a separate life of its own. This ‘life’ is so active that, as Gell argues, pictures have loves, wants and desires. Furthermore, for him “artworks ... come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. ... they have relations with one another as well as with people... they are like people, enculturated beings” (1998:153).\(^{11}\)

For Gell, these ‘beings with a culture of their own’ can be of various kinds. Like many other thinkers mentioned above, Gell sees art as a general term which embraces

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\(^{11}\) Of course, artworks are not human beings, but as Gell explains, they are “holographic fragments of the ‘larger unities’ to which they are united... Artworks are shares or portions of a distributed object corresponding to all of the artworks...” (1998:220). Furthermore, the artist’s oeuvre for Gell is a ‘distributed object’ that is not only the index of the life of the artist and the network s/he is part of, but is also a trans-temporal object. By ‘distributed object’, he means that the object is itself but has extensions and is therefore other than itself at the same time (1998:250). I am me but I am also my lock of hair for the person who is in love with me, and the paper I write. Trans-temporality is not to be understood in a linear time-scale but rather in the understanding of Husserl and Bergson or in Heidegger’s account of ‘being’ or Duchamp’s fourth dimension. For a more elaborate analysis see the original document.
various forms of creativity from Maori communal houses, Ancient Greek drawings of mazes, and dance patterns to the silk-screen prints of Andy Warhol. He treats all these artworks as indexes that have specific powers that arise from the interactive relationship they have with their surroundings and backgrounds in manifold contexts. Understandably, Gell does not aim to draw up a theory for the specification of the agency of different artistic styles, as he suggests that the power of these works is different and particular to the very relationship they are part of at a given moment. For Gell, the agency of art in general is defined by this never-steady web of relationships in which all encounters take place among various cultural agents who constantly change the entity and the identity of each other and therefore themselves. The relationship and therefore the players are always in the process of “becoming”. The perception of art from this viewpoint does possibly the most justice as, instead of treating art as a luxury object or an aesthetic, historical statement with which we have a one-way relationship, an artwork without a fixed identity becomes an active cultural agent that interferes with the things of the world. The artwork, as Ziarek suggests, is perceived as a process, as ‘work’. Gell (1998) would agree with Mitchell, as he calls art a “holographic fragment” of reality and artworks “distributed objects”, meaning they are connected to, but only partially identical with the represented. For Gell, artworks are not identical with the object/subject, but are part of it. This approach is different from that of Gadamer and Freedberg who treat images as the embodiment of the represented (signified). The portrait of a sitter is and is not the sitter; it is a creature with a separate existence of its own, it is an index of the sitter with a power of its own.

In order to sum up, by putting the various theories regarding representation on a scale, I argue that there are two extremes: at the one end there is representationalism in which the artwork is no more than a secondary conveyor of a particular message. At the other end of the scale there is the artwork with a separate life of its own, in which case the artwork is and is not identical with the represented. The artworks ‘live’ as active agents as if they were living beings with all their complexities and controversies.

It is this latter end of the scale that I sympathize with and have adopted for this research. I, too, argue that the agency of art is other than the signified and has a separate life of its own. I agree with Holly in the sense that the observer brings the artwork to life and what life the artwork has partially depends on the observer. However, I also argue that the
artwork, as an (independent) agent, can exercise its power on us in most unexpected ways. I would even go as far as saying that in some sense it is the artwork that dictates subjectivity.

It is proposed, then, that in order to do justice to any art, artworks should be treated as agents. How contemporary art – the subject of this research - demands to be treated as agency, and how it drags the viewer out of representation is explained through the following examples.

2.5 Uncle R – away from representation

Let us start the investigation with the painting *Uncle R*, (2009) by Moldovan painter, Alexander Tinei. I will begin by describing the work and I will also provide an art historical analysis (see footnote 16). By doing this, I will be able to show briefly how representationalist art history works, in order to be able to challenge it. On seeing this artwork, it is obvious that it has a certain force. Although the piece stops us, there is nothing outstandingly eye-catching in it at first glance. An intriguing image of a boy smeared with blue paint stares us in the face. The work is not showing anything radically out of the ordinary, however, it might generate immediate reactions, such as not wanting to look, or, the other way around, not being able to let go of it. One can sense already that finding various ways to interpret this work is not necessarily an approach that does justice to this painting. Nonetheless, following a general art historical attitude one tries to decode the image.
We are looking at a 100 x 80cm portrait of a young soldier. We notice the uniform, the pale skin, the dark background. We notice that there are no hands – the composition is oddly cut and the hands disappear just above the wrist. If we assume that the painting was done from a photograph, the image is neither good enough to be a proper photograph nor suitable to be a photo for an ID document. Among our first impressions, we detect the oddly applied blue paint, sometimes carefully applied as part of his face, and at other times in loose strokes seen as painterly indication of veins, tattoos or simply pigment applied onto an image. Aside from the ambiguity, it is the persistent gaze of the boy that does not allow us to move on; the interrogative eyes make us stay with the work. What does this work ‘mean’? What does *Uncle R* represent? These are the questions that need to be answered from a representationalist perspective.

An interpretive art historical analysis would note that most probably *Uncle R* was painted as a reference, a paraphrase to Gerhard Richter’s *Uncle Rudi* (1965). However, *Uncle R* is presented in a way as if he were the artist’s uncle, and from this perspective there is an ownership taken over traumatic family past and historical heritage, representing the
brutality of the war and the hardships of undergoing such traumatic situations. The boy is
the victim of political powers that create zombies, walking dead of young people.

Knowing that Alexander Tinei was born and brought up in socialist Moldova, it is
easy to see this painting, as well as the artist himself, as a product of his time, that is, a post-
communist past (and present) that the artist wants to digest and overcome through his
oeuvre. Upbringing in a socialist state, with the firm grip of the USSR, marked people for life.
This is also how Tinei is often positioned by contemporary criticism, namely as “an absolute
product of a soviet culture”. In this sense, it is easy to see this painting in a historical
context and place it in the past as some sort of revealing and healing of terrible political
memories that haunt one even in the present.

The painting is from the ‘blue stripe’ series of the artist who, for years, smeared his
figures with this emblematic blue color and called it ‘tattoo’. The tattooed figure therefore
can stand for the marks of life and the marks of the political regime. Such dealing with the
Nazi and Communist past has been a central question for many contemporary painters, and
has been especially popular in the past fifteen years.

12 http://arttattler.com/archiveyoungfigurativepainters.html
13 Uncle R was painted in 2009, so one can fit the piece into the new figurative trend of painting.
Although painting had a universal revival in the past ten years, artists associated with the former USSR
countries developed a distinctive voice characterized by a strong technical knowledge, virtuous use of
brushwork and often brutal or depressing subject-matter, as well as a reference to the Socialist past. This
specific language was initially presented by the New Leipzig School of painting. The New Leipzig School artists
such as Neo Rauch, David Schnell or Tim Eitel are emblematic names by now and their work can also be seen as a reference to and digestion of socialism. Furthermore, in Eastern-Europe, the Cluj-school of painters since 2005
has become significant in reaching back to issues of war, dictatorship and Communism. Adrian Ghenie, Victor
Man or Serban Savu are artists who are making an international name for themselves, often with subject-
matter that refers to the political past and artistic heritage. The title ‘Uncle R’ recalls Gerhard Richter’s Uncle
Rudi (1965) painting, which portrays a Nazi officer in the winter landscape. Uncle Rudi is a black and white
blurred image in the well-known ‘sliding’ Richter brush-stroke style. The smiling officer, uncle, was
photographed during the war and we assume that Richer took this image and created the painting using this
original photograph. When painted in 1965, “Rudi reminded Germans that many of them — most of them even
— had a Nazi in the family. But the painting doesn’t moralize, it doesn’t pity or self-pity, accuse or suggest to
Germans how they might consider their own Rudi, their own roles in the Nazi machine. The picture simply
presented incontrovertible evidence of something that many Germans couldn’t deny: There was national
culpability for what happened. ... Remember. Uncle Rudi is confrontation-by-whisper” (Green 2009).
Other associations are also possible, for instance the style, the positioning of the body of Uncle R and the colors
reminds one of the compositions and figures of Michael Borremans (b.1963), Belgian painter and film-maker. In
his paintings Borremans reaches back to the tradition of Velazquez and that of Realism. This excellent artist is
also the master of ambiguity and rupture, yet his images have an arresting presence. Borremans has a
detectable influence as he is very popular in the Central-European region. The aforementioned Cluj artists as
well as painters from Hungary are deeply inspired by his oeuvre, by his sensitivity of the positioning of his
figures and the haunting enigma that characterizes his art.
Therefore, following a Panofsky-based interpretation and attitude, it is easy to situate *Uncle R* in a politically defined present and past, and look at it as cultural and psychological evidence. Various political and art historical associations can arise in connection with the painting. It can be classified and contextualized, and parallels can be made with other artworks and with issues that the artist, as well as fellow artists, have been dealing with. Still, in spite of all these theories, something remains in *Uncle R* that does not leave us at peace. I could go as far as saying that we do not need to know all these theories in order for *Uncle R* to work on us.

I remember visiting Art Market Budapest with a friend one time when this painting was hanging in one of the gallery booths. My friend spotted the painting from a distance and refused to go closer, physically resisting, planting herself in the middle of the art fair hall and not wanting to move. I persisted that she should see this work and others by Tinei but she exclaimed that she was not in a state of mind to be able to look at a painting as such. Her reaction was striking and it made me wonder about the nature of the force of this painting. What was she so afraid of? We see terrible images around us all the time, especially at an art fair where it is quite natural to encounter shocking, brutal works. I realized that she was not resisting being shocked, but she was refusing to face her own issues that this painting would have brought up.

In this sense, *Uncle R* works on the beholder differently than Lucian Freud or the Raphael. One can tell that the *Madonna* with its presence draws the viewer into a space of beauty, divinity, peace and calm, almost into an otherworldly realm that is above or beyond the torments of the modern mind. But where does *Uncle R* invite us? The *Madonna* has obvious intentions for taking the beholder somewhere, it has an open narrative for taking the viewer out of the present state of consciousness and drawing him/her into this other worldly realm. But what are the intentions of *Uncle R*? Are we just simply seeing a boy, a historical figure crippled by the political powers of the past? What is happening to the beholder exactly? How is it possible that a picture that represents a historical figure can address the contemporary observer, who might have nothing to do with the historical event, personally?

*Uncle R* invites us beyond its own narrative. The fact that we are seeing a young soldier fades away and the artwork disturbs, shatters and tears apart. But unlike many
artworks that hunt for effect, it asks for the beholder’s personal engagement; it draws us down into ourselves to come up with personal stories. This is not to say that this artwork cannot work as representation, it surely can. When Uncle R works as representation, one can engage with it as one engages with historical facts. Certainly, dealing with issues of war moves any viewer, but not to the extent that one becomes afraid of the painting, refusing to engage. What is most curious about this painting is that the young man, an adolescent, obviously a soldier, yet a victim of the war and greater political powers, makes us ask questions about ourselves. We feel that Uncle R wants to tell us a story that is going to be our story, too. It is the story of being cheated, being raped by history, belittled by politics and superpowers, being looked down upon by our descendants. It is a story of being crippled by something stronger than us, be that politics, our family or an unfortunate encounter in which we are unable to do anything. We stand as victims who carry the signs burnt into their skin. It is the story of being paralyzed while not being able to retaliate against that greater aggression that cripples us for life. It is a reminder that although we can play heroes, we are actually helpless, abused cripples and clowns who let themselves become victims and carry this regret for life. Being subjected to aggression or any sort of abuse against which nothing can be done creates zombies, creatures that are half-dead, half-alive, become non-existent, a memory or a shadow of themselves. The body becomes a flat surface, a canvas that is marked forever by the abuse.

In this sense, Uncle R overcomes the logic of representation. By not telling, by pester ing us to go beyond the (historical) narrative of cultural memory, it invites us to this state of ‘ground zero’ in which the beholder does not have a choice but to confront his/her own issues of being beaten, abandoned, cheated, forgotten and, in a sense, left for dead. One cannot extract one’s subjectivity and close personal engagement from the work.

This kind of personal engagement works with a different logic from let us say (pre)modern art. When it comes to the Madonna, Lucian Freud paintings and Uncle R, I argue that on the one hand the two former artworks create an effect with a specific intention. They, as agents, intentionally draw the viewer into specific spaces, be it divinity or the torments of the human condition. In this sense, art instructs us to think, engage and feel in specific ways. On the other hand, Uncle R as an agent does not direct us anywhere in the sense of the two other works. Instead, one feels that something is still missing if one looks at the work as mere representation. Uncle R makes one reach beyond learnt historical
references and one senses that the work is only begins to work if one goes beyond the conceptual structure. If this happens, there is no other way but to start personal engagement. This non-hierarchical, disorderly, non-teleological and personal associative manner in which the viewer is not instructed what or how to feel, or which realm to shift into, nor to escape but rather sink into him or herself, might be the agency of contemporary art such as Uncle R.

I argue - and it is from here that I might differ from art historians such as Holly – that what the artwork does to me, this ‘freeing of the observer’, is the property of the artwork. It is an ontological characteristic of the artwork itself. Let me explain this further through a historical example. Holly contrasts the Renaissance picture-plane ordered by perspective with Medieval manuscript images in which there is no geometrically structured illusionistic space or symbolism, and decorative elements are just as much emphasized as the main theme of the image.¹⁴ She says: “I think it is intriguing to contemplate why many historians, not to say most twentieth-century thinkers in general are driven to think perspectivally, compelled to create worlds in which all things fall into place. In this sense – and contrary to the Renaissance interpretation of the system – perspective is not liberating. It is dogmatic and doctrinaire. It admits no disjunctions or contrarieties into its scheme. By contrast, the medieval treatment of space could be construed as creatively freeing” (1996:50).

In other words, if Renaissance perspectival picture-plane is binding, instructive and doctrinaire for the observer and generates in him/her the same attitude towards art and life, Medieval manuscript as agents demand nothing from this attitude. Similarly to Medieval manuscripts, contemporary art such as Uncle R might be experienced as liberating because it creates a space in which one is not told what to do and it is the intention of the artwork not to tell. Presence is not forced onto the viewer. The attitude with which one might approach Uncle R is not empathy (meaning there is a particular phenomenon in the artwork I engage with) as one would have with the Madonna or with a Lucian Freud work, for that matter. It is rather an inner work in which the image does not demand the viewer to engage with it, but demands the viewer to engage with him or herself. While looking at it, the image starts working on me personally, it asks me to work on myself. In this sense, the image becomes a mere starting point, an initiator and it builds into me, opens up gates to myself.

¹⁴ For an in-depth discussion on the subject see her book Past looking (1996:50-57).
2.6 Muster as representation and as agency

In order to understand how it is possible for contemporary art to exercise the kind of agency that initiates profound personal associations, the ability of the contemporary artwork to invite beyond representation, needs further elaboration. In the following subchapter, to do this I introduce a film. As already suggested in the case of Uncle R, I argue that some contemporary art might exercise a kind of agency that helps the beholder revisit and therefore re-imagine his/her personal world ‘otherwise’. What needs to be substantiated, though, is this shift from representation to agency, furthermore, towards an agency that initiates personal work. Let me start with presenting the context of Muster.

Background

Muster is an 80-minute feature film that consists of three parts; each episode takes place in different times, in 1945, 1970, 1994. The work gives the impression of being shot on HD and that we are watching a professionally directed, enacted movie. Prior to demonstrating how the film addresses the complexity of representation, a short introduction to the work is needed. From the viewpoint of this research, the background information is presented in order to be challenged by the agency of the work.

Muster’s carefully choreographed scenes are inspired by and involve the Breitenau cloister, a site close to Kassel, burdened heavily by politics. The surface narrative of the work is based on the turbulent history of the site as if we had stepped back in time to see what was happening in Breitenau at those dates (1945, 1970, 1994).15 The film was created for documenta 13 (2012).16 The first screening and the installation of the work took place in Kassel at the Hauptbahnhof, an elegant yet industrial site ideal for the exhibition. The film was installed in one of the very dark halls of the station, projected onto three screens in the shape of a triangle; one episode projected onto each screen. Depending on which entrance the visitor used they could choose which screen to watch first (fig. 9.). There was a mélange

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15 A lengthy description of the narrative of the three parts might sidetrack the reader, therefore each part is briefly introduced in the section dealing with that particular part of the film. I deal with the first part, 1945, in this chapter, providing a short description of the narrative in subsequent paragraphs.
16 Documenta is an international exhibition in Kassel, Germany, taking place every five years. The first documenta was created in 1955 by painter and academic, Arnold Bode, and since then it has grown to be one of the most prestigious venues to engage with cutting-edge contemporary art, issues and ideas that define and are present in the world we live in.
of sounds and one could always decide to switch screens and see what was happening at the same moment in another time period at the same location.

Fig. 9. installation of Muster, documenta 13 (2012)

Given the reference to a specific site in the work, a few words must be dedicated to the place. Breitenau, a seemingly insignificant, small German town in which not much happens, hides a church, a site that has much to tell about people and history. The building (fig.10.), initially a monastery, therefore a place of worship, study and work had been turned into an ‘exemplary’ venue of control, authority and the manifestation of Foucault's meaning of power: a place of trauma, a place of pain, one could say.¹⁷

Fig. 10. Breitenau monastery

¹⁷ When writing about power, Foucault argues that practices to treat, exclude, humiliate and control the ‘abnormal’ or everything that is the ‘other’ and the not-self, meaning the ‘they’ and not ‘us’ have been repeated throughout history. The ‘abnormal’s’ every move is controled and surveilled and s/he is constantly reassured that s/he can never become a normal human being; never become like ‘us’. This approach comes from centralized power; from the panopticon. In the case of Breitenau, the panopticon is the German state represented by the various guards of the site (Foucault, 1995).
The Breitenau monastery functioned continuously as a site of state oppression from the 1870s until 1973. The 12th century Benedictian monastery was taken over by the local aristocracy in the 16th century and was turned into a warehouse and later a prison. In the 19th century it was transformed into a correction workhouse for the poor and outcasts of society. The art theorist specializing in Holocaust studies, Zoltán Kékesi, in his book, *Agent of liberation. Holocaust memory in contemporary art and documentary film* (2015) explains that from 1874-1949 the “correction house” (*Besserungsanstalt*) as they called it back then was primarily for homeless people, beggars and prostitutes who were locked up there for an average of one or two years. The living conditions were inhuman and it was accepted that those who were poor and from the lower classes of society were to be blamed for their own misery. The prisoners, meaning those “to be corrected” (*Korrigende*), were separated by gender and were forced to work six days a week, twelve hours a day not only inside the institution and its vicinities, but also for the local farmers and manufacturers who could “rent” the cheap labor from the institute. “Inmates left the building each day in prison uniform under strict control as forced labour. This means that for those who lived in the neighborhood, it became a normal and everyday scene what for us today is one of the scandals of the genocide after 1933” resulting in “*the normality of forced labour*” (Kékesi 2015:190-191).

Breitenau was later remodeled with a cell-system inside and was used for Nazi governmental purposes, housing thousands of inmates, Jews, communists and others. It should also be noted that although the monastery was put to different use over the centuries, the church kept functioning off and on, separated simply by a wall from the prisoners on the other side of the building. After the war, the place was transformed into yet another kind of site of exclusion zone in which “homeless youth, people with sexually transmitted diseases ... were imprisoned” (http://www.americanacademy.de/de/home/program/past/breitenau-workhouse-project).

The rest of the history of the site is equally depressing: “By the late 1960s, the institution had become a place for locking troubled young girls away; it had also become the subject of extreme public scrutiny for its harsh methods (brought to light by journalist and eventual left-wing terrorist, Ulrike Meinhof), which led to Breitenau being shut down in 1973. When it opened again later in the decade, it was transformed into a closed psychiatric
hospital” (http://www.americanacademy.de/de/home/program/past/breitenau-workhouse-project).

Today, Breitenau is an outpatient psychiatric ward, and part of it has been turned into a museum. In spite of the efforts of the organizers (Gunnar Richter) this site, unlike Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, has not managed to become part of the global memory of sites of trauma, a place that is part of collective remembering and mourning. Kékesi argues that due to the continuous use of the site as a space of humiliation and exploitation, the various phases of historical and political oppression are not only to be understood as individual tragedies of a specific historical era, but the site is enframed by the larger discourse of human cruelty and exploitation. Therefore, the place as a site of the Holocaust, a concentration camp, is just one momentum of “the history of class-based repression and punishment and the institution of forced labour” (Kékesi 2015:194).

Objects as agents

As one can see, Breitenau is defined by complex and hard memories that are the key subject-matter of Muster. 1945 shows us the scene when the American forces arrive at Breitenau, take over the site and discover the prisoners and the labor camp. The prisoners desperately try to explain what has been happening. Aside from the tonality, the images of the film demonstrate the greater complexity of what an image can stand for. An image is evidence. Aside from the narrative, the burning of documents, American soldiers arriving, prisoners explaining what happened, Wedemeyer incorporates unexpected scenes into the film in the form of short pauses in which we can see objects collected and archived (see fig.11. and fig.12.). By making the viewer stop in front of specific pictures, the viewer is made to spend more time with the selected images than the ‘real time’ of the film.

In the scene I am referring to, the liberating US officer goes up to the attic of the Breitenau monastery, which was used as a concentration camp, to take a look at where the prisoners were kept. We are in the dark space of the attic among dirty straw beds, boots and blankets. The officer starts lifting up the objects he finds and shows them to the camera, one

18 The 1970 scene narrative is the story of a young film-crew who, as if they were that of Ulrike Meinhof, wants to put on film the life of the girls in the detention home. The third part is of a young school-group visiting the site and the teacher is trying to, yet not able to, bring the message across. All parts are discussed in subsequent chapters.
by one. We see these objects – blanket, ID document, a spoon, photograph, the ‘Jude’ sign in the star, itinerary of the ‘intake’ of Breitenau and so on - in premier plan, held close to the camera, each object carefully turned as if prepared for archiving.

Lit by chiaroscuro (fig. 11. and 12.) the objects appear as melancholic, historical yet very much present, personal, archived items that are proofs of someone’s life. Or, to be precise, proofs of – as Judith Butler (2004) would say – precarious lives. Lives that are not worth documenting or representing. Showing these objects to the camera in slow motion, letting the viewer spend time with them drags one out of the ‘real time’ of the movie and demands contemplation. Nothing is shown, just a dirty plate, lit by yellow light in the dark. The silence of the scene adds to the sorrow and to the sacrality of the moment.

Fig. 11. screenshot, Muster (2012), part 1945

The filming of these objects, and showing both sides and every detail to the camera reminds one of the process of collecting, archiving and listing evidence. We are witnessing the process of the making of ‘the list’; Wedemeyer shows these pieces as if they are being catalogued for trial or for museums, in both cases as factual evidence. In this practice, these objects are treated as representations that refer to a particular represented: to the miserable life of prisoners. For instance, there is an old piece of paper or photograph that used to belong to a detainee. Wedemeyer confirms what can already be sensed: that he did not use props, but used real, authentic objects. Through this act, the artist affirms the intention that indeed these objects should be seen as representation in which case they
refer to something other than themselves. These objects are (similar to) items we see in museums (either art and/or ethnography) that stand as representations of lost lives and perished civilizations.  

The display of these objects, one by one, also reminds us of the exhibitions that were organized by the Nazis to display the inferior culture of the Jews. The exhibitions that took place in multiple venues, including synagogues, and were “curated” by Jews. The objects exhibited were confiscated or left behind by the deported. These exhibitions served to demonstrate the inferiority of the Jewish race to juxtapose the Nazi right to the “final solution”. Greenblatt (1991:47,48) explains the case of the Central Jewish Museum:

The … museum announced that ‘the numerous, hitherto scattered Jewish possessions of both historical and artistic value, on the territory of the entire Protectorate, must be collected and stored’ (Greenblatt quotes Altshuler and Cohn). During the following months, tens of thousands of confiscated items arrived from Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia, the dates of the shipments closely coordinated with the deportation of their ‘donors’ to the concentration camps. The experts formerly employed by the original Jewish museum were compelled to catalogue the items, the Nazi compounded this immense task by also ordering the wretched, malnourished curators to prepare a collections guide to organize private exhibitions for SS staff. … in March 1943, for example, there was an exhibition of Jewish festival and life-cycle observances… Plans were drawn up for other exhibitions, but the curators, – who had given themselves with a strange blend of selflessness, irony, helplessness, and heroism to the task, were themselves at this point sent to concentration camps and murdered.

Although these objects recall lost lives, they also create a void that cannot be overcome, namely that what remains of these people is evidence of objects and of lists. Still,  

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19 On the other hand, the use of ‘real’ objects has another purpose: Wedemeyer somewhat transforms his fictional film into a documentary that is based on authentic factual evidence. There is tension between documentary and fiction; what is real and what is created? To what extent memories cover reality? How important is it to reconstruct (re-present) them? The film cannot be anything but fiction though; an imagined story of how the discovery of the Breitenau concentration camp could have happened.
somehow these objects become those people that perished. Wedemeyer highlights how they can be seen as individuated agents which can ‘bring back the dead’.

As they are presented in *Muster*, we realize that objects have a dual nature. On the one hand, they are representations of lost lives and cruelty. On the other hand, because of the sacrality of the moment as it appears in the film, we feel that they are more than just archeological remnants of a tragedy. In other words, *Muster* and the scene can be looked upon as representation, but we sense that we are missing out on something. Why the silence? Why the Caravaggio-like staging of the shots? Why the impression that these are not merely objects we are looking at, but replacements or portraits of people or even sacred subject-matter?

Because of this kind of showcasing that surely is unfitting for an ordinary spoon or a plate, the viewer realizes that these are not simply objects to be looked at, but agency in the Gell-ian sense. The people cannot be shown as they are all dead but what they have left behind remains as their extension carrying on a part of them, with a life of their own. The objects are more than the representation of a frozen tragic segment of history. As the site of Breitenau also suggests, events as such are not independent from us, people from a later era of history, but we share the fate of the very same humankind. It is from this moment that the object ceases to be what it is, namely a plate that is the representation of a murdered victim. The plate and the ID document point beyond what they stand for, namely as
representation of lost lives and tragedy. Somehow, they manage to overcome their own objecthood and manifest into something different.

Let me juxtapose this with a personal example that I was reminded of while watching the film. This example has nothing do to with war or the Holocaust, still, the film managed to drag me into a state in which the following memories were evoked. Seeing these objects reminded me of personal objects that used to stand for specific ‘people’ to me, personally. Losing the little raw porcelain rose my late grandmother had made and had given to me as a child, felt like an absolute tragedy as that was the only object I was left with from her. That rose was dear to me beyond words. Raw, white, delicate, one petal was as large as a fingernail, one could tell it was made really fast and spontaneously, but the petals retained even grandma’s fingerprints. What was strange is that this object was different from how I used to remember my grandmother. It was feminine, gentle, delicate, spontaneous and fresh; qualities I never connected with my grandmother. Or maybe I did, but never with my conscious mind.

It is striking to see to what extent we personify the objects of those dear to us, treating them as special creatures themselves and also as an extension of the person they (used to) belong to. Throwing away clothes, emptying apartments after elderly parents die is sometimes postponed for weeks as somehow the objects ‘keep the person there’, they grant a kind of presence that can, at least for a while, overcome death. What has to be emphasized here though is that these objects themselves are not (simply) the lost person, but they have active lives of their own. The beautiful installation by Rachel Whiteread in the Tate Modern entitled *Embankment* (2005) had been inspired by the artist’s mother’s death and not being able to pack away her clothes. For the viewer, the gigantic installation made of the casts of the cardboard boxes, had nothing to do with Whiteread’s mother. Yet, walking in this huge white architectural installation that was contrasted by the various (in comparison small) size of the delicate casts of boxes was like walking in the architectural setting of a ghost city of our own, personal memories, among various individual stories of mourning, letting go and remembering.20

In other words, *Muster* as an artwork fulfills a dual function; it embraces the idea of *art as representation* along with the idea of *art as agency*. Both phenomena are present in this film. The objects recorded function as a representation and as a signifier for the lives destroyed. However, they also carry those lives within themselves; they are references, but with a life of their own. It is precisely in this indecisive ambiguity, a limbo between the dual function of the objects that the agency of the film itself lies. Furthermore, there is one additional twist to the film that makes this short scene even more thought-provoking. By showing these objects as part of the film, recorded in the process of showcasing but also in the manner of the making of modern catalogues of objects either of art or ethnology, (the two often overlap) Wedemeyer applies a meta-narrative to the objects and images. He demonstrates museum practice in the process of the creation of catalogues and the making of lists to which these objects will eventually belong. It is the museum that preserves these objects for us, carefully archived, numbered, stored and restored as evidence of lives once lived. Therefore, he does not simply reveal to us the dual phenomenon of the object, but sheds light onto the *discourse that is responsible for the creation of the phenomenon of the object as representation*. This is important, as through this act we can understand why we have a hard time empathizing with these objects – or objects of any ‘evidence’ displayed in museums. Furthermore, the agency of the film itself lies in its ambiguity, the shift between representation and agency, therefore inviting us to reconsider the question of the object as representation or an object with life. The dichotomy of representation versus agency is therefore lifted onto a meta-level and makes us, beholders, exist in this tension when relating to the work, and within that to the objects.\footnote{Wedemeyer’s ambiguous relationship toward representation, the impossibility of representation, the distortion of the original signified by the attempt to represent it and the birth of a ‘frustrated void’ due to the impossibility to picture is analyzed in Chapter Three entitled *From presence to absence*.}

What emerges as the image of these objects is a reference (representation) but also agency that is not frozen into a particular presence but instead, as demonstrated in previous paragraphs, opens up ground for multifaceted personal associations.

In this sub-chapter it was argued that *Muster* has a dual function in the sense that it can be seen as representation, but the artwork itself overcomes its representational nature and starts working as agency. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the kind of agency the
work exercises is non-teleological and emerges from the personal encounter, and therefore becomes an *individual*, unpredictable journey for every observer. Artworks as such, by overcoming their own nature as representation, become a space revealed that is a path to associations in a non-driven order. This is a non-teleological space, without any structure and it is beyond any hegemonic value-system. This non-teleological space might be able to shed light onto yet unknown comprehensions of who and how we are in the world, and therefore help yet unknown alternatives to emerge in which we have an other than just cognitive understanding of the decisions ahead of us and their possible consequences.

**2.7 Towards absence**

In recapitulation, there is a need to go back to the initial problem of this chapter: the relationship of art and representation. Heidegger talks about statues of gods and tragedy, art forms from our classical heritage. From his argument, we can also speculate that by looking at the image of the god, we connect with the phenomenon of the holy. But what is there to connect with in the painting, *Uncle R*? The problem with this kind of contemporary art image is that although they invite us into their presence, instead of a tangible entity we find various ‘shadows’ passing in front of our eyes.22

Grasping *Uncle R* is not only difficult because it demands that we reach beyond representation. In the case of this painting, and indeed all contemporary art that chooses this strategy, it is difficult to get hold of meaning because we do not sense what is there to take hold of. Or, to be precise, no matter what we get hold of, one feels that one remains empty-handed. We, viewers, cannot grasp the phenomenon of the image and immerse ourselves in it as we would do with the statue of a Greek God, a Madonna or a Lucian Freud. Instead, *Uncle R* persuades us to stay with its ambivalence. What does this image want from us? As Kitty Zijlmans suggests, the image interrogates. It asks the same questions over and over again: ‘What kind of creature are you? What do you want from me?’23 And given that

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22 The impossibility to ‘pin down’ the artwork will also be demonstrated in the case of *Muster*, but for now it is most obvious when looking at *Uncle R*.

23 Personal communication, 2015, Leiden, The Netherlands
we cannot come up with a straightforward answer, we are left in a ruptured ambiguity with manifold impressions.

When we find ourselves in this state, lost in our cultural and personal float of associations, without being able to attribute ‘a particular meaning’ or a particular phenomenon to the artwork, it is at that moment when contemporary art as ‘ground zero’ works on us. Its agency lies in its ability to overcome representation, open up space and – instead of presence – creates absence into which we can project our inner world, but without being able to come up with ‘a particular’ solution. Instead of presenting ‘a’ phenomenon or ‘a’ narrative, these works of art are able to create space for us to associate, without any hierarchy and order. They open up a space through piercing a hole in the wall of the ego in which subject and object become one, and the viewer can no longer tell what impressions come from the artwork and what associations originate from him/her. This is going down to the bottom, going beyond our carefully structured ego, in other words, beyond our own representation, beyond how we think of and identify ourselves. This empty, yet very much potent space of ‘ground zero’ is a personal, embodied sensation. Once again, it is able to emerge because the artwork does not enforce its presence on us, or, to be precise, it lets one go beyond its own presence. Beyond presence there is absence to be found, and the ‘zero point’ characterizes this space of art engagement. I refer to this open space as “absence”, and this attribute of the transitional space of contemporary art is examined in the next chapter.