

Title	Deferring and materiality: incomplete reflections on Donald Preziosi
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/10628/
Date	2016
Citation	Smith, Dan (2016) Deferring and materiality: incomplete reflections on Donald Preziosi. <i>Journal of Art Historiography</i> , 1 (15). ISSN 2042-4752
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Deferring and materiality: incomplete reflections on Donald Preziosi

Dan Smith

Putting together reflections about the work of Donald Preziosi is difficult for me, as I am, and have been for some time, engaged in an ongoing attempt to work through some of his ideas, an endeavour that has yet seen little progress. I feel as if I am not only struggling to keep up with his work but continually returning to what was written years ago. A meaningful engagement with his ideas is still some way off for me. So I will instead turn to a form of confession. Art history is not my discipline. I have no discipline as such, a confession that rings true in any sense but is certainly indicative of not having a defined field in which I work, or in which I was taught. My education was as a practitioner of art, which has led to interesting conversations with Donald in which he has made clear the extent to which he has considered himself an artist.

As for my own training (if it can be called that) as an artist, it is important to point out that a degree in fine art in the UK was, during my time as an undergraduate, a loosely defined set of encounters with staff grounded by a practice. This practice was an emergent set of activities that students were expected to develop from the moment they arrived at college. As an art student, I eagerly listened to lectures and seminars that I rarely understood. Yet somehow I fell into engagements with what in those circles of practice became known as *theory*. This phantasmagoria of opaque language and slippery ideas soon overwhelmed me, and made it difficult to make work unselfconsciously, or at all. This disembodied realm of theory appeared as a cloud of swirling ectoplasm, traces of complex thought and ideas that moved freely, intersecting the spaces of studio and gallery as manifestations from netherworlds that I could never truly comprehend. Nevertheless, I was enchanted, mesmerised, and seduced by the ways in which reality was transformed and illuminated by textual ideas.

My initial encounters with Donald Preziosi were as a set of ideas that emerged within this miasma during my postgraduate study, which was essentially a chance to continue talking about the ideas I had failed to grasp as an undergraduate, but without the benefit of any actual teaching. His ideas seemed to glow from within a gloom of seemingly unrooted discourse. His thoughts on museology were beyond my reach, yet still resonated with my own interests. As I got to know Preziosi's work a little more fully, I also began to make sense of the disciplinary boundaries and histories and that made up the phantasmagoria of what had once seemed a mysterious field of theory. This swirling mass was actually comprised of an often inappropriate and ongoing set of appropriations from distinct fields of academic endeavour and research, all of which had the potential to offer sources of exciting illumination for my own synthesised version of academic writing. (Although just as I have to confess to having no discipline, I also need to confess to not being a proper academic.) Preziosi belonged to a disciplinary and

academic world of art history, a field with which I have only ever had tangential encounters, and that had, during the period in which I slowly began to properly recognise disciplinary boundaries, already been polluted in my mind by Preziosi's insistence on hauntings and projections.

Preziosi's work has left me with much to unpack, particularly with regard to the ongoing resonances of *Brain of the Earth's Body*.¹ This collection was, and continues to be, a profound influence on my own thought. I first encountered the material collected there through Donald's lectures, some of which I was lucky enough to hear in various spaces around the turn of the century. My short book, *Traces of Modernity*,² is directly influenced by the work he was doing during that time. The ideas in *Brain* continue to disturb and probe at the limits of my own perspective, particularly the fundamental challenges it sets out regarding secular theologism. These ideas have been developed since by Preziosi, necessitating ever more unpacking. However, for now I would like to address an earlier point in his work, which continues to inform my thinking. That it does so still today is of particular significance, as it serves as a fixed point of reference within an increasingly obscured view of how objects and materiality might be theorised. Recent years have seen the emergence, from numerous directions, of a set of ideas that fall under the shadow of two overall descriptive terms: Speculative Realism and Object Orientated Ontology, terms that I assume need no framing here since they have become so pervasive in discussions of visual culture.³ Nor am I going to offer any judgement on these ideas or the enthusiastic response that they have garnered in spaces across numerous fields of criticism and academic discourse. All I will point out is that, despite the excitement these recent debates offer, it is not only prudent to remember that discussions of objects and their meanings are recurrent and ongoing, but that perhaps it is also necessary to step back and consider pragmatic relations between objects and meaning. It is a reminder, as much to myself, that in the ecstatic imaginings of materiality that have preoccupied so many of these discussions, it can be useful to remember a more grounded and reflexive approach to the idea of material culture.

The book that Preziosi wrote with Louise A. Hitchcock on the Bronze Age Aegean embodies a rigorous approach to thinking through material culture, which includes a kind of simple theoretical methodology that I continue to employ.⁴ Their approach is useful to me not because it asserts that objects have meanings, but rather through a clear framing of the *ways* in which objects have meanings. Since first making use of their elementary formulation, I have continually reminded myself of their approach when considering images and narratives.

¹Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

² Dan Smith, *Traces of Modernity*, Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012.

³ For an interesting set of reflections on these fields, see Mackenzie Wark, 'From OOO to P(OO)', <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/12/from-ooo-to-poo/>.

⁴ Donald Preziosi and Louise A. Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Preziosi and Hitchcock write: '(...) that the visual and material cultures of a society (...) constitute forms of individual and social technologies or instruments for the active construction, maintenance, and transformation of individual and social realities.'⁵ These visual and material cultures, as they are described, include what might be accounted for today in terms of, among many other things, art and architecture. More interestingly for me, these terms move far beyond the institutional or semantic boundaries such as those that might define art and architecture. Material culture, as it might be described, is therefore read as much as a set of active social processes as it is a set of objects or built environments. Although such things as objects and architecture may by the elements that are read in close detail, this reading is not a process of framing things as either reflection or trace, or as a residue of social activities. Preziosi and Hitchcock stress the need to question the sequential order of such an assumption. In deliberately not reading objects as reflections of ideas, attitudes, or mentalities, the assertion is made that social actions do not precede any form of material expression in which they are given long lasting form. Implied is a sense of mutual interdependence between, on the one hand, the construction of social forms and modes of identity, and on the other, forms of objects that are not merely representative shadows of the former, but are active forms of their constitution.

This mutual and interdependent constitution prefigures many of the assumptions made in more recent approaches to thinking about materiality and objects, such as Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*⁶ or Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*,⁷ which have expanded discussions of objects into models of ecologies that oppose human-centric bias. Preziosi and Hitchcock have already offered a way to read objects that undermines simple oppositions between human and non-human in reading objects. More than this, the approach outlined by Preziosi and Hitchcock opens up a space of practice within the temporal gap between active interpretation and artefact. That these things remain after their living culture has ceased to exist is misleading if it gives the impression that they were not a living part of it. The approach put forward here is situated between two perspectives of reading objects as surviving fragments of the past. One side of the division is determined by the assumption that an object's meaning is fixed as an imprint of the intention of its makers. These are likened to the physical and chemical properties of an object that are retained, fixed, and readable. The task of the reader is the deduction and reconstruction of original intentions. An object becomes analogous to a text, with the use forming a con-text. This object/context relationship might be privileged as the only legitimate source of interpretation, which is to be executed by the relevant expert. The object is regarded as analogous to a medium of communication. Ideas or values move from maker or maker's society through to an attendant viewer or reader in the present. This is a model that privileges the role and function of the

⁵ *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 25.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

⁷ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

trained expert who can stand as sanctioned interpreter. On the other side of the proposed division, there is a mode of thought that might be held up as the opposite to the one just described: 'the notion that the meaning of an object is entirely or largely in the eyes and imagination of its beholders or users.'⁸

What is described here is a compatible and simultaneous plausibility of apparently antagonistic positions. It could also be thought of as an unacknowledged return to extant debates around authorship.⁹ Preziosi and Hitchcock describe this situation as being made available by the relative permanence that artefacts display: '(...) they remain to be used and reused, and thought about in potentially new and possibly quite unforeseen or unintended ways over time – unlike a spoken utterance, which materially disappears unless it is recorded.'¹⁰ It is the temporal endurance of things that allows them to be read outside of their original conditions, while still retaining varying degrees of that originary context and meaning. The mode of analysis that Preziosi and Hitchcock lay out here recognises the limitations of adhering either to the thought that an object's significance is embodied within the object itself, or that it can only be found in the perception of the viewer. By granting that both seemingly irreconcilable positions are not only plausible, but necessarily compatible, their position allows for readings that acknowledge original intentions and function, while recognising the likely impossibility of any such meanings being fully reconstructed. Perhaps even more significant is the facilitation of interpretations that are not only multiple, but perhaps conflicting and antagonistic. This position is one that is usefully contextualized by a Derridean description of authorship that sees the reliance of any inscription of meaning through a medium upon a culturally specific system of language.¹¹ This system cannot be dominated or controlled by an author. The attentive and critical act of reading, both as phenomenological and hermeneutic act, must therefore be one that looks for relationships between what an author does or does not command. It is reading, therefore, that enables the production of a signifying structure of interpretation around the object. In an object, shifting authorial, hermeneutic, and temporal layers concatenate within the dimensions of the encounter.

Aegean Art and Architecture ends with a disarming modesty. In part, there is a reflexive undermining of Preziosi and Hitchcock's own interpretations of a material culture from the distant past. I like to daydream and wonder what it might be like if such reflexivity could truly find its way into museological presentation as an active mode of display: would this open up and introduce some form of productive uncertainty? What might enter into this space of uncertainty? Not only are Preziosi and Hitchcock's interpretations presented as not authoritatively certain but they are potentially short lived, with no guarantee of a long shelf life.¹² Here the authors refer

⁸ *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 26.

⁹ See Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992.

¹⁰ *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 26.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, 158.

¹² *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 219.

to the viability of their book on ancient Greek visual culture. I have no disciplinary authority here, but I can offer some reassurance that at least within my own thinking, writing, and teaching, Preziosi continues to pose questions and hints at ways to address them. However, he also points out how fundamentally unanswerable some questions might be.

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