Polemical objects

GUMENTATIVE, QUARRELSOME, LITIGIOUS, EXJUSTIBLE, BELDISPUTATIOUS, IRASCIBLE, ILLSIVE, LOOKING QUICK-TEMPERJUNKYARD DOG,
# Polemical objects

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Figure 1. Fibula of Picquingy, Frankish. Sixth century. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.
1. Brooch and buckle

One of the crucial matrices for Alois Riegl’s thought on early medieval metalwork and jewelry was the emblematic role assigned to such artifacts by Symbolist poets. Stefan George was describing a late Roman or already Germanic *fibula* in his short poem *Die Spange* ("The Clasp") of 1891:

Ich wollte sie aus kühlem eisen  
Und wie ein glatter fester streif.  
Doch war im schacht auf allen gleisen  
So kein metall zum gusse reif.

Nun aber soll sie also sein:  
Wie ein grosse fremde dolde  
Geformt aus feuerrotem golde  
Und reichem blitzenden gestein.

(I wanted it of coolest iron  
And like a smooth and solid band.  
Yet in all shafts throughout the mine,  
No such cre was ready for the mold.

But now it shall be like this:  
Like a large exotic bloom  
Shaped of gold red as fire  
And rich sparkling gems.)

George’s metalworker intends to make a simple, functional clasp of iron. But the process takes on a life of its own and instead he creates, as if willed by the material, a monstrous gem-studded blossom of gold (fig. 1). More metalwork figures in George’s next work, *Algabal* (1892), a poem cycle presenting the Roman emperor Heliogabalus (reigned 218–222) as the type of the aesthete, given over to a sun-cult and lost inside his private garden of precious stones. George in his own theoretical writings highlighted these passages as images of artifice and as a model for poetry. He used the term *mache* ("making" or "fabrication") to stress the elemental imaginative appeal of wrought verses over any communicative or expressive function. *Mache* was roughly the equivalent of the ancient Greek *techne*. The term shifted the emphasis away both from the artist as subject and from the natural world as object, and instead pointed back to the artifact and to the capacity of the fabricated thing to put in place its own reality.

George rejected poetic naturalism, or any notion of poetry as a representation of the world. Instead he urged submission to the discipline of internal verbal order; rhyme and meter; the materiality of the sound of words. The result would be a stylized style deliberately alienated from nature. The poet, for George, does not reflect the world or the self, but instead creates anew, transmuting his verbal raw material through artifice. Jewelry is also the emblem of art that does not think. The wrought form collapses inward on itself and is not redeemed by a concept. The artifact has no transitivity, no movement that would support a process or development. George’s brooch is not a vehicle for an idea, and therefore is in no danger of being discarded once the idea is conveyed.

Most, but not all, of Riegl’s thoughts on jewelry were published in 1901 in *Late Roman Art Industry Based on the Ferns in Austria-Hungary*, Part One. This was the first installment of Riegl’s report, commissioned by the state, on metalwork and jewelry excavated in the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the lands corresponding to the ancient Roman provinces of Pannonia, Dacia, and Illyria. In fact, two-thirds of the book are dedicated to the architecture, sculpture, wall paintings, and mosaics of the Roman Empire. Only the

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The term *Kunstindustrie*, a term generally used and not a coinage of Riegl’s, meant applied arts, more or less. Gottfried Semper used the term in his treatise *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*, vol. 1 (1860), § 7, p. 23, to refer to the industrially manufactured design products of his own day, such as textiles.

4. Margaret Olin found the initial publication project sketched in 1893 by Carl Masner, a colleague of Riegl’s at the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry. Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1992), pp. 129 and 219, n. 1. There were to be five volumes by different authors, united under the title “Antique Art Industry on Austro-Hungarian Soil” and surveying the whole range of ancient Roman arts and crafts. Riegl was scheduled to write two essays in the final volume, one on mosaics and one on the applied arts of the migration period.

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last chapter deals with the buckles, clasps, pendants, and brooches of the second and third centuries. The chapter approaches the material not chronologically but by formal modes: perforated or open-work, chip-carving, garnet-settings, enamel. All of the book’s twenty-three full-page plates are dedicated to material from that last chapter. Figure 2 reproduces one of those plates, a group of second- and third-century silver and bronze casps and relief fragments.

Few are aware that there is a Late Roman Art Industry, Part Two. Yet a volume with this title was in fact published under Rieg’s name, eighteen years after his death.5 After the publication of The Dutch Group Portrait in 1902, Rieg resumed his research on the metal artifacts and jewelry of the fourth through the eighth centuries, the so-called migration period when Germanic tribes are supposed to have been shifting from one part of Europe to another and filling the power vacuums left by the collapse of Roman imperial institutions.6 But Rieg died in 1905 at the age of forty-seven. The Austrian State Press had made photographic plates of the migration-period material and did not want them to languish unused (fig. 3). In 1911 the press commissioned Ernst Heinrich Zimmermann, Rieg’s successor at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Vienna, to pull it together. The book was finally published in 1923, in the same folio format as Part One, based on Rieg’s lecture notes and a few book reviews.7 Zimmermann sewed it all together quilt-fashion; the seams between the authentic patches and his own supplementary accounts are almost but not quite invisible.8

The posthumous Part Two only imperfectly completes the image of Rieg’s thinking on these dense, numinous objects. But it does give us a fuller sense of the scope of his project as a whole. After discovering Part Two, one reads Part One of Late Roman Art Industry differently: the concluding chapter of Part One on fibulae and belt buckles emerges more clearly as the fulcrum of Rieg’s entire world-art history. Within his overall scheme, the “colorism” of these artifacts—their fusing of pattern and ground into a single integrated apparition—becomes the template for the purely optical constitution of the modern work of art. For Rieg it was the late Roman and early medieval applied arts, in all their humility, that made the crucial break with the ancient Mediterranean conception of art, which had persisted in stimulating the

6. Between 1901 and his death in 1905 Rieg travelled to museums in Germany, France, and England to study migration-period material and published several articles, including a review of Bernhard Salin’s pioneering monograph on animal ornament on northern European fibulae, Tierornamentik (1904). In two of his essays of 1903 Rieg mentioned the forthcoming publication of Part Two of Late Roman Art industry.
7. For the introduction, and for the first two chapters on the objects found in the Danish moors, Zimmermann had Rieg’s university lecture notes. Rieg had given courses on migration-period art in winter 1898–1899 and in summer 1903. For several of the remaining eight chapters, Zimmermann was able to draw on seven short articles and book reviews that Rieg published between 1901 and 1905. Each chapter addresses a relatively small body of material, in some cases single “finds.” The editors had to make do with whatever material Rieg had written or lectured on, even if not found on Austrian soil.
8. At some points in the later chapters Zimmermann uses Rieg’s own words and indicates this in the notes. In these chapters the voice of the book changes, however; whereas the introduction on the general principles of migration-period art speaks in Rieg’s own voice, with confident uses of the first-person plural, the later chapters at some points actually cite Rieg by name in the text. Three chapters were written entirely by Zimmermann.
tactile imagination, both in its imperious and aural figurative art, and in its ornamental art, tied through figuration and symbolism to the natural world. Riegl located the deepest roots of modern optical art, addressing the eye and the free intellect, in the abolition of the clear distinction between figure and ground brought about by the contrasts of light and dark shimmering in a shallow plane on late Roman sculpture and metal jewelry (fig. 4). The shallow plane became a screen for dematerialized apparitions that could propose virtual realities and invite beholders to participate in that reality intellectually and emotionally. The modern beholder was generated by, indeed was nothing more than a function of, that virtual reality. In some ways Riegl was simply saying that late Roman art was already Gothic art. The idea that Gothic art, with its perforated stone screens and translucent painted glass, was a diagram of transcendence and overcoming of the material, was by this time commonplace. But Riegl was not just contrasting the Gothic with the Classical. His more imaginative destination point was early modern Dutch painting, in particular the complex machines of virtual intersubjectivity that he wrote about in the monograph he published only one year after Late Roman Art Industry; in 1902, The Dutch Group Portrait. The originary beholder of modern times, for Riegl, was the visitor to the quarters of the Companies of St. George or St. Adrian in Haarlem in 1627, who saw hovering before him a virtual feast, in life-size, the black ground flowing out over the black frame into the surrounding, lamp-lit, interior gloom. This was the telos of the early medieval brooch or belt-buckle. Riegl did not give all the intermediary steps between the clasp and the canvas, but he sketched out the trajectory.9

Riegl’s approach to the early medieval metalwork at first seems very far from the Symbolist approach. He never makes overt aestheticist ploys; that is, he never tries to reproduce aesthetic effects in his own text. His analyses are arid and stress none of the features of the brooches and buckles—the coarse bends and splay, the density of detail, the invitation to the grip—that appealed to the late romantic imagination. And his long-term model of the rise of an optical art was roughly compatible with Hegel’s conception of a symbolic art giving way to a classical art, which in turn is succeeded by a romantic art. Such a process of dematerialization and transcendence is exactly what George’s concept of machè, the aura of artifice and material, had been directed against. Art, for George, found its destiny not in concretizing the concept but in abandoning it.

But in other ways Riegl was converging on George’s position. His very choice to focus so intensely on jewelry was significant, just as was his decision to focus on the Dutch group portrait, a practical, occasional art form that seemed unlikely to contribute to a theory of historical transcendence and the overcoming of the material; or for that matter on carpets, the subject of his first book, Altorientalische Teppiche (Ancient Oriental Carpets) (1891). Riegl’s overall schema was Hegelian, but nothing is more difficult to incorporate into a model

9. For a most complete version of Riegl’s world art-historical schema, see Riegl, Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste, ed. Karl M. Swoboda and Otto Pächt (Graz, Köln: Böhlau, 1966), based on lecture notes.

of historical dematerialization than jewelry, which had always been strictly excluded by idealist aesthetics. Idealist aesthetics could be characterized as one long process of delegitimation of the raw appeal of metal and gem. There had been two basic phases in this theoretical process. High-medieval theologians, facing the ubiquitous presence of metalwork and gems at the heart of Christian ceremony, argued that bright and glinting color was a figure for divine form and that admiration of such effects would lead finally to a transcendence of material. And then in the Renaissance, writers on art posited an ideal artwork that did not need to depend on its raw materials to impress the eye, but rather worked its effects on the mind through its form or design. This idealism became the foundation of academic doctrine from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Idealist contempt for jewelry is hardy and has survived through all the historical challenges to academic taste since the nineteenth century, all the avant-gardes. The idealist contempt flashes in a curious passage from Bernard Berenson's little book The Arch of Constantine or the Decline of Form (1954), where Berenson disputes Riegl's relativistic approach to late antique art. Berenson wrote that Michelangelo's figure art "led to the fading out of Tuscan painting and the reduction of its sculpture to jewelry (even when, as with Cellini, it was life-size or over)."

Jewelry resists any efforts to redeem it metaphysically. And jewelry can never accede to the autonomy, self-containedness, or self-sufficiency of the artwork. It is fundamentally a supplement to the body of the bearer. Brooches and buckles are accessories: functional objects that clasped, contained, marked, signalled. In late antique and early medieval society they functioned as status markers and perhaps as talismanic or fetish-like focal points as well. The criterion of the artwork that distinguished it from other made things was its freedom from such duties.

Riegl's handling of the jewelry traces an inward collapse and refusal of transitive meaning not so different from that described by George. His analyses break with a conception of the artwork as transitive, propositional, allegorical, or anagogic. It is possible to read Riegl's texts on the jewelry against the dematerialized destiny in the Gothic and in proto-impressionist painting that Riegl's own Hegelian schema prepares for them. Riegl had a strong interest in securing the integrity and legitimacy of the artwork, but only if the artwork could be established on a new basis. His pages on the brooches became a laboratory for a theoretical investigation into what that basis might be.

He made no effort to recontextualize these artifacts. He did not allow them to retreat back into a historical network of functions and situations. Instead, he stripped the culture that produced them—whether still Roman or already barbarian hardly mattered to him—down to an abstract skeleton of artifacts. This was not so hard to do.

since there was not much left to that culture apart from the artifacts. It was a culture that had left no written traces and no architecture, only these glinting bones. When Riegls does arrive in his narrative of late Roman art at the Kunstdindustrie, the brooches and buckles and scabbards, it is as if he has found his way back to some zero point of art-making, a point long before the process of dematerialization and autonomization had begun. The decontextualization entailed by the formal analysis has the effect of purging civilization and reducing it to its schematic core. The early medieval metalwork is presented as a kind of diagram of art’s operations: the working of material, the appeal to visual attention, the marking, framing, and re-presenting functions of ornament and figuration; a set of operations not covered by the idealist model.

He accomplished this by treating both the brooch and the oil painting as closed formal systems operating with severely reduced variables: line and color in plane and space, in his formula. Manipulations of these four variables generated an infinite range of responses in individual beholders. The stringency of the analysis and the availability of the results to comparative interpretation depended on the closure of the system. In other words, Riegls treated every artifact as if it were a work of art.

The isolation of the brooch or the buckle in the display case, or on the page, is violent, even more so than the decontextualization of the carpet that Riegls performed in his first book, Altorientalische Teppiche (1891). Riegls in his search for the elements of art had to turn away from the oppression of representational art, with its power to govern and predict its own interpretation. Instead he focused on the applied arts, where he found that absolute abstraction that had not quite been invented yet on the stretched canvas. To secure his argument he was willing to bracket out the actual historical supplementarity of the brooches and the rugs. Isolation within the scholarly text was functionally equivalent to the ekphrastic isolation achieved by George’s poem.

Riegls apparent evasion of the materiality of these artifacts, then, his decontextualization and his apparent mobilization of them to an idealist project, is better understood as a function of his radical intimacy with the materiality and direct appeal of the artifacts. He seems to “look away” from the material sources of the aesthetic response only as he veers closer to them. The closure and abstraction of his analyses only increase as they approach what might be called proto-aesthetic situations. Riegls brought to bear on the applied arts a strong conception of the autonomous artwork. But he did not promote the brooch or scabbard into a work of art, nor to demote the oil painting, but instead to reconnect the concept of the artwork to what he thought was its essence. By forcing the concept of the work of art into close proximity with jewelry, he sought to disclose something about art.

2. Cosmetics

Riegls does not deal directly with the historical or anthropological functioning of these artifacts. He tells us nothing about strata or find-sites, or about what excavations might tell us about how the artifacts were used. He never speaks of how the buckles and clasps were worn, for instance how many brooches were worn at once. There are no drawings of jewelry-wearers in costume. The people that made and wore these artifacts are simply invisible in his account. But the possibility of the artifacts’ non- or pre-aesthetic use is inscribed in his analyses by its radical absence, and it is that possibility that drives the analyses.

Admittedly, little is known about the historical functions of the early medieval metalwork and much less was known in Riegls time. Fibulae are brooches, clasps that held clothing together (fig. 5). It seems that from an early point they were also simply fastened to the clothing irrespective of any binding function. Eventually they were hung from the belt on cords. Our sense of the way the fibulae were used in the early middle ages is derived from their placement in burial sites and a few literary accounts. References to metalwork in epic poetry give us only a refracted image of their symbolic charge. The literary passages were easily romanticized and Riegls was wary of this. Modern scholarship often says very little about the meaning or uses of the objects. The substantial catalogue of the 1987 exhibition at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, for example, simply avoids the issue.11

Weapon mounts, fibulae, buckles, rings, and necklaces were distinguishing and ordering devices. They marked off individuals and occasions, established hierarchies, and diagrammed bonds and alliances. Metal clasps and pins elevated the textiles and furs that wrapped them and constituted them as mantles, conferring status and dignity. The jewelry marked the

Figure 5. Various fibulae with glass paste or coral decorations. Celtic. Fifth century. British Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.
key points where the layers of clothing that wrapped them were held together, the clothing that distinguished them from their surroundings and their enemies. It is possible that some artifacts may have been thought to operate on cosmic forces and were therefore used as talismans, perhaps to protect from or deflect evil. Jewelry put the invisible house of the real in order by focusing mental attention. Its function was “cosmic” in the original sense explicated by Angus Fletcher in his book on allegory: ornament cosmically upgraded its bearer, establishing rank in a hierarchy that was analogically related to the cosmos.12

To work in these ways, the artifacts had to be very weakly coded. They had to be intelligible to recipients with a minimum of background. We can imagine that these objects tended to be acquired by hazard: through pillage, tomb-raid, theft, conquest, hand-to-hand combat, trade. They had to perform their distinguishing and marking functions with widely valued and readily understood features: wrothtugness; hard, variegated, and reflective surfaces; luminosity and color. The object-types and forms remained amazingly stable across long stretches of European history, well beyond the practical limits imposed by functional requirements. Their symbolic system could not have been simpler: with their interweaving and folded forms the brooches and buckles represented their original practical functions of claspimg and joining. They framed the themes of discipline, gathering, self-containment, binding ties. Like spoken formulas or incantations, they held out the possibility of a reuniting of the disjointed through rhythm, repetition, and symmetry.

It is not clear that clothing layers always permitted ideal visibility, as they do in archeological drawings (fig. 6). The artifacts are wrought things that were made to be possessed, worn, carried, held, stored, and eventually buried. They do not “posit” beholders in the sense that works of art are expected to do. Rather, they offer themselves as focuses of mental attention. That attention brings about a differentiation and heterogenization of the environment. “Object-quality” can be defined as a coagulation of space generated by mental attentiveness. Object-quality is the fiction of a thing’s closure and integrity and its differentness from the rest of the world.

Wroth, or the spectacle of metal submitted to folding, bending, chiselling, puncturing, and scratchimg, was the feature that appeared to isolate these artifacts from the rest of life. Marshall McLuhan, in the prehistory of the visual regime of modernity that he offers in The Gutenberg Galaxy, traced a connection between the ancient Greek metalworker and the arts of the western middle ages.13 He pointed out that in the beginning it was the metalworker who was held in the highest regard: not the sculptor, but the master of the arts of carving, chasing, embossing, engraving. This mode serves as one of McLuhan’s paradigms for “tactile making,” making not based in drawing. For McLuhan, the engraver or caelator created a magical-acoustic space, before the setting in of the compartmentalization and specialization associated with visuality. McLuhan claimed that this tradition basically bypassed Roman civilization, which for him was the matrix for the post-Renaissance order grounded in the manipulation of


vision, and instead linked up with medieval illumination, although he could have invoked medieval metalwork as well. The carver or caelator succeeded in isolating the wrought artifact from the rest of reality and created the fiction of its object-quality. This quasi-miraculous and technological achievement fed the earliest myths about artists—we might call this the “Daedalian” tradition—wherein the artist figured as a kind of magus. 14 The Daedalian artist was a technologist who exerted pressure on the material world. His manipulation of raw materials symbolized magical intervention into the workings of the cosmos. Jewelry was fundamentally something wrought. The German word Schmuck (jewelry) is derived from schmieggen, to bend into links, cognate with the English word smith. The bending of metal and the forming of links and bonds symbolized the hierarchical bonds that organized the cosmos and the linking of the inferior and superior realms sought by magical practice.

Early medieval jewelry has little to do with the modern conception of opticality that involves controllable viewing distances and freedom of movement within ambient space. Riegl was aware of this, and the perversity and flair of his project lies precisely in his decision to build a theory of optical art on a culture that in some sense could not see. We might name this notion of the availability of artifacts to optical reception “apparition-quality” in contrast to “object-quality.” Apparition-quality can be defined as an overcoming of the material object in favor of a phenomenon: the reality of the object becomes the beholder’s experience of its appearance, not the material thing itself. The beholder creates that apparition and so in effect creates the work of art.

Object-quality, we saw, was also generated by attentiveness, but a different sort of attentiveness, not the stable, measured, optical address involved in the generation of apparition-quality. Both qualities are fictions imposed on things by minds.

The modern model of optical attentiveness to made things, yielding a phenomenal image, is predicated on the stable spaces provided by architecture. The modern image, the Bild or tableau, is not seen until it is installed in an enclosed space. The beholder is concretized as a beholder when he or she can take the measure of the enclosed space, can move relative to the space, and can willfully stop and arrest the gaze. Optical stability follows from architecture: there is no measured seeing until there are enclosed spaces, conceived as spaces. The surrounding space is the first frame of the work of art, for the space serves as an insulating or buffer zone against the outside world and allows the artifact to emerge as an image, perhaps the apparition of an alternative world. The wearers of Riegl’s brooches had no such sense of space. They lived in unstable, impermanent, low, dark structures, or travelled a good deal. The Roman border soldiers and the migration-period tribes in some sense had no architecture at all. Their clothing was their architecture. They owned few images, perhaps none at all.

The vast distance of the migration-period metalwork from the modern object-world is illustrated by a plate in Gottfried Semper’s treatise Der Stil (1863), an array of late medieval and Renaissance door locks and hinges (fig. 7). 15 Semper treats them as images, and yet this somehow does no injustice to them. The late medieval metal plates, now finally emerging out of a stable, newly constituted ground, enter into free formal play. Their asymmetry and skew are marks of their supererogation of their structural function. They point away from object-quality and towards image-quality. These locks and hinges served many of the same symbolic functions that the belt buckles and brooches once did: they held the building together, elevated it above mere construction, and constituted it as architecture. Semper explains that locks and hinges like these were replaced in the Renaissance by “symbolizing structure-forms.” At that point in history, in a sense, the image-potential of these Gothic plates was taken up and extended by so-called “cabinet” pictures designed to hang on the wall.

Siegfried Giedion, in Mechanization Takes Command (1948), argued that only in the later middle ages did furnishings finally merge with walls and create the idea of the “room as a unit.” 16 Doors were incorporated into their walls; furnishings spoke to their surroundings; wainscoting and other framing devices spread horizontally and rose to the rafters, creating a shell of space. Not until then did the figure-ground tension enter into daily life, and not until then did figure-against-ground became the fundamental configuration of aesthetic experience. The room was organized into


overlapping rectangular fields. Ornament was detached cleanly from function and played out in a virtual plane.

In the early middle ages, figure and ground had not yet emerged into their diagrammatic opposition. Everything—body, jewelry, surrounding space—was rolled into moving bundles or tossed into heaps. There were no rectangular fields. The levelling performed by Riegl’s scholarly illustrations, with their contrived staging of the figure-ground relationship, is thus all the more vehement. The reproduction of an image is itself an image, and many of the operational features of the original image will be preserved in the reproduction. The reproduction can still do many of the things that the original image was meant to do. An image of a brooch, by contrast, is alienated from the historical life of the brooch.

3. The myth of the talisman

Riegl’s schema pushes the cosmetic and talismanic functions of the object back into a remote historical past. If the objects retain any object-quality in his text, it would seem to be a backward-facing quality; it is rather their apparition-quality that faces forward in time. Is Riegl falling into the conventional intellectual habit of evading the philosophical problem of object-quality by historicizing it? Historicization is the way that modernity generally handles the problem of the empathic or participatory relationship to artifacts. The mind that prized the artifact as a talisman or a link to a higher sphere of the cosmos is figured as a phenomenon of the past. The modern mind then has the choice of whether to go back and seek authenticity in that origin, or to leave the origin safely behind. The modern relationship to the artifact is always presented as comparatively disengaged, abstract, and intellectualized. This is a virtually universal feature of the modern approach to object-quality.

This approach is already neatly framed by an anecdote from Benvenuto Cellini’s Autobiography (1562) involving the discovery of a cache of ancient jewelry:

It chanced at that time that I lighted upon some jars or little antique urns filled with ashes, and among the ashes were some iron rings inlaid with gold (for the ancients also used that art), and in each of the rings was set a tiny cameo of shell. On applying to men of learning, they told me that these rings were worn as amulets by folk desirous of abiding with mind unshaken in any extraordinary circumstance, whether of good or evil fortune. Hereupon, at the request of certain noblemen who were my friends, I undertook to fabricate some trilling rings of this kind. . . .

One could call this the myth of the talisman. It was easy for Cellini’s authorities to associate the rings with belief in apotropaic power precisely because so little was really known about such remote times. The implication of the anecdote is that people of Cellini’s own time did not ordinarily wear rings for such purposes. When they did, it was in imitation of a putative antique practice. Belief in the talisman is inseparable from a retrospective consciousness and from an attendant self-consciousness about one’s modernity.

This is the way modernity deals with the more general idea of the analogic or participatory cosmos. Belief in such a cosmos is always historicized. It is cast as “lost,” as in Foucault’s succession of epistemes,

17. McLuhan makes this point in The Gutenberg Galaxy, pp. 64–67. The rectangular structure of Josef Hoffmann’s brooches (see below, p. 65 was the true mark of their modernity.

where the analogic Renaissance gives way to the representational "classical" era, which in turn gives way to the disciplinary regimes of modernity. The fallacy of this approach is that it historicizes a structure of mind that is fundamentally not historical. Object-quality and apparition-quality are present-tense choices. They are ways of thinking about why fabricated things attract attention. The opposition between the two qualities is a structure, not an event.

Art history assimilated at an early stage and has never really abandoned the ideal-historical schema of a primordial "tactile" relationship to artifacts that through history is transformed into an intellectualized or spiritualized "optical" relationship. I would say that the analysis of artifacts in art historical writing, whether it is framed as formalist or contextualist, always proceeds within this historicist transformatory schema. The idea of a historical opening onto vision, light, cognition, and apprehension, is irresistible. In effect, art history always takes up one version or another of a "secularization" narrative.

4. "Empathy" and Delirium

In Riegl's analyses, then, the *fibulae* are both decontextualized, that is, treated as disembodied apparitions, and historicized. But the thesis of this paper is that the anthropological, pre-aesthetic working of the artifacts is nevertheless inscribed in his text. Riegl's book is after all a book about objects. His earlier treatise on ancient Mediterranean ornamental motifs, *Stilfragen* (1893) was about the covering of surfaces. In *Late Roman Art Industry*, Part One and Part Two, extracts ornament from its surrounds and breaks it down into independent objects. And in his analytical isolation of the artifacts Riegl comes close, in an indirect way, to acknowledging their original functions. His formal readings of these artifacts, entailing an air-tight avoidance of any historical or anthropological engagement with them, end up pointing to their essential operative features.

Riegl's abstract, decontextualized approach to these artifacts is best understood as a negative reaction to what he must have seen as the two obvious and even crass alternatives: first, the vulgar and quasi-superstitious reading, sympathetic to the barbarians, that took seriously the powerful, talismanic "object-quality" of the artifacts; and second, the recourse to contemporary "empathy" theory.

The cultural context for Riegl's and Stefan George's engagement with this material was the intense fascination of late Romantic and turn-of-the-century European culture with barbarian energy. The repeated challenges of the "Germanic" peoples to Roman authority between the first and the fourth centuries, climaxing in the sack of Rome in A.D. 410, provided a foundational dialectic for European culture. According to this dramatic folk tale, civilization defined itself against the chaos and brutality of the barbarians, but at the same time required periodic revitalizing infusions of that same alien energy. Sympathy for the barbarians had been a major topos of German national self-understanding since the late fifteenth century. The myth of Germanic or nordic cultural vigor was massively recharged by nineteenth-century scholarship on northern European folklore and folk art, including the culture and crafts of the pre-Carolingian period. Historians located the foundations of modern social and political institutions in Germanic tribal law and culture. Some scholars of Volkskunde and Germanic antiquity indulged in illiberal speculation about the survival of the deep pagan-nordic past into modern European history, even into contemporary folk culture, and found a wide popular audience. New museums charted a national artistic trajectory, notably the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, founded in 1852. Even scholarly art-historical treatises like Bernhard Salin's *Tierornamentik* (1904) were dedicated to unearthing the roots of a "national sense of style" (nationale Stilgefühl).

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21. See Sybille Ehringhaus, *Germanenmythos und deutsche Identität: Die Frühmittelalter-Rezeption in Deutschland 1842–1933* (Berlin: VDG, 1996), pp. 115–119 on Salin. Ehringhaus focuses mainly on the impact of nationalist thinking on art historical scholarship. The field of early medieval art in particular was so contaminated by myths of German ethnicity that in the second half of the twentieth century comparatively few scholars returned to it. Many who have studied the period have questioned the reality of the entire model of migrating Germanic tribes. See Lawrence Nees, "Introduction" to "Approaches to Early-Medieval Art," special issue, *Speculum* 72 (1997): 959–969. To the extent it survives, it has become an exclusively archeological and positivist field, cumulative like a scientific discipline and thus effacing the traces of the older discourse. The 632-page catalogue of the exhibition *Germanen, Hunnen, und Awaren: Schätze der Völkerwanderungszeit* at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (1987) never mentions Riegl, presumably because his insights, although often accurate, were not grounded in good archeological method.
The clearest echoes of the cult of the barbarian within contemporary art-making were the square buckles and brooches designed by Josef Hoffmann of the design cooperative Wiener Werkstätte, founded in 1903 by Hoffmann and Koloman Moser. A brooch of silver, diamonds, and semi-precious stones of 1904 might have been modelled directly on one of Riegl’s illustrations (fig. 8). The early medieval jewelry functioned for Hoffmann, just as did Byzantine mosaics for Gustav Klimt, as a lever against academic classicism.

Riegl, too, presented himself as the opponent of academic aesthetes and bourgeois connoisseurs. He purged conventional philo-classical taste from his art history, and observed no distinctions between high and low cultural forms, or between a brooch and an oil painting. He displaced classical art from the center and smoothed out the gradient of art history. Every period, every style had its function within the historical schema.

But Riegl in the end discounted the barbarian contribution to the metalwork and refused to romanticize the Germanic tribes. He avoided all the current clichés of the superiority of nomadic culture to sedentary civilization. His original twist was to locate the roots of aesthetic modernity not among the dynamic Germanic newcomers but in the breakdown of Roman culture. He folded the brooches and buckles into a continuous development out of classical Mediterranean culture. This was encapsulated in his coinage “late Roman.”

Margaret Olin has shown how liberal contempt for German ethnic chauvinism generally provided a spur to the art-historical revisionism not only of Riegl but also of his colleague at the university in Vienna, Franz Wickhoff, who in his book on the Vienna Genesis detected the origins of Velázquez and modern coloristic, impressionistic painting in early Roman art.23 The

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22. See also the examples illustrated in Vienna 1900, exh. cat. New York, Museum of Modern Art, p. 143.

23. Margaret Olin, “Alois Riegl: The Late Roman Empire in the Late Habsburg Empire,” in Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms, eds., The Habsburg Legacy: National Identity in Historical Perspective
Viennese rehabilitated Rome as an antidote to philo-Germanicism. The idea of Rome as the source of modernity had the ingenious merit of already incorporating barbarian energy. For the Romans, who overwhelmed and in the same gesture assumed Greek civilization, were Europe's first successful barbarians. The tension between brutal, practical energy and Hellenic idealism was, as it were, built into the Roman system. For Riegler, it was as if Roman civilization had put an end to the dialectic of civilization and barbarism by absorbing it. This move also suggested that the modern Austro-Hungarian empire, liberal and multiethnic, was the just successor to the Roman state.

For Riegler, Rome was a kind of self-perpetuating machine of culture and there was no need to invoke an external ethnic source. He argued that the ingredients of mediaeval opticality were an ancient Mediterranean legacy and were already storehoused in Roman art. He argued for example that stone inlays were not already Gothic, but rather descended from Egypt. He derives all the key metalworking techniques and ornamental motifs directly from Roman art. One of the main specific points of debate in Riegler's time was the origin of the chip-carving technique. Strzygowski had argued that it derived from near eastern metalworking traditions; Riegler traced it instead to the Roman military camps of the Rhineland. At another point, Riegler says explicitly that the artist's products of the migration period should be credited to the "aesthetic will" of the Romans. Riegler is frequently dismissive of the barbarians. He maintained that the barbarian tribes did not have an aesthetic sense because when they did get control of ornamentation they based it on stylized representations of animals.

The second alternative that Riegler was rejecting was empathy theory, which basically held that aesthetic engagement with images or buildings was a staging and concentration of a more general tendency to project bodily experience onto the outside world. The theory was supported by rather little real knowledge about the psychology or physiology of experience. It appealed to art historians who wanted to reckon somehow with object-quality and who were dissatisfied with the prestigious idealist and neo-Kantian model of aesthetic experience proposed by the aesthetician Konrad Fiedler. Fiedler had argued that the world was made in the mind of the artist, not discovered or reproduced, and that aesthetic experience was an accession to an ideal visuality.

The key to empathy theory was a disrespect for the frame. It was an attempt to recover some original aggressive relationship to made things, against academic decorum. A good sample is the dissertation by Heinrich Wölfflin, Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture (1886), which was in some ways a polemic against Fiedler. In that 40-page essay Wölfflin described Dürer's engraving Melencolia I (fig. 9): "...we see a brooding woman staring at a block of stone. What does it mean? The stone block is irregular and irrational; it cannot be defined with compass and with ciphers. But there is more. When one looks at this stone, does it not appear to be falling? Surely! And the longer we look at it the more we are drawn into this restlessness." It is easy to


25. The consensus today is that Riegler was more or less right. The disciplinary oblivion that swallowed Riegler's project is all the more ironic in that many of Riegler's main archeological theses—for instance, that notion that the animal style derives from the Roman military insignia and not from the steppes—are now widely accepted.


27. Riegler, "Oströmische Beiträge," in: Festschrift Franz Wickhoff (Vienna: Schroll, 1903), pp. 1–11; and in Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, Part Two, pp. 23–29. Part Two of Late Roman Art Industry was meant to be essentially about barbarian art. In the preface to the posthumous publication, Emil Reisch quoted Riegler himself from his introduction to Part One: the second part was to take the measure of "the creative contribution of the nordic barbarian tribes, at that time newly entered into the culture-world" (Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, Part Two, p. V.). In his university lectures, the basis for Zimmermann's ventriloquized introduction to the 1923 volume, Riegler seemed to accept the myth of barbarian individualism. He also conceded that the Germans in these centuries were the "actors" of history and that the Romans were the passive, willing recipients of the new regimes and new ethical principles, in particular the subjective principle of Treue or loyalty. But Riegler never developed these ideas. They seem to have provided a scaffolding for his university lectures, but not for his sparse surviving writings on the barbarian artifacts. Generally on Riegler and the contemporary discourse on early medieval ornament, see Ehringhaus, Germanenmythos und deutsche Identität, chaps. 7 and 8.


think of Erwin Panofsky’s later reading of Dürer’s famous work as a systematic attempt to bury this delirious misreading, for the winged woman in the engraving is of course *not* looking at the polyhedron (yet another cut stone, one might add). Wölflin himself is looking at it. It is as if he has put himself inside the picture. Wölflin’s writing opens up the alarming possibility that to turn one’s close attention to objects—perhaps to artworks as well—against the normal lived grain of distractedness is to risk cutting one’s perceptions off from other people’s perceptions. Attentiveness plunges in this passage into a terrifying cul-de-sac of private perception. The essence of Wölflin’s strangeness here is that he makes an “event” within the picture the elemental unit of his analysis, whereas for Riegl as for other formalists the image as a whole is always the elemental unit of analysis.

Against Fiedler’s views, Wölflin wrote: “If we were purely visual beings, we would always be denied an aesthetic judgment of the physical world.”31 He was only trying to say that the model of the disembodied gaze did not sufficiently account for our experience of art. His proposition was clumsy, however, and his reading of the Melencolia I was “enthusiastic” in a way that violated the basic premises of scholarly objectivity. Empathy, which is after all a synonym of “sympathy,” involved a kind of imaginative participation, a displacing of the self. In empathic readings of works of art the imagination tends to drive straight into the heart of the work and seize on its inner workings.

Riegl wanted no part of this. His abstract approach to his objects can be read as a return to and endorsement of Fiedler: And one can only conclude that Riegl’s largely hospitable reception over the course of the last century reflects a comparable endorsement of Fiedler’s idealism. Twentieth-century art-historical scholarship found no way to approach object-quality, unless it was through poetical or lyrical or otherwise “para-scholarly” writing of one sort or another. Empathy theory was doomed, and instead it was basically the principles articulated by Fiedler that were taken up by the ideologists of painterly abstraction and by art-historical formalists in the early twentieth century.

This paper argues, however, that Riegl’s writing on the early medieval metalwork cannot so quickly be dismissed as an abandonment of the problem of object-quality. This argument will require an understanding of the optical relationship to artifacts, which Riegl posited as the endpoint of art history, not as an overcoming of the primordial tactile or haptic relationship, but rather as a complication of the haptic. By the haptic relationship to artifacts Riegl was referring to the perceptual fiction of object-quality. Haptic was a neologism of the period derived from the Greek verb *haptein*, meaning “fasten” or “attach.”32 Haptic referred to a mental fastening or attachment to the artifact. It could just as easily be characterized as a participatory or empathic relationship to things.

Both the haptic and the optical relationships are fictions. The optical relationship to artifact as, we have seen, the perceptual fiction of an apparition. The optical relationship is certainly a refinement over the haptic, in Riegl’s view. Nevertheless, in its overcoming of the haptic it bears the marks of the haptic within it. Riegl’s model of a universal haptic approach to artifacts being historically superseded by a universal optical relationship cannot therefore be taken too literally. Riegl’s haptic-optic binarism is best understood not as a historical trajectory, but as a schematic, ahistorical account of aesthetic experience. The distanced or optical reception of the artifact includes and also conceals within it the empathic or haptic reception.

In this way object-quality is not obliterated but rather contained within Riegl’s formalist thought-experiment. And in the same way, empathic art history of the sort ventured by Wölflin is both contained within and at the same time overcome by Riegl’s schema. This admittedly confusing point was demonstrated in dramatic, even sensationalizing, fashion by the widely read treatise *Abstraction and Empathy* by Wilhelm Worringen (1908). Worringen, a follower of Riegl’s and a brilliant writer, set up empathy and abstraction as opposing principles of aesthetic address. Abstraction in Worringen’s terms referred to a flight from the terrifying chaos of the natural world into the discipline of style. Empathy referred to the more comfortable participatory relationship to nature achieved by Europeans since the Renaissance. Worringen considered that comfortable participation, corresponding to naturalism in art, a dangerous illusion. He presented abstraction by contrast as both the primordial attitude towards nature (and a peculiarly “nordic” attitude) and the highly advanced approach that under the conditions of modernity was once again appropriate. Worringen, in other words, presented abstraction as both a starting point and a final psychic contrivance.


32. Riegl introduced the term as a superior substitute for “tactile” in a footnote to his review article on Strzygowski’s *Orient oder Rom? Riegl, “Late Roman or Orient?” p. 190.
This argument about the embeddedness of empathy within abstraction, and of the haptic within the optical, is vividly reinforced by Riegl's corpus of *fibulae* and belt buckles (fig. 10). The *fibulae* presented by Riegl are never simply wrought objects. Rather, they always already display their clasping function and their wroughtness. The head and foot of the *fibula*, in principle simply the points of contact between the needle and the brooch, are flattened and expanded into dedicated “fields” for ornamental motifs. There would appear at first to be a historical dimension to this phenomenon. After the year 450 bow brooches were more likely to be made of precious materials and by that time seemed to have served exclusively symbolic or cosmetic purposes. This opening up of the object to visual attention may have had to do with a switch from the Greek-style *pepalos* to the tailored northern European tunic, rendering the *fibula* essentially nonfunctional.\(^\text{33}\) The belt buckle, too, was at an early stage just a ring and a tongue. Later it developed a backplate and then a counterplate, and these plates became focuses for visual attention.

Yet it is not clear that this contrast between the use and the display of the brooches can be understood entirely as a historical movement. Tomb-finds reveal that Roman soldiers along the *limes*, the frontier with the barbarians, already wore a lot of useless, symbolic metal in the second and third centuries. Already then the functional fasteners were on display. And it appears that these artifacts were commodified already at an early historical stage.\(^\text{34}\) From the beginning, it seems, there were choices to be made between one brooch and another; the pieces were not simply circulating organically, falling by mysterious processes into one person’s hands or another’s.

Indeed, the display of the artifacts on the body appears to have been related to the talismanic use of the objects. That is, when the artifacts were maximally open to the eye, they were at the same time finding a new interface with putative cosmic forces and discovering or renewing a different function. In other words, the display-quality and the object-quality were always present. Tomb-finds show that the barbarians eventually took to wearing multiple, that is, superfluous *fibulae* on the shoulder, or even hanging from the belt, as amulets. Thus the two qualities of object and apparition, the two superstitions of autonomy on the basis of cosmetic potency, on the one hand, and autonomy on the basis of the beholder’s mental imposition of order, on the other, are always folded onto one another.

It would be a mistake to characterize the emergence of display-quality and even commodification as attenuations of object-quality. For this is the very same movement described by George in his poem, from functional *spange* or clasp to autonomous *dolde* or bloom. The bloom is aimed at the eye but it includes and profits from the closure and tool-like integrity of the clasp. This journey back from beauty to materiality was noted by Adorno in his comments on George’s and Hofmannsthau’s aestheticism. The barbaric ugliness of the brooch, indeed the very brooch described in George’s poem, is the symptom of its return to life. “On


the way to fashion and life,” according to Adorno, “beauty raternizes with the very same ugliness against which it, being outside the sphere of utility, had declared war... Handicrafts are the stigma of emancipated beauty.”

5. Monadology

Jewelry and metalwork are high-gravity zones that pull any inquiry inwards. Riegls sensed that the migration-period material was an opportunity to approach fundamental questions about art. But instead of writing directly about their object-quality, he devised a way of writing about them that blanked that quality out, as if with a template cut to measure, precise to the millimeter. The elemental appeal of wrought objects is never named by Riegls. The evasion was so precise that his texts have the effect of being exactly about what they avoid. Riegls analyses seem to drain the brooches of any such appeal by extracting them from the life-world that created them. They are subjected to a detached and systematic analysis. But Riegls subtext is that “art” is always more and less than an object of measured visual attention. His writing is balanced precariously between oblivion of the thingliness of things, and reverence for the thingliness of things.

Wroughtness and “curiosity”—the pointlessness of form turning back onto itself—emblematize the privileged place of artifice within human life. The wrought artifacts Riegls deals with had no meaning other than representing madness. That function was enough to earn them all their secondary historical functions of marking, upgrading, and improving. Jewelry prefigures the aesthetic by being independent of context. Its context is its owner or bearer, who can change from year to year. Jewelry is fundamentally property: its meaning does not derive from its origins but from its present-tense workings. In writerly, self-documenting cultures like our own, artifacts with complex symbolic dimensions, such as oil paintings, are understood as if they were texts, as if they were linked one to another by intertextuality and processes of semiotic dissemination. But brooches and buckles are not much like texts; each artifact carries its own present tense with it.

In the military and nomadic culture of the early middle ages, the brooches and buckles were constantly circulating, in effect were always out of context. One of the features of Riegls own society, one that alarmed many traditionalists, was that paintings, too, were now circulating like jewels, detached as mere property from their ancestral roots and from the deep patrimonial background of European history. Thus in this respect too, in its extreme portability, the fibula in Riegls account prefigures the modern artwork. And, in this respect, Riegls account did not so much confirm as confound the correlation between style and culture aimed at by critical art-historical scholarship. The value of these objects was related historically to their vulnerability to seizure and transfer. They were meant to retain their appeal and significance in any context. From the moment of their making they eluded any cultural anchoring. The art-historical project of contextualization and explanation is therefore permanently deferred. In Riegls account the artifacts became emblems of that deferral.

Riegls was acting out on a small stage the larger drama of turn-of-the-century culture’s preoccupation with ornament. The supplementary and secondary status of ornament was a construction of modernity. The stabilization of the artwork from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, with its unity and integrity, created that supplementarity. Ornament was form that could not be included within the work and was therefore dismissed as a mere supplement to the work. With its “cosmic” or hierarchy-creating function, ornament threatened to bind the work into society and curtail its freedom. Ornament was progressively marginalized from the eighteenth century on, in parallel with the emergence of the easel painting as the standard unit of aesthetic measurement. As a supplement outside the control of aesthetic doctrine, ornament was dangerously subject to the caprices of taste. Ornament reflected only fashion. The historical study of art sought a deeper principle, one that was legible in works of art: style.

There were two sides to this situation. Ornament by virtue of its exclusion was at the same time the emblem of freedom. Ornament was form that had been liberated from illustration, narrative, and symbol. This basic ambiguity already troubled Kant’s aesthetics. Kant constructed an exemplary aesthetic situation that involved a stable encounter between a subject and a framed work. But in a famous passage of The Critique of Judgment he offered as an example of “free beauty” the arabesque or design à la grecque. A century later, for the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, and the Wiener Werkstätte, ornament came to represent freedom.


36. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, § 16.
from the aesthetic imperative of autonomy: freedom from freedom, in effect.

Ornament was the opposite of the artwork, but captured the essence of art. Jewelry, meanwhile, with its reliance on gross material and its cosmetic function, seemed the opposite of art, but in fact was something very close to the artwork. Jewelry was like an écorché of the artwork, a laying bare of the innards of the work. Riegl’s text moves in the space between ornament and jewelry. His decision to treat the early medieval artifacts as disembodied apparitions represents a refusal to let the function “ornament” destabilize the artwork. Yet his text in effect carries through that destabilization in favor of a new philosophical and anthropological grounding of the artwork in objecthood (in the condition of jewelry, in other words). His book is not about the work of art, but about art.

The Germanic tradition of art-historical scholarship, grounded in idealist philosophy, still dominates academic art history. We are all working in an era not of the radical critique of idealist Kunstwissenschaft, but of the fulfillment of Kunstwissenschaft. The most advanced art history usually accepts versions of the following propositions: that works of art are machines for thinking; that representations do not derive from reality, so much as they construct it; that style is not a simple registration of deeper facts about a society, rather the society organizes and represents itself in style; that the material, the desirable, and the abject are all redeemed or suspended through the subjective operations of attentiveness, receptivity, and interpretation. These are all anti-realism propositions, and they can all be found already in Riegl.

This idealist framework makes it virtually impossible to pose first questions—one might say anthropological questions—about art: questions about beauty, desire, the origins of art. It almost seems as if evasion of these questions is one of the constitutive principles of Kunstwissenschaft. The modern academic study of art maintains the anti-anthropological fiction of the historicity of art; it also maintains a fiction of its own independence from museums, the art market, collecting, even taste—just as Riegl did. Riegl’s writing on metalwork at first appears emblematic of that disciplinary evasion. But in fact Riegl’s formalist abstraction is just an intensification of the way the discipline is compelled by its own premises to deal with the problem: its only approach to “first questions” is by way of evasion, a negative rather than a direct approach.

This tension between ornament and artwork is always implicit in formalism. But the tension is not a theme that has been much pursued in twentieth-century thought about artistic form, unless it is by Adorno. In his Aesthetic Theory Adorno called formalist attentiveness “immanent analysis” and pointed out that the device of isolating and abstracting form was in the first instance “a weapon... against philistinism.” Riegl did in fact use formalism as a weapon against the materialism and functionalist reductionism of his time. Adorno’s “immanent analysis,” however, would seem to involve precisely a setting aside of object-quality in favor of something like “image-quality,” a quality of exclusive availability to attentive perception and cognition. The isolation of form would seem to narrow the window through which the artifact could be reached.

Adorno saw the power of that narrowing, but at the same time was interested in opening up the artwork to universals, to an exterior field. Only this opening up to life and society, for Adorno, would finally justify the existence of the artwork. He was therefore not content to stand by the product of immanent analysis and instead displaced the problem into a discussion of what he called the “monadic” aspect of the artwork: its autarchic, condensed, blind, or windowless character. Adorno was very far from dismissing the monadic character of the artwork as a fiction. On the contrary, he called it a fact about the artwork. He then went on to rescue the artwork for a social or critical analysis by arguing that the “stringency and internal structuration” of monadic artworks “are borrowed from their intellectual domination of reality.” He continued: “To this extent, what is transcendent to them is imported into them as that by which they in the first place became an immanent nexus.” Thus the work is at once “a force field and a thing.”

With this image of the closed monad that nevertheless derives its internal coherence from its domination of the outside world, Adorno was trying to convey a situation not so different from the one described in the previous section, where it proved difficult to disentangle the object-quality and the apparition-quality of the historical brooches and buckles.

In Adorno’s thought, the monadic quality of the artwork does not precede its aesthetic identity. Rather, its density and blindness are functions of that

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38. Ibid., p. 180.
39. Ibid., p. 179.
“intellectual domination of reality” that lent the thing its art-quality in the first place. One could argue, pursuing Adorno’s lead, that the artwork is nothing other than a special case of the monadic thing. The artwork is an artifact that has been fashioned in such a way that its frames and represents closedness, density, and blindness. The artwork is the representation of a monadic quality found in artifacts—perhaps even in unmodified objects—beyond the domain of art.40

In the core passages of Late Roman Art Industry and in its mutilated, forgotten sequel, Riegl appears to be narrating a historical shift from object-quality to apparition- or display-quality, whereby the brooches and buckles function as prefigurations of the modern dematerialized relationship to the artwork. This is not all that he was doing, however. In Riegl’s text the early medieval artifacts figure the monadic closure of the artwork. Riegl’s fibulae, outlandish metal blooms, stand for the alienation of the artifact from nature and for the absolute self-sufficiency and legitimacy of artifice. The fibulae are emblems of contrivance and closure, qualities which for the aestheticist culture that engulfed Riegl were the indispensable criteria of the artwork. Riegl was providing, indirectly, a historical matrix for those criteria. And by driving both concepts back into a common ground of art-making he was collapsing the distinction between ornament and artwork so central to modern aesthetics.

I will conclude by pointing to an alternative model of the place of matter or materiality within the artwork. It is possible that we are falling into a fallacy when we simply identify the medium of art with matter. A better definition of medium is the one developed by the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, wherein medium is understood as a component of a differential pair with form. For Luhmann, medium and form are always defined against each other; together they constitute information. Form emerges against medium; medium emerges against form. The medium/form mutualism is nested within the phenomenon of art. The differential relationship between the two is in constant historical and situational flux, so that it is meaningless to speak of the “essential” qualities of a medium. There is no medium, until it is picked out by form, in a given work.

Anything can be the medium of art, then: materials, light, space, but also meaning, and in the end art itself. “In contrast to natural objects,” Luhmann argues, the artwork’s material participates in the formal play of the work and is thereby acknowledged as form. The material is allowed to appear as material; it does not merely resist the imprint of form. Whatever serves as medium becomes form, once it makes a differentiation, once it gains an informational value owing exclusively to the work of art.41

This conception of medium, built on the medium/form differential pair, does not sacrifice materiality, because materiality is already contained within the prior artworks against which form finds its definition.

The advantage of this for our purposes is that it defuses the matter-spirit tension which so dominates the idealist tradition of thinking about art. Once matter is taken out of its traditional role as simultaneously vehicle for and resistance to concept, a new sense emerges of what the “polemical” dynamic of art might be. To abandon the pathos of the idealist agon between matter and spirit is not automatically to give up the notion of polemics or difference; there are many different differences.

40. Art history has generally not followed Adorno in this struggle for a dialectical resolution of the dilemma between the “force field” and the “thing” characters of the artwork. Instead of making the wrought thing its first subject, art history embraced an aesthetic philosophy—and a theory of the work of art—that put the emphasis on “art.” This had the effect, as we have seen, of delegating jewelry to the status of an accessory. The cost for art history was any familiarity with wrought things. That familiarity has been excluded from critical discourse and survives for the discipline only as its crass or tasteless “other”: the spheres of collecting, buying and selling, displaying. The roots of this trouble lie in the sociological tension between academic art history, a creature of the bourgeois universities, and the elite worlds of collecting and museum patronage. Art history is expected by society to fulfill a custodial, essentially conservative, role. Both historicist scholarship and idealist formalism—including poststructuralist formalism—are basically gestures of rejection of that expected role.

POLEMICAL, ABELLIGERENT, CANTANKEROUS,
PLOSIVE, COMEBLICOSE, CRABBY,
ERISTIC, FEISTY,
HUMORED, ABRFED, MEAN AS A