



Edited by Gunhild Borggreen,
Maria Fabricius Hansen and Rosanna Tindbæk

Tracing the Animation of Matter
in Art and Visual Culture

DEAD OR ALIVE!

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

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DEAD OR ALIVE!
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The image is an ontological paradox; it is made of dead matter, yet appears to be alive. For millennia, artists have created images of the living world – images that are static and yet possess the power to bring to life a moment frozen in time. While this tension has constituted a fundamental challenge for as long as theories on the nature of images have existed, recent scholarship has rekindled interest in the question of what images ‘do to us’. Despite the rationality of Modernity, we must acknowledge that we view images as half-living entities. A dialectic relation determines the power of images: the incapacitating distance that forbids us to touch and actively ‘use’ an image is the same mechanism that holds the power to draw us closer to it. This book represents an attempt to grasp the animating power of images within a wide range of image-production practices and historical periods. In its twelve chapters, scholars of art history and visual culture demonstrate that the ontological paradox of the image is not limited to a specific historical period or certain types of images, but can be seen throughout the history of images across different cultures.

The Principle of Life – The Principle of the Image

In the very beginning of his treatise *On the Soul*, Aristotle establishes his topic as “more honourable and precious than another”, as it “contributes greatly to the advance of the truth in general, and, above all, to our understanding of Nature, for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life”.¹ Nevertheless, defining the soul proves to be “one of the most difficult things in the world”. The trouble starts with the fact that the soul cannot be said to be a thing with a given set of properties. Rather, it is an intangible essence that causes bodies to move: to grow, to self-nurture, and subsequently to decay, but also to sense, desire, and – for the ‘higher’ species – to think about the world they sense and desire.² Contrary to his philosophical predecessors, several of whom were eager to determine the principle of life as an abstract substance originating in the elements, be it air, fire, or water, Aristotle observes that the soul cannot be separate from the body, insofar as ‘life as such’ only manifests itself in ‘the living’. Although Aristotle thus cannot draw a singular conclusion about life’s cause, he presents a new discourse that defines the soul as “something relative

to a body”, more precisely a body that possesses the ability to sense.³ In a famous analogy, he likens the eye to the merely living being and sight to the soul: “Suppose that the eye were an animal – sight would have been its soul, for sight is the substance or essence of the eye [...], the eye being merely the matter of seeing”.⁴ In other words, the soul is what turns ‘matter’ into ‘form’, and with this transformation of the ‘merely’ material into something ‘essential’ follows appetite and desire – the inner conditions that allow for self-preservation and an outward orientation in the world.⁵ Without the soul shaping the material body, the living being would not relate or address itself to the world.

Aristotle began a ‘scientific’ discussion about something that images had seemingly been proving for centuries, namely that life’s appearance rests on an embodied exposure of inner motion. Long before technological inventions made the animated motion picture possible, images – understood in a wide sense – have acted like bodies in possession of souls. Inscriptions on statues and pottery from the last few millennia BC utter words in the first person, literally giving voice to the otherwise silent, static figures as if they moved from within. This is a gesture that continued to infuse figures and objects with interiority well into the early modern era, when not only paintings but also swords and decorative shrines addressed the viewer as an ‘I’ through inscriptions.⁶ In the same period, around the fifteenth century, when sight gradually came to dominate aesthetic and epistemological debates, images found a way to replace the voice with another – more visual – expression for the animated body that consequently came to govern strategies of painting (and later cinema) for the next centuries. This new expression of interiority was communicated through the depicted gaze. Jan van Eyck proves exemplary as a transitional figure in this era; he both gave voice to his works in his ‘first-person’ signature (*Johes de eyck me fecit*) and began to paint faces with eyes of such illusionistic rigour that they appeared embodied, as if they were ‘filled’ with spirit and intention.⁷ Presumably, this animated effect was not prevalent in Antiquity, since Aristotle continued his analogy on sight by comparing the mere eye to a painted one: “when seeing is removed the eye is no longer an eye, except in name – it is no more a real eye than the eye of a statue or of a painted



figure”. The more the depicted figure seems to possess sight, i.e. sensory faculties, the more convincing the effect of an animated, wilful being. Analogously to the new depiction of the embodied gaze, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painting human figures took on a still more liberal agency and a will to move around the depicted space with ease and control; this new illusion of liveliness was reflected upon by image theorists such as Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci.⁸ Centuries later, cinema made it possible to produce images of the body in motion. This art form presented new ways of conveying the animated body, including methods of editing the gaze – the ‘Kuleshov effect’, for instance – that manipulated the representation of inner (e)motions in unprecedented fashion.

Sculptures, paintings, and photographs are made of so-called dead matter, void of any interiority. Yet by so obviously manipulating matter into forms that take on life on their own, images demonstrate for us what it means to possess a soul. It means possessing desire.⁹ Images appear desirous. Despite their shallowness and lack of ‘real’ sensory capacity, they address us as if they had motives, prompting W.J.T. Mitchell – millennia after Aristotle – to use the question ‘What do Pictures Want?’ as the title of his book on the theory of images.¹⁰ The dialectical suspension of life in images determines our own dialectical relationship with them: it is the incapacitating distance that forbids us to engage with images actively that simultaneously draws us in.¹¹

The animated appeal channeled by only half-living images was for a long time the elephant in the art-historical room. Neglected in favour of iconography, social-historical relations, or aesthetic issues, it was not until the 1980s that art history began pointedly to address this at once overwhelming and unsettling ‘power of images’ – with the notable exception a century earlier of Aby Warburg, whose concepts of *Pathosformeln* and the *Nachleben* of images concerned animation and were consequently brought to light again.¹² In the following decades, the seductive allure of pictures’ paradoxical lifelikeness gradually received more attention, allowing a broad interest in the characteristics of the specifically ‘iconic’ to flourish (what we nowadays call ‘the iconic turn’). This new perspective emphasized the importance of looking, quite literally, in order to understand the

visual ways in which the image acts, instead of reading the image as a text or an ‘illustration’ of literary sources, as the practices of iconography and social history did.¹³ Accentuating the workings of any visual display – its ‘iconicity’ – means recognizing that images produce meaning on their own terms. Since images are characterized by their act of displaying something (and not just anything), this display is precisely what differentiates imagery from the otherwise undifferentiated material continuum of the world.¹⁴ As such, iconic appearance is a meaning-making act or gesture.

Images animate matter. Following Aristotle, transforming matter into form is how the soul transforms the eyes into sight. In other words, animation is not evident to the ‘naked eye’ but appears to the gaze that is able to invest material appearance with something more. Images are in this dialectic sense a mirror of the soul’s gaze – of the intentionality with which the world takes shape before our eyes – while also addressing us as if they shared this intentionality. In this sense, animation should be understood not only as a ‘simple’ simulation of movement, but also as a gesture that sets meaning in motion (since it is always already invested with meaning by the maker who envisioned it). Approaching the ‘iconicity’ of the images means recognizing this complex, half-visible – half-invisible – address.

For the image to simulate life, it evidently needs to manifest itself in a medium: the particular mode in which it finds its embodiment and thus its liveliness. Consequently, the question of just how images appear alive, address their viewer, and produce meaning can never be separated from the question of what they are made of. As already noted, oil painting, for instance, animates the gaze in different ways from cinema. Just as J.L. Austin’s linguistic theories on performative utterances broke new ground in the 1950s by claiming that the way something was said was crucial to the meaning of the words, the emergence of performance studies in the 1990s gave voice to another ‘turn’ in cultural history, engendering a similar argument about performance art and visual artefacts: that the way an image is shown is paramount to what sense we make of it. The performative ‘act’ of the utterance or display suspends the distinction between sign and being and replaces it with an intertwining of the two that highlights



the relationship between the artwork's meaning and its reality-producing effect.¹⁵ Locating the performative properties of the image is thus a methodological approach that proves useful in identifying inherent tensions between 'matter' and 'form', i.e. the 'dead' materiality of the image and its power to animate the viewer.

This book will present an array of different imagery materialized in different media, along with analyses of how the medium in question animates the image it embodies. We have chosen presentations of specific artworks or visual phenomena that all focus on the relation between the image and its medium and how the play between life and death inflects this relationship. Prioritizing visually-oriented interpretations and analyses over theoretical discussions has been a conscious choice; the variety of examples deepens the image-theoretical debates as they have unfolded over the past twenty to thirty years. These analyses make it clear that images not only always balance an ontological paradox – they also often demonstrate a self-referential awareness of their own tension between life and death, movement and stillness, beauty and decay. The chapters in this volume accordingly present us with imagery whose visual and material constitution reflects upon its animated status as image. Hence, they all demonstrate in their own way the *bildwissenschaftliche* belief that images *think* and *perform*, and that this visual complex discloses itself to the viewer of the images and their material constitution instead of reducing them to signs substituting textual sources.

As the chapters collectively cover human image-making over a (very) long historical period from the earliest abstract patterns of Lower Paleolithic stone engravings up to present-day manipulations of living organisms, bacteria, and live tissues in bio art, they remind us that every material embodiment of an image poses the question of the 'principle of life' in a different way. The question of how the medium 're-enacts' the living impels us to ask not only what an image is, but also what life is. Images, in other words, reveal that the principle of life is an issue for humans. The fact that the Greek word for 'living being' (*zoon*) is also the word for 'image' seems to disclose precisely this fundamental condition for the human sense of life: that 'the living' always shows itself *as a principle* by way of the image.

Chapter Summaries

The book opens with the lavishly illustrated essay “Fugitive Mirror: Art Neither Dead Nor Alive” by Alexander Nagel.¹⁶ Written in an essayistic style that matches its tailor-made layout, this piece investigates how human image-making manipulates nature and with that gesture suspends not only life but also death. In an associative meander through different genres and eras, Nagel begins with a walk in New York’s Central Park and moves on to Robert Smithson’s chemical experiments with mercury and sulphur, tying these together with emblematic stone engravings from early modern Galicia and late medieval crucifixes and Man of Sorrows imagery. As Nagel looks closely at the material compositions and self-referential effects of each work of art, the reader is invited to follow the author’s reflections equally closely, as the essay’s pictures re-enact the writer’s gaze with reproductions of details and inventive visual juxtapositions.

Relationships between representations of life and death and their material manifestations are addressed in several chapters. The second chapter, Frank Fehrenbach’s “*The Most Difficult of All: The Life and Death of Italian Tomb Sculpture, c. 1280–1490*” takes its point of departure from Leon Battista Alberti, who demands a clear distinction in art between representations of living beings as lively and dead persons as lifeless. Fehrenbach investigates how late medieval Italian tomb sculptures negotiate these distinctions by emphasizing the visual and structural equation between the dead body and the image. Fehrenbach shows that while the tomb sculptures often represent a deceased individual who awaits his or her resurrection as a means to evoke (after)life, the latent vitality of the effigy may also come about through other means, such as the figural and ornamental elements of their surroundings.

A broad perspective on figures and ornaments in art forms is presented in the third chapter, in which Jacob Wamberg provides an outline of pictorial paradigms in the evolutionary history of visual culture. Entitled “Animating the Crystalline: A Posthumanist Elaboration of Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1907)”, Wamberg’s essay draws upon the theories of German art historian



Wilhelm Worringer to argue for a spiral-shaped model of pictorial paradigms that oscillate back and forth between, on the one hand, *abstraction* as the original impetus for the creation of art and, on the other, *empathy* as a life-celebrating and naturalist idiom. While the empathic paradigms distinguish between the living centre and less living periphery, the paradigms of abstraction even out the differences between the living and the dead. Bringing in complexity theory, biosemiotics, and new materialism as a means to examine the modes of *entropy* and *negentropy* in the interdisciplinary field of cultural and natural evolution, Wamberg develops a posthumanist perspective on Worringer.

A number of the chapters here revolve around the self-referential image, in which the materials and medium of the image call attention to the effect of liveliness it produces. The authors investigate how figures in pictures transgress the limitations of the frame as a meta-pictorial gesture. In the fourth chapter, entitled “Ghosts in the Gallery: Animated Images from Rembrandt to Bendz”, Mikkel Bogh explores the dilemma of art museums’ dual purpose of exhibiting and preserving artworks. Bogh analyzes how, as a response to this paradox, a selection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings engage in various methods that challenge the potentially static environment of the picture gallery. With the rise of this new genre, Bogh argues, artists began addressing the pictures’ own artificial environment at a remove from the living world. The affective devices of these pictures engage viewers to contribute new life to the mausoleum-like gallery and museum.

Other types of meta-pictorial acts are analyzed by Maria Fabricius Hansen in the following chapter, entitled “Living Sculptures: Natural Art and Artificial Nature in Sixteenth-Century Ornamental Frescoes”. Hansen outlines two painterly strategies of sculptural representations in ornamental frescoes that oscillate between the dead and the living: One is the animated sculpture, which designates figures depicted as sculpture that appear to have been made of marble or metal but look as if they move and act. The other is statuesque naturalism, which places figures on plinths or in niches as if they were sculptures, but depicts them as if they were live human beings with

skin, hair, and clothes through the use of polychromy. These two forms of liveliness are attained through a playful crossing of the borders of representational conventions.

The close connection between life, death, and material properties is further investigated by Katerina Harris in the chapter entitled “Two Fifteenth-Century Italian Death Masks Made of Earth and Absences (to Make Hearts Grow Fonder)”. Through careful material and iconographical study, Harris argues that the purpose of the two death masks was not to bring the individuals to life, but rather to materialize their absence. The two masks are imprints of actual dead faces and were made to look naturalistically lifeless. Harris points out how this “true-to-death” portrayal may have engendered mixed emotions in the contemporary viewer, ranging from grief over the loss of loved ones, and over fear of inevitable death, to hope for resurrection of the soul.

A focus on the transitory and ephemeral oscillation of Renaissance images between life and death is addressed in the following chapter. Chris Askholt Hammeken, in his text “The Image as Nymph: On Affect, Animation, and Alchemical Affinities”, discusses the ontology of the image through the figure of the nymph. The nymph is a hybrid form, signifying a metamorphic stage between birth and death in which form is animated and awakened, then disappears. In Renaissance paintings, nymphs were particularly animated beings, usually depicted in airy motion with garments and locks of hair flying in all directions, freed from gravity. Hammeken engages classical rhetoric as well as nineteenth-century philosophy concerning empathy and a number of contemporary visual theories to argue for the compatibility of the nymph and the image; the image, like the nymph, conjures liveliness, activates the beholder’s imagination, and awakens desire.

Imagination and desire also appear as a central theme in the next chapter, where the relationship between sleep and death plays an intricate part in a still-life painting. In the chapter “A Sleeping Girl on a Silver Tray: Animate Fantasies of Consumption in a Nineteenth-Century Still Life”, Rosanna Tindbæk focuses on a painting by the now forgotten children’s painter, Timoléon Lobrichon, which shows one of his more surprising compositions: a little girl asleep on a



platter surrounded by fruits and confectionery. Scrutinizing the painting's abundance of visual puns and metaphors, Tindbæk elaborates on the psychological connection between the power of animation and the cannibalistic drive of the human libido.

In several chapters the uncanny or exotic aspects of animation are explored in connection with artificial beings such as monsters, automata, or humanoid robots. Jérémie Koering writes about the cinematic fantasies of the enchained image in the chapter called “‘Catch that Monster!’: Immobilization of the Simulacrum in Cinema”. He investigates the relationship between movement and immobility in three ‘monster movies’ from the 1920s and 1930s: *The Golem*, *Frankenstein*, and *Metropolis*. These films share a ‘politics of animation’ in the sense that the animated monster – created from dead matter – returns to inertia as soon as its creator loses control over it, and it takes on a life of its own. Koering argues that the monsters’ trajectory from dead matter to life and then back to dead matter again works as a metaphor for the relationship between film and photography as media. The chapter demonstrates how these early films all use still images to convey the enchainment of the monster, thus at the same time pointing to the photographic origin of the film medium.

The medium for representations of artificial beings is also addressed in the chapter entitled “Invisible Mechanics: Life in Android and Robot Representations”, in which Gunhild Borggreen analyzes the relationship between artificial android robots and mechanical automata and their forms of representation in photography and printed media in the visual cultures of eighteenth-century Europe and Japan. The printed representations of automata display a desire for the technological Other, which manifests itself in the relationship between the anatomy of the human body and the mechanical copy, as well as the dynamics between the artificial human being, and the cultural practices it is constructed to perform, and the exotic framing of the technological and cultural Other.

Franziska Bork Petersen writes about fashion in following chapter, “Fashion Bodies: Swinging Between the Animate and the Inanimate”. Using the concept of intra-action, Bork Petersen proposes that garments and models can be seen as sites for the ‘entanglement of agen-

cies' in two of fashion designer Alexander McQueen's shows. In a self-aware gesture that negotiates the relationship between the lifelike and the artificial, the human model's body becomes still, lifeless, and mechanical, while the clothes become alive and animated through movement produced by mechanical artifice. Parts of the fashion garments become a kind of agentive partner as they performatively display the ambivalence of qualities usually associated with the human body.

In the last, entitled "A Contemporary Paragone: Staging Aliveness and Moist Media", Jens Hauser introduces the notion of 'moist media', which combines machinic virtuality and germinating and/or metabolizing matter. According to Hauser, the field of bio art lacks the appropriate terminology to root itself in the materiality of the artworks, and his text is a proposal for such new terminology. Hauser accordingly addresses what he views as our time's re-enactment of the Renaissance *paragone*, namely what he calls 'the animation of the technological' (supported by *carbophobic*s, who oppose carbon-based materials) versus 'the technologization of the animated' (supported by *carbophil*es, who favour carbon-based materials). Hauser formulates three functional instances of biomediality – milieu, means, and measure – which situate bio art in the space between technology and biology, and display the mechanization of both life and death through the aestheticization of living material.

By presenting chapters that take the reader through different epochs and countries, encountering a wide variety of artworks and visual media, this anthology openly wishes to address the perpetual relevance of the question of animation. And by having each author present the most current research on his or her individual material, it also offers the latest contributions to the topical debates about the lifelike effect of images. Consequently, this book's broad scope and thematic variety invites readers to make their own connections between the texts, associate across time and space, and discover lost liaisons of materiality and meaning. In other words: it invites you to animate its content.



Notes

1. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book I, part I.
2. Ibid. Book II, part I.
3. It is worth noting that Aristotle's perspective on the soul's, i.e. the principle of life's, relation to the body is echoed in the fact that the word 'life' shares Proto-Germanic roots with the German word for body, 'Leib'. 'Life' and 'body' have long been connected through language.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. Book II, Parts II–III.
6. As Horst Bredekamp has shown in his book on the 'image act', *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013), particularly pp. 59–100.
7. Hans Belting pointedly addresses the Northern painters' invention of the gaze in the fifteenth century in *Spiegel der Welt* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2010), pp. 75–94. See also his article "The Gaze in the Image" in Bernd Huppau and Christoph Wulf (eds.), *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image between the Visible and the Invisible* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 93–115.
8. On the embodied gaze see Gottfried Boehm, "Der lebendige Blick. Gesicht – Bildnis – Identität" in Gottfried Boehm, Orlando Budelacci, Maria Giuseppina Di Monte, and Michael Renner (eds.), *Gesicht und Identität – Face and Identity* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2014), pp. 15–32.
9. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book III, part X. For Aristotle these are the two most basic conditions; the concept of desire especially is the essence that structures – and enlivens – the sensorial, imaginative, and cognitive measures of our being.
10. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 1–14.
12. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989). See also Louis Marin, *Des pouvoirs de l'image* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993).
13. For a critique of the iconographical method, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004).
14. This is what Gottfried Boehm called 'iconic difference' (*iconische Differenz*). See, for instance, Gottfried Boehm, "Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder" in Christa Maar and Hubert Burda (eds.), *Iconic Turn: Die neue Macht der Bilder* (Köln: DuMont Verlag, 2004), pp. 28–43.
15. Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art: The Meaning of Art's Performativity* (Zürich: JPR Ringier & Dijon, Les Presses de Réel, 2010).
16. This article's layout is designed by Amelia Saul to bring to paper Alexander Nagel's expanded keynote lecture presented as part of the conference 'Dead or Alive! Tracing the Animation of Matter in Art and Visual Culture' (University of Copenhagen, November 2016).

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