Burn after Reading: Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies + Vol. 2, The Future We Want: A Collaboration

Eileen A. Joy, Myra Seaman, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

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A. Joy, Eileen, et al.

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We want a collective future.

This is a material moment, and we want a material future. A *lush* future, a future of exploded views and inner lives of objects, a future of abundant encounters with the material and natural worlds, a future of touching objects that touch us back. A collective future, a collaboration with *things*.

We want to call out, through the discipline of Art History, to the field of medieval studies, and, further, to the endeavor of the Humanities, in this material moment, when the *objects* of medieval studies are more than ever in our sights. We *need* a field change: a change in our field of view, our field of vision, our visual field. If we perceive differently, we will conceive differently. Objects have hurtled through history to get here, why keep them still now? In the flat ontology of the future we want, objects keep moving: through juxtaposition, association, attention.

This can be our project: articulations of objecthood; descriptions of the interconnectedness of things. The
deep and vital networks and circulations and operations. The aesthetics of ontology.

What would that look like? In an art history of flat ontology, for a start, a classical or neoclassical ideal of beauty would not determine a hierarchy of objects, styles, representations, histories. Beauty would come from being, rather than from relativism. We could then take our time with surfaces and with substances, teasing out and amplifying the charm, the allure, of material. In the aesthetics of ontology all materials matter; all materials have our attention, we can attend to all materials. And so our aesthetics would enlarge our sense of ‘beauty’ to compass the revelation of the workings and beings of any artwork. Any object. Oh!

For some, there may be a fear that aesthetics is distance, that to aestheticize is to make distant, shimmering; to hold off, to gaze at and even evaluate, and so to separate, to distinguish ourselves from our objects. But this is perhaps a definition of ‘aesthetics’ beholden to 18th- and 19th-century philosophy, in which the arts inhabit a special realm, set off from ‘regular’ experience, distinct especially from the mundane, just beyond the reach of average perception; this is aesthetics entwined with morality, and with teleology. In the future we want, aesthetics is intimacy: beauty is close and possible and not rare; it makes us pay attention, displace ourselves, look at manuscript, cross, cup, toaster with possibility. This is an understanding of ‘aesthetic’ at once very medieval and very modern: resonant with Ian Bogost’s book and essay series _Object Lessons_, and also with Aquinas’s “animated sensory pleasures (animales delectationes),” in which we take delight in our physical and mental interactions with objects. In medieval thought, as Mary Carruthers explains, “‘aesthetic’ meant ‘knowledge acquired through sensory experiences’”, and while human-made artefacts did have special status, it was more like the “ludic play space recog-

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1 See http://objectsobjectsobjects.com.
nized by modern anthropology and psychology” than like the distant realm of Enlightenment and Romantic aesthetics.³

And so our aesthetics inhabit this play space to engage sensation and knowledge, to pay attention to material possibility, to be intimate with objects. But in this intimacy, this attention, we must not occlude the alien differentness, the wonder and strangeness of the art object. That strangeness, its being-beyond-interpretation, is what entices us.

Figure 1. The Lothar Cross, jeweled side (“Front”), c. 1000, gold, gilt silver and gems over a wood core, 49.8 cm x 38.8 cm x 2.3 cm. Cathedral Treasury, Aachen, photo by Ann Münchnow, photo ©: Domkapitel Aachen.

Here, for example: a visual field, an object. The Lothar Cross, given by the Ottonian Emperor to the church at

³ Carruthers, The Experience of Beauty, 17.
Aachen just before the year 1000 (Fig. 1). This luxe *crux gemmata* is 50 cm high, an oak core covered in gold and silver gilt sheets, encrusted with 102 gems and 35 pearls, and further decorated with gold filigree and cloisonné enamel. The Cross’s splendid workmanship, expensive materials, and Ottonian patronage were certainly as important as its religious meaning when it was affixed to a tall pole and carried in the public drama of liturgical processions. At the center of the cross, where we might expect to find an image of Christ, is a sardonyx Augustan cameo, which we could (and which we have) read in relation to tenth-century imperial ideologies, spolia, and appropriation. More of the stones here are reused Classical gems, perhaps chosen for their historic or semiotic valence: an amethyst carved with the Three Graces, an onyx lion. Now, though, in the intimate play of a materialist ontology, we propose to see the strangeness: not the sure ideology, but the hesitation; not the power but the plea. A jewel is rare and demanding, but it is the result of geological imperfections; a cross affirms splendor and power, but a cross also asks for intercession and salvation.

So we can change our field of vision, discipline ourselves to look more materially. When we look at the object, and not only at the image (*crux gemmata*, emperor, lion, *Romanitas*) we see that most stones were set to highlight their color and their size, their lush materiality; they play a visual rhythm along the four arms of the cross. Iridescent blue teardrops at each terminal, and at the base of each blue stone a pearl; paired green squares at the interior angles of the cross arms; two sets of double rows of symmetrical dots along the length, remarkably consistent in size and shape. We can start to trace the tendrils of the filigree, to think with the object: the delicate strands of beaded gold wire, laid curled and queued to breathe in the spaces between the gems. The effects of movement and depth when one tendril drapes across another. The barely-visible daubs of solder (gold, to be sure, but less pure, with a slightly different melting point to adhere the filigree to the plane of gold plate). The uneven edges of the bezels, tamped close around the gems with tiny hammers, or pressed by careful fingers.

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To look more materially, at first, is to look more closely. A close looking, in pace with the close reading of a text. To look, if not innocently, then not all-knowingly, either. In an art history of flat ontology, we will seek the mundane within the rare: the point where the tendril of the filigree does not accomplish its curl, where the band around the gem is crooked, where the gesture-to-make became tedious, where the matter is predictable. Does this “humanize” the object? Make the gleaming gem susceptible to human faltering? Our ontology is flat, let’s turn the table: human faltering gathers around a gleaming gem. An art history of flat ontology doesn’t humanize the object, it collapses the rare into the mundane, it fuses human gesture with the object’s becoming, the human’s becoming (from emperor to museum director to viewer) with the object’s gesture (the Lothar Cross processed thousands of times before it was stilled by the museum). Close looking doesn’t reveal things to valorize them: it upends them, it disintegrates the whole for its parts, oscillating between present materiality, past gesture, future desire (see Fig. 2). At some point, in some way we want to attend to, the Lothar Cross is equally ordinary and extraordinary.

Figure 2. The Lothar Cross, oblique view of jewels and filigree. Cathedral Treasury, Aachen, photo ©: Domkapitel Aachen.

More closely, and from a shifted perspective, we see that the gem settings are architectonic, miniature domed
drums and arcades, a tiny landscape evoking (perhaps) the splendor of the City of Heaven. Reading this way, iconographically, we take the Cross’s surface in all at once; we take its meaning. But if we linger, if we luxuriate in that very medieval pleasure of the “multifocal perspective,” we can feel the dizzying shifts of scale and illusion and distortion, the push and pull of “minificence and magnificence,” the wonder of material play.\(^5\) Here we falter, we fall, into what Ian Bogost might call the “native logic” of the object.\(^6\)

\[\text{Figure 3. The Lothar Cross, detail view of jewels and filigree.} \]
\[\text{Cathedral Treasury, Aachen, photo ©: Domkapitel Aachen.}\]

We look again (Fig. 3), letting the stones and gold lead us, both intimate and strange. We then notice that some

\(^6\) Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
stones are drilled for beading, perhaps once part of Byzantine jewelry; the gems engraved with figures of Roman gods or animals are set upside down or sideways, resisting figural readings. The intention isn’t towards meaning, it’s towards form: that drilled pearl can no longer be seen for the necklace it might once have been a part of, now you see it for its luster in a new luxury, you see it in its own lushness. Symbolism-as-intention is tricky here, too, when we know that some of these stones are post-medieval replacements, and nineteenth-century repairs. This is an object that to some degree resists iconography and narratology, and so resists much of art history’s modern methods. What does it mean for art history to think about meaning beyond a single or originary moment of creation, beyond a first, or second, reception? As we move away from that originary point of creation, meaning and being start to intersect in new ways. The meaning is no longer simply what the original maker or user intended; it will be what you intend, what you attend to. Being asserts itself over meaning: the Cross survived, the pearl clung on, it is here and that is the new starting point.

Materiality, as Michael Ann Holly writes, “is that which halts transparency.” It stops us seeing through, seeing past, the object to something else, to something beyond or besides. It keeps us focused, it slows us down and makes us play, gives us pleasure. We will rediscipline our eye to look more closely, more materially, to admit play and pleasure, and to be moved in and by the object.

So: our future is a shift in our field of vision, in the field of play for and with objects.

THE BOON AND BOTHER OF LUSHNESS

The field of play of art history has always been drawn by and to objects. You can see why.

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Fantastic *things* whose materiality calls out. The responses of human interlocutors have never stopped changing, framed by liturgy, antiquarianism, connoisseurship, iconography, social history . . . , always carving out a new future they want with and from the objects. Every interpretive frame is a “future we want.” The frame is how we now present our works of art to the future: the frame is now the means of transference, claiming ontological status for any object as art. The frame will change (always), but it will be there (always). The French and English Academies reveled in the frame: Poussin prized it, Derrida prized it open.9 But think, now, of medieval works of art unbounded by frames, no means of transference save accident and personal desire, only indications (no certitudes) of meaning. *They don’t exist.* And so we frame and re-frame medieval objects: with the medieval practices of liturgy and devotion, with the rarity of antiquarianism, with the knowing eye of connoisseurship, with the medieval texts that sustain iconography, with the political mission of social history. The future we want is the next frame, the frame of reference we can next share (and debate): feminism, sexuality, queer theory, post-colonialism, eco-criticism . . . . The frame is the object’s network: we think we might dispense with it, get “back” to the “original” work, but any return is itself framed. Medieval texts are presented as the surest context, but materiality precedes and outlasts context: the gems pre-existed the cross by millions of years, and they will persist long after the cross has come undone. Frames (physical, digital, interpretive) are part of flat ontology—they are flattening agents. Different frames elicit different meanings, but let’s consider how they shift *being*, too. Medieval objects are not immutable, their ontology can shift. It’s how they got here in the first place: tree to wood to cross, mineral to suture to jewel. Let’s hold on to the frame, let’s keep making our means of transference to the object, let’s keep the object moving, let’s keep moving with the object.

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Object-oriented ontology creates a vigorous field of play, one that makes for optimistic declarations: one in which we can revel in the material agency of the object, in which we can turn to our objects and see them do things. What is a hammer when it’s not hammering? What is a cross when it’s not processing (or blessing or saving or frightening)? What is the work of art when it is not meaning something? It is gem pressed into gold, cameo found and reinserted; it does light and color, it embodies texture and rarity—it makes us want a future whose material possibility makes us gasp. Lurking under, hovering over, is a metaphor, a possibly dematerialized future, but for now the material holds us fast; we fasten it to a frame and hold on.

Lushness has been the boon and bother of art history, it is that aspect of materiality around which the field changes; material, form, luster, texture, gleam, color, illusion—lushness is one of the qualities we try to frame. It is feared (think of Bernard of Clairvaux fighting the allure of image). It is administered (think of Suger assuring himself that he was seeing through the gems). It is measured (formalisms, iconographies, semiotics . . . Commandments). The Calf, lest we forget, was golden. We try to control lush materiality, and our resulting pleasure. The pleasure that comes from gleam and color, touch and texture. Why is pleasure so unnerving? Why does it become an ethical dilemma? Is it because we are overwhelmed by the agency of the object in our moments of pleasure? Because wonder might be more about the force of the object than about our possession of it?

Bernard’s aesthetic asceticism gives us one of the best description of the thrill of images, and the condemnation of pleasure from lushness. The sensual seduction and harsh sanctimoniousness of the Apology makes even the act of reading it an ethical exercise. He lets lushness languish in gorgeous word, sight and sound (“pulchre lucentia, canore mulcentia, suave olentia, dulce sapientia, tactu placentia”) before calling it all shit (“ut stercora”).

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What delight did Bernard take in stripping delight of its delightfulness? The question is put not in terms of vindictiveness, but rather, precisely, in terms of pleasure: his word play seizes on the material forms of language and makes them dance—“deformis formositas/formosa deformitas,” quoth he. He dips his quill deep into the stuff of his words, tracing letters and shifting endings, before he seeks to abolish the materiality altogether. He knows his stuff: in detail and precision, he mocks color and texture and form, and he derides viewers’ helpless attraction to beauty. Then he lowers the ethical hammer: “The church adorns her stones in gold, and abandons her naked sons.” 11 You can feel chastened reading Bernard. Of course he’s right: bread before baubles, food before fantasy. But who is he to tell anyone that their pleasure at beauty is empty? Who are we to do so? Or not do so? Thus, the dilemma.

But even Bernard can’t stay in it too long, even Bernard needs resolution, frames: “Assentio,” he says in response to Psalm 26:8’s declaration, “Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house.” He agrees that churches should be adorned, because the good that material opulence might do for the “simple and devout” outweighs the power it gives the “vain and avaricious.” Appeal, pertinence, usefulness—those are Bernard’s frames for lushness and they are still very much in use today to curtail or justify the beauty of materiality. You can be sympathetic to Bernard: he was overwrought at the lushness of wrought things because he understood their allure and agency. You can be aggravated with him: his attempts to strip lushness of its place in spirituality results in a moralization of beauty and form that creates hierarchies (monastic elites and devout simpletons) and divides. For us—for the future we want—these can be breached by the aesthetics of flat ontology.

Because the material will out: the wonder of Augustus’s lush cameo freaks out the center of the Lothar cross. In the future we want, lushness is vibrant: it unnerves us with pleasure, it blurs the boundary of discipline and desire, it acts on us. We want this play, this field of riotous blooming, this fertility. We want to stay longer in the conundrum of lushness: its ability to nurture but not to feed,

11 “Suos lapides induit auro, et suos filios nudos deserit.”
how it moves us in its stillness. We want to consider Jane Bennett’s “shift from epistemology to ontology.” The future we want is on a material trajectory of perpetual becoming, how objects come to be, how they are at any given time, and we with them.

STRUGGLES AT HAND: THE ETHICAL PROJECT OF ART HISTORY

This is a way of engaging a long history of (as Maura Nolan has recently written) sensation and asethetics, from Augustine and Aquinas to Adorno and Elkins. And in this project, texts should not be our only primary sources. Objects themselves, and art objects especially, in their very made-ness, their facture, in their uneasy difference from the natural world (even if that difference is only the frame, the setting of a pearl into a hammered gold bezel), disclose the depth and the varieties of human-object networks and assemblages.

In all this close looking, this luxuriating in lushness, this pleasure, beauty, and ekphrasis, we find ourselves taking up some rather old-fashioned art historical methods. And we find ourselves sympathetic to the demands of formalists and connoisseurs that we see artwork for itself. It’s easy to see the affinity here: the artist and art critic Roger Fry (1866-1934), for example, championed the autonomy of the visual encounter with art, apart from literary and historical knowledge, and described the specific formal elements of artworks—especially “plasticity”—that grip the viewer and provoke the aesthetic experience.

Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), and other connoisseurs wrote lovingly and persuasively of specific details of paintings and sculptures. Berenson even described the aesthetic experience as a loss of boundary between viewer and object:

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the

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spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at. . . . He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness.\(^{15}\)

And for Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), art was a visual language, a distinct mode of knowledge: the agency of the work itself acted through formal and stylistic means. Such possibility, in these ideas, for our materialist project, for the future we want! But we are uncomfortable, too, with this legacy. Because connoisseurship and nineteenth-century formalism wrought *command* of objects, and teleologies of style and masters. Because aesthetics was most often transhistorical and absolute. Uncomfortable because our opening to objectness and materiality and lushness seems also to reopen an old disciplinary wound, the tension between aesthetics and structuralism.\(^{16}\)

And so this future that we want troubles us, and in realizing it we must attend to this tension: do we have to give up the care for the liberal democratic subject nurtured by the hermeneutic projects of iconography, feminism, marxism, and postcolonialism? Over the last forty or so years, by exploring how we know objects, by exploring their meaning, function, and use-value to patrons, makers, and beholders, art history described the workings of power and the inequities of representation. This has given us a political and ethical project in art history, one that we value, inhabit, and want to defend.

Can our lush object-oriented future be an ethical one, too?

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To think about the ethics of beauty and materiality we can look not only to Bennett and Bogost and Harman and Latour, but also to our medieval objects-in-themselves, which had their own ethical power and moral presence. Medieval beholders knew, as we do, the power of art-objects to elevate the human spirit. So much of the medieval encounter with things was revelatory. Abbot Suger knew it when he wrote of the transformative power of precious stones:

Thus, when—out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.17

The mystics—Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, Mechthild and Hadewijch and Margery Kempe—knew, too, that looking at objects (and touching them, stroking them, losing yourself to them) could save your soul. And all kinds of devout beholders kissed manuscripts, fondled statues, tucked tiny relics into their clothing and jewelry to keep them close, intimate. Medieval devotional objects, as Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us, are not merely symbols, indexes, or icons, but the immediate presence of the holy.18 That presence was in relics, of course, but it was also palpable in things like gemstones, which were formed through mysterious cosmic processes, and often had celestial origins. Objects like the jewelled Lothar Cross were efficacious and miraculous because of their materiality, not despite it, and the encounter with them depended on the sensory experience. Medieval objects—at least, these

devotional objects—were not simply instrumentalized by medieval beholders, but were understood as essentially embedded in networks, in assemblages, of icon, human, divine, nature, and material.

Figure 4. Saxo-Norman Crucible, mid-11th to mid-12th century, ceramic; earthenware, H 78 mm; DM (rim) 103 mm. Museum of London #13175.

Yet we cannot account only for the religious objects and the devotional networks. If we are to take seriously an aesthetics of ontology, we can’t limit our vision (or our pleasure) to religious objects any more than to a canon of “masterworks.” If “beauty” is loosened from some of its Kantian disinterest—which tends to separate “art” from artefact and “beautiful” from utilitarian —then we can grapple with a problem we love: what is beautiful about medieval objects beside/beyond/outside their religious

import? Sure: some of their particular materiality tugs at modern/postmodern notional beauty and visual pleasure. But there is also the beauty of *survival*. The impossibility of medieval objects, for us: the fascination of their very present ontology. The *Beowulf* manuscript in the fire, the Staffordshire Hoard underground, the Ghent altarpiece in a salt mine. That survival doesn’t have to be unique: the Saxo-Norman crucible, the clay lamp, the cooking pot (see Fig. 4). The mundane survives, too. How to attend to *these* objects? We can think of thirsty throats, cold fingers, and hungry mouths—we can see the beauty in that survival, in the persistence of presence, long after usefulness is gone and purpose is moot.20

The aesthetics of ontology begin with materiality: we can *attend to* the material at hand. We can marvel at the emergence, manipulation, and survival of the clay. We can think about use, but in the stillness of the museum, presence prevails. The aesthetics of flat ontology see the lushness of the clay cup. Of course, flat does not mean equal: we are not seeking to valorize clay to claim it as gold. We *are* asking for attention, for a future that attends to the power of the material, whether it be clay or gold. If the fundamental tenet of identity politics, of the political project of historicism, is *visibility*, can we turn that to making objects—of all sorts—visible? Can we value that, alongside the recovery of the muted voices of female embroiderers, alongside the exposure of violence in racial or class representation? Can the aesthetic act of description be an ethical practice?

Because—oh!—*that* is the future we want: an ethical relationship with objects that still allows for lushness.

**STRUGGLES AWAIT: IDENTITY POLITICS**

Oh! *That* is the future we want: an ethical relationship with objects that still allows for lushness.

And so we ask: What to do with lushness and its attendant decadence? The problem with lushness is that, usually, someone owns the lush object and wields its power. But might our pleasure dislodge unique owner-

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ship? Is there an element of pleasure that *takes possession* of the object of pleasure? Do we mock Protestantism and Puritanism and their mistrust of the material world? Easy. Harder to mock Marx and class consciousness. Harder to make it “all right” to prioritize the lushness of the Lothar Cross when there’s a starving pilgrim nearby. So let’s not. People have their own materiality, which can be strategized as identity politics. We have to confront the anxiety about object oriented ontology and post-humanism and eco-criticism displacing/replacing human subjects. But it’s the belief that we are autonomous subjects wielding dependent objects that we want to break down. We’re going to have to let our guard down as we move towards the collective future we want. We’re going to have let ourselves, and everybody else, feel pleasure, feel the power of pleasure. Moments of enjoyment can become moments of resistance to singular ownership and hierarchy.

Bogost points out that we’ve worked hard for a long time to articulate an ethical relationship to each other, and lately to animals and the environment. But, as surrounded with things as we are, as encased in objects as we’ve become, we have just begun to articulate, and maybe formulate, an ethical relationship with objects. We want to be provoked to articulate an ethical approach to things. To experience how actants (be they cross, gold, Lothar, pilgrim, or the memory of Augustus as a really great emperor) are the builders of the collective reality. Can you fight social injustice by loving the Lothar Cross? You can’t do it *through* the Cross as an object; you have to give up on yourself as the wielder of stuff to make things right. But remember, start to see: the pilgrim does her own looking and savoring outside of what you think is right. Each viewer is an actant in the ever-shifting experience of lushness guided by material, sense, perception, and response. These precepts of the aesthetics of ontology precede, and perpetually recede from, the concerns of epistemology. They will not attend to iconography, liturgy, or symbolism. They will group around the pilgrim, feel her tiredness and warmth, her thirst and relief, the dryness of her hands as her fingers reach for the cool touch of the cross or the crucible. Gather with her in wonder. We, the art historians, the gathered here today, are the latest act-

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ants in the trajectory of this Cross, we hurtle forth with it for a little while, building collectives along the way—that’s the future we want.

Ultimately, our call for the future (of our field, our discipline, our humanities endeavor) is not simply for a return to “materiality,” or a “new” materialism, in relation to specific representations or objects. It is rather a call to treat the *objects* of medieval studies (the artworks, the texts, the artefacts, the histories, the people) with compassion. To see them in their native logics, their strangeness, their ontological beauty. Materiality is not a trend or a fashion or a mode; it *is* an ethical system, and it should inform our collective future. That’s the future we want.