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LIVING PRESENCE RESPONSE

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It. *Living Presence Response*; Fr. *Living Presence Response*; Germ. *Living Presence Response*; Span. *Living Presence Response*. The *living presence response* phenomenon refers to the multifaceted ways in which a viewer can react to an inorganic artefact when he or she perceives and experiences it as alive, despite knowing that it is not. This investigation thus concerns those cases in which inert objects (artworks in particular) elicit physical, emotional and cognitive reactions that are typically provoked by living beings only – ranging from erotic to violent behaviors, from love to hatred. This does not account for an ontological or cognitive mistake; yet, the beholder cannot but experience the artefact's life and act accordingly.

This phenomenon raises a two-fold issue: on the one hand, there are the social agency and lifelike powers of the artefacts; on the other hand, there is the beholder's engagement, which cannot be separated from his or her personal experience. Whereas the debate on material agency focuses on the first aspect, the discussion on living presence response more carefully analyzes the recipient's experience of encountering the artefact. However, such phenomenological investigations on reception acquire their utmost relevance only if carried out on the premises of the sociological – if not metaphysical – considerations that regard the performative capacity and efficacy that can pertain to artefacts. The focus on the beholder's experience, on the other hand, also clarifies why the debate on living presence response often intersects with the debate on idolatry and iconoclasm, while not overlapping with it completely.

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS

Living presence responses can be investigated by a wide variety of disciplines, from art history to anthropology, from visual studies to neuroaesthetics. This has given rise to an interdisciplinary understanding of the phenomenon, which has been described and examined in relation not only to artworks but also to ordinary artefacts and images. In this sense, one of the explicit goals of the debate on the topic is to reject the divide between fine arts and lower cultural productions: according to David Freedberg (1989:

xix), each image can elicit a living presence response. A striking example is offered by pornography, intended by Freedberg in continuity with artworks that elicit sexual responses (Freedberg 1989: 349). However, even if images in general are taken into account, it is worth noting that sculpture provides a particularly fertile field in which to investigate the phenomenon: in the case of statues, touch or haptic sight can play a role in stressing the impression of the presence of a living body (van Eck 2015a: 121-122).

Living presence responses are transhistorical and transcultural. The attempt to ascribe them exclusively to "peasants, children and crazy people" (Freedberg 1989: 283) reveals nothing but the fear and shame experienced by the cultivated Western viewer who represses such responses. In fact, not only do cases of living presence response date back even to Ancient Greece and Egypt (see respectively Pugliara 2002; Weynants Ronday 1926), but such cases are also well documented throughout Western modernity. It suffices to mention the great success that Ovid's Pygmalion enjoyed in 19th century literature (see Bossi 2012), or the fact that many important authors (from Goethe to Herder, from Flaubert to Foscolo) recount that they were so erotically aroused by the uncanny presence of classical statues or by the liveliness of Canova's marbles, that they often ended up kissing them (van Eck 2010: 646, 2015a: 15-16). However, case studies do not exclusively concern figurative artworks or images that realistically depict human bodies: among the most recent examples of living presence responses, there are also reactions addressed towards abstract artworks. This is the case for Vietnamese artist Randy Sam, who "felt so overcome with passion for an entirely white Cy Twombly canvas that she had to cover it with red lipstick kisses" (van Eck 2010: 643); or of the iconoclastic attack to Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*, that occurred in Berlin in 1982, when a visitor experienced the frightening life of the painting and slashed it (Freedberg 1989: 418; Bredekamp 2018: 174-175). Instead of dismissing such responses as mere pathological or paraphilic behaviors or as cases of fetishism (both in the ethnographic and psychoanalytic sense), the research on living presence response tries to go beyond the high responses encouraged by rationalist aesthetics in the attempt to take seriously the role played by body and emotions in the relationship between human beings and objects.

Finally, the study of living presence response can urge scholars to call into question the "disjunction between the reality of the art object and reality itself" (Freedberg 1989: 436) that underlies Western art theory. As Freedberg points out, what emerges from the analysis of these phenomena is "that our responses to images may be of the same order as our responses to reality" (Freedberg 1989: 438).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In the 20th century, much scholarship has focused on responses elicited by religious artworks (Clerc 1915; Belting 1994); a more thorough attention to the topic in its wider terms was brought by art historian David Freedberg in 1989, when he published his text on *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Freedberg 1989). Although the recipients' responses to the "life in the image" (Freedberg 1989: 316) are the central concern of the book, Freedberg ultimately fails to account for their first-person experience. Besides, he does not use the expression "living presence response", that has been put forwards more recently by art historian Caroline van Eck.

With her many writings on the topic (van Eck 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Bussels and van Eck 2011; van Eck *et al*. 2014), that stretch from the consideration of images' ἐνάργεια in classical rhetoric and ekphrastic speech (van Eck 2010: 651-655; 2015a: 34-51) to the analysis of artworks' material agency in anthropology (van Eck 2010; 2015b), van Eck acquired a major role in today's debate on living presence response. She defines living presence responses as those cases in which artworks affect the viewer not as the inanimate objects they truly are, but as living beings, and they are thus treated accordingly. Such treatments can involve, but are not limited to: "Speaking to statues or paintings, kissing or beating them, claiming that works of art in their turn look at the viewer, talk or listen to them, move, sweat or bleed; or feeling love, desire, or hatred for images" (van Eck 2010: 643). In these cases, the boundaries between representation (e.g., the statue) and what is represented (the prototype) become blurred (Maniura, Shepherd 2005), and the artwork is experienced as coming to life. Against all reductionism, van Eck stresses that "Viewers react to works of art as if they are living and acting persons not because they have come alive for some miraculous or supernatural reason, or because these spectators suffer from cognitive or semiotic confusion [...], but because they *experience* the work of art as living" (van Eck 2010: 646).

As regards analytic philosophy, living presence responses have generally received little consideration. A remarkable exception is represented by Jason Gaiger (2011, 2014). Gaiger draws on contributions in philosophy of literature in order to reject Freeberg's claim of continuity between art and life and argue for the existence of barriers (however porous) between the world of ordinary experience and the fictional domain of art: responses to artworks and persons differ from one another as they are of a different order and have a different set of properties (Gaiger 2011: 369). The scholar describes living presence response in terms of a sub-category of the paradox of fiction (Radford 1975): even if one is cognitively aware that the artefact is not alive, he or she cannot but engage with it as with a living being, thus violating rational constraints. In the attempt to explain the phenomenon, Gaiger rejects the strong reductionism defended by Colin Radford, who argued for emotional responses to fictional characters and situations to be utterly irrational (Radford and Weston 1975: 78), and turns to Kendall Walton's theory of make-believe (Walton 1990). According to Gaiger, Walton's account of participatory imagining provides a sound explanatory framework that can apply to living presence responses: in this perspective (that can be regarded as mildly reductionist), people who experience artworks' living presence actually are engaging in games of make-believe. Among the perks of this view there is the fact that it accounts for living presence responses elicited by abstract or aniconic objects: here, the artwork is regarded as a "prop" in the game; therefore, resemblance does not play a diriment role in provoking the response.

Along with the studies that explicitly address living present responses, there are further works that contribute to the debate in a more indirect way. Such works mainly come from the following fields:

a) *The debate on material agency*. The main reference here is *Art and Agency*, written in 1998 by anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998). Although Gell does address the topic of nonbiological life (animacy) of artworks, and even though he does describe living presence responses (the slashed *Rokeby Venus*, that raised the interest of Freedberg and van Eck too, is a case in point, see Gell 1998: 62-65; Freedberg 1989: 409-412; van Eck 2010: 650), *Art and Agency* primarily concerns social structures rather than individual

experience. Nevertheless, the anthropological approach to material agency provides valuable insights on living presence response as it sheds light on objects' personhood and on their semblance of life (Severi 2018). The animacy of things is also at the center of Jane Bennett's research (e.g., Bennett 2015), that regards it as a kind of liveliness that does not depend on biological properties. In analyzing those encounters with "art-things" in which one experiences the artwork's presence, Bennett rejects the accounts that dispel these cases by placing them in the field of pathology (as cases of hyperkulturemia, see Bennett 2015: 99-100). She rather proposes a perspective based on the power of the artwork's sheer material presence.

b) *Visual studies and* Bildwissenschaft. In this field, contributions concern the lives of images and their desires (Mitchell 2005) as well as images' performativity, i.e., their ability to affect us and engender experiences and behaviors (Bredekamp 2018). In particular, the debate on living presence response could benefit from integrations coming from Horst Bredekamp's study, especially as regards the section on the schematic image act, in which the focus is on images that manifest a life of their own (Bredekamp 2018: 77-136).

c) *Neurosciences and the debate on empathy*. Drawing on the intersection between neurosciences and the long-standing tradition reflecting on the concept of *Einfühlung*, Freedberg and other scholars have carried on the research on the emotional engagement with images by exploring the significance of some crucial neuroscientific discoveries such as mirroring mechanisms and embodied simulation (Freedberg 2007; Freedberg, Gallese 2007a, 2007b). This line of research might prove to be very fruitful for further inquiries on the puzzles raised by living presence responses.

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