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We Are the Material Collective

By Rachel Dressler, University at Albany - SUNY

What is the Material Collective? We are a loosely organized group of historians of medieval art with diverse specialties and interests united by our dedication to the principles of agency and transparency. We believe that objects have agency: they act on us as much as we manipulate them. We further believe that, as scholars, we should be transparent, we should openly acknowledge our own subjectivity in our study of the past. We came together out of a sense that the developmental model of styles that has characterized art-historical research for so long did not resonate with our own experience of the power of artworks as things, as physical objects.

Prior to organizing, members of what would become the Material Collective made an initial public statement with a session for the First Biennial meeting of the BABEL Working Group in 2010 in which we explored the transparencies of things as articulated in a passage in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Transparent Things* (1972):

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!



The papers and performances in this session engaged historiography, pedagogy, and experience; the end result was the Material Collective's first publication as a group: *Transparent Things, a Cabinet*, published by punctum books (<http://punctumbooks.com/uncategorized/transparent-things/>). Through this panel, and the resulting book, we started to think and talk about what kind of medievalists we wanted to be. We thought more deeply about an object's role in the encounter between the present and the past, the human and nonhuman, the animate and inanimate. And we wondered about the role of history, and our own desire as historians to somehow know the past, which is ultimately unknowable. Our frustrations with the scholarly detachment we had all been trained to develop eventually resulted in the following manifesto delivered at the BABEL Working Group session "Burn After Reading: Miniature Manifesto for a Post/Medieval Studies" at Kalamazoo 2012:

We are the Material Collective, a group of medievalists interrogating visual materials. We seek to:

*cooperate
encourage
share
promote transparency
touch
desire
destabilize
amuse
and blunder*

As a collaborative of students of visual culture, Material Collective seeks to foster a safe space for alternative ways of thinking about objects.

We strive for transparency in our practice, and we encourage the same in our institutional surroundings.

Our project touches upon both form and content, as we pursue a lyrical and experimental style of writing along with a more humane, collaborative, and supportive process of scholarship.

We encourage spontaneity in writing art history, including an acknowledgement of our subject positions; therefore we embrace the incorporation of personal narrative and reflection in our historical interpretations.

Our specific interests vary, but we are all committed to prioritizing the materiality of things, the relationships between those things and the human beings who experience them, and the intimacy of past and present moments in time.

As we celebrate, dwell in, and embrace the basic materiality of our objects, we work to find ways to foreground the material of the objects themselves into larger historical analysis.

Central to this effort is a desire to support each other as we attempt to create experimental approaches, and to embrace both the successes and potential failures of our ventures into new ways of thinking.

We are also working to increase the legitimacy of these approaches in the academic world, primarily by practicing them, loudly and often.

We are as much a support group as a scholarly group. We share the joys and sorrows of career, life and our academic work.

For us, this is not a mere exercise — we stand by our manifesto. And we revel in this opportunity to raise a glass with all y'all, right here and now.

We value:

*experimental processes
risk-taking
transparency, revelation
a blank space
joy in faltering. Together*

*So say we all.
So say we all.*

In this statement we acknowledge the agency of material objects and their power to act on and with us as we act on or with them. We renounce boundaries and divisions:

between human and animal, living being and object, work and the rest of life. We promote collaboration with and support of one another.

Since the public performance of who we are, the annual conference at Kalamazoo has been a major forum for the Collective and our fellow scholarly travelers to continue pushing and breaking down scholarly boundaries. At Kalamazoo 2012, in addition to our participation in the BABEL panel, we organized two ICMA-sponsored sessions of our own entitled “Active Objects,” each of which attracted standing-room-only audiences. Inspired by exhibitions of reliquaries in the Cleveland, Baltimore, and London, these sessions engaged the power of objects through two themes: visibility and agency. The presenters engaged phenomenology, optical theories, and thing-theory and demonstrated the power of devotional objects to direct viewers’ devotional performances. Four of these papers, in addition to a fifth essay by one of the session organizers, are currently being prepared for publication in a special issue of *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* (www.differentvisions.org). The Introduction to this issue will discuss the current scholarly interest in “New Materialism” especially as it impacts Art History and address the resonances between the five essays, especially the tensions between historicism and materialism.

At Kalamazoo 2013, the Collective again sponsored a packed session, “Time and the Medieval Object,” in which presenters addressed objects’ refusal to remain locked into a single temporal framework. Instead, as demonstrated in these talks, they move between the originating past, the scholarly or otherwise present, and an undetermined future. Thus, objects exist within temporal instability. We hope to find an equally enthusiastic audience for our Kalamazoo 2014 session, “Faking It” in which our

presenters, some of whom are not art historians but producers of objects employing medieval methods, will explore the fine line between authentic but restored, respectfully reproduced, and consciously faked "medieval" works.

The BABEL Working Group's bi-annual conference has also provided a fruitful showcase for our mission to energize medieval art history through attention to materiality. *Hoarders* and *Hordes*, two sessions the Collective sponsored for *cruising in the ruins: the question of disciplinarity in the post/medieval university*, BABEL's second conference in 2010, focused on the Staffordshire Hoard, the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon metalwork yet found. The papers from these sessions, in which those working from various disciplinary perspectives be they medievalists, artists, scientists, performers, poets, curators, art/historians, educators, and philosophers, were able to dialogue and collaborate, are now being prepared for a special issue of the journal *postmedieval* in the area of visual culture and art history. To further encourage collaboration, we have asked contributors to respond to one another's work in the form of a mini-crowd review and the *postmedieval* volume will incorporate both the original papers and comments and online discussions beyond the conference. At BABEL 2015 we will sponsor "Things from the Sea" which takes advantage of the conference's location at Santa Barbara, CA, by inviting attendees to take a walk on the shore and gather objects which catch their eye. These will then be displayed in an exhibition curated by members of the Collective.

Our public presence has not been limited to Kalamazoo and BABEL, however, and in 2013 members of the Collective conducted a roundtable on "Networks of Then and Now: Medieval Objects and Their Publics: for the *Annual Symposium on Medieval and Renaissance Studies* at Saint Louis University. The roundtable format enabled

participants literally to "network," thus responding not only to the session theme but to one of the central principles of the Material Collective--collaboration. The session was kicked off with an introduction to some key methodologies--Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory and Ian Bogost's flat ontology. Participants then delivered ten-minute talks focusing on an object that had prompted them to think about networks between past and present, and objects and people.

As should be clear from the above description of the Material Collective's goals and actions, we are committed to reforming our chosen field of study in order to move away from solemn individuals working in isolation, whose output is judged by equally ponderous and not always temperamentally suitable reviewers, toward a practice in which scholars incorporate joy, playfulness, subjectivity, support and collaboration in their study of the past. We are not arguing for decreased rigor in the quality of our scholarship but seek greater community in its production. Anyone interested in joining us in this exciting endeavor are invited to get to know us through our website, www.materialcollective.org, our blog, and our Facebook page. We welcome all to the table.