Transparent Things: A Cabinet

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INTRODUCTION
DEAR MATERIAL COLLECTIVE

Maggie M. Williams and Karen Eileen Overbey

By the time you read this, things will be different. By the time you read this, we will already be WE, the Collective. By the time you read this, we will be doing a different kind of art history, one that seems so familiar and natural that the version of art history we practiced before will seem quaint, twentieth-century. By the time you, we, I, read this, we will barely remember the before. We will be WE, and our work will be changing.

This is a record of how that began, a snapshot of a moment of becoming. We, you, I, are writing this to remember and to make what happens next — what happened next — real.

* * *

It was like this:

Art historians were mostly (not entirely, and not univocally, but mostly) concerned with figuring out what and how and who. They (we, I, you) wanted to know, to quantify, to ascertain: who made it? When? Which came first? What were the influences? What does it mean? Who made it mean
that? Where did he get the idea that that was a good meaning? And so on, and so forth. There was a particular scholarly apparatus in place.

Then there was, for us, a moment of transparency, of translucence, of surprise and illumination at the 2010 conference, “after the end: the humanities, medieval studies, and the post-catastrophe,” the first biennial meeting of the BABEL Working Group in Austin, Texas. Maggie Williams and Rachel Dressler had called for papers that would explore transparencies: of objects, of scholarly practice, of historiography, of pedagogy, of experience. Each of us, in some way, answered that call — and this little volume holds those collected musings.

We took as a shared prompt the chance discovery of a passage in Vladimir Nabokov’s 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!\(^1\)

For us, as students of medieval material, these tensions between surface and depth, present and past, concentration and skimming are all too familiar. Nabokov vividly evokes the ways in which visual objects entice us with the promise of experiences—emotional, visceral, mnemonic, intellectual, spiritual. The inherent contradictions of medieval objects, their irreducibility to either the purely intellectual or the merely physical, are at once the delights and the dangers of our work. And so this panel offered a dialogue on the question

\(^1\) V. Nabokov, Transparent Things (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Here we must acknowledge a distaste for Nabokov’s conservative politics, particularly his rumored dismissal of collective movements. His words remain lovely. We are willing to acknowledge, even celebrate, such contradictions.
of how our encounters with physical things spark a process and how objects might allow unique collisions between the past and the present, the human and the inanimate, the practice of history and lived experience.

For each of us, the contemplation of transparency led to a revelation of personal experience; we each grappled with the role of the historian and with our inevitable desire to know the past. We found ourselves challenging the tradition of a detached scholarly posture, uncovering our own subjectivity as writers, viewers, historians, and human beings. Each of us, rather than suppressing subjectivity and desire, laid it bare. Karen Overbey’s movingly somatic “Reflections on the Surface; or, Notes for a Tantric Art History” examines the play between visibility and invisibility in a thirteenth-century True Cross pendant reliquary. Jennifer Borland’s “Encountering the Inauthentic” investigates the phenomenological effects of studying medieval visual and material culture without access to actual medieval materials, and she asks how we negotiate our objects of study when they are absent. “Touched for the Very First Time: Losing my Manuscript Virginity,” by Angie Segler, is an almost exhibitionary account of library research. And Nancy Thompson humanizes our scholarly activities in wonderfully transparent ways in her “Close Encounters with Luminous Objects: Reflections on Studying Stained Glass.”

Nabokov allowed us to think very literally about transparency, about crystals, stained glass and other objects that light passes through. But we also thought about other kinds of transparency in our work as scholars, teachers, historians, and writers. We thought about the kinds of medievalists that we are and that we want to be. The writings collected here, on the one hand, record the proceedings of that panel. But they also document what happened: we came together in Austin.

Right then, we took ownership of our subjectivity and decided to allow the personal, experiential, and sensual to seep into our scholarly production. We — the speakers, the presiders, the audience — organized the Material Collective (www.thematerialcollective.org).
Dear, dear Material Collective: by the time you read this, most of the ideas in these little papers will have moved on, become parts of other texts, or not. As works of medieval studies or art history, these essays are incomplete, awkward, and provisional. Some of them may read, to you, to us, like embarrassing teenage poetry. This collection is that dusty box in the basement: it is full of raw, unedited, transparent expressions of affect, of the sort we have learned to hide.

Dear Material Collective, this is a nostalgic love letter to our present and future selves, a little bit of poetry from the past.