

Mateusz Kapustka
Liturgies of the Void
 Seeing Objects as Images*

Talking about objects in art history implies not only exploring the issue of their historical mobility, changes of context, or media-related flexibility of interpretation. Above all, strictly physical features of rudimentary dimensions that escape our contemporary predominantly visual thinking such as mass, gravity, density, substance, three-dimensionality, and subsequently, vertical or horizontal position, make the objects appear as objects and differ from all kinds of media. It is eventually these distinctions in physicality that allow us to distinguish between object and picture, between »being-thrown-into-« and »speaking-to-the-world.« In these terms, the present article will touch upon what we tend to forget: that the very specific zone of transition between object and picture is determined intuitively: by the elementary way the object's simple physical alteration plays with the human tendency to comprehend the visible through the experience of the previously seen, in other words, by the confrontation of the established mental image archive with the phenomenological moment of astonishment.¹ I will pursue this issue and interrogate the transformations and shifts of meaning in the domain of liturgical and semi-liturgical objects, which are designed to function within the possibly strongest canon of visuality that has ever been invented. Their unexpected presentation beyond original context and strongly functional attribution turns them into »activated« objects, the meaning and agency of which results from a tension between image and object. At the same time, the term »liturgy« can be critically investigated and conceivably applied to our contemporary practices of making and showing objecthood.

The so-called St. Bernward paten from ca. 1180 to 1190 (today in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio), associated with the saint bishop of Hildesheim who died in 1022, will serve as the initial example in this investigation (fig. 1). As a dish adorned with an image of Christ Pantokrator, originally used horizontally in the liturgical practice mostly for covering the chalice and putting the consecrated bread on its decorated surface, it was arranged vertically already in the second half of the 14th century.² In this way, it was transformed from an illustrative object of liturgical utility into a vertical »ostensorium« and consequently into a detached though auratized exhibit – into an »image of a paten.« This method of display conveyed the very individuality of its historical contact-related objecthood.³ Within this visual metamorphosis, the simple effect of the beholder's astonishment is of great relevance, since the paten has actually never been put into liturgical action vertically as an independently speaking image towards the viewer, but, instead, it delivered a symbolically fixed and illustrated place of horizontal deposition, an intimate place of reception.⁴ In the new intentional presentation of the Bernward paten, it is, beyond ritualistic function, the object's nature as a tangible artifact that becomes an independent focus of the gaze. Accordingly, this epistemic space in-between – between object and the same »object as an image of itself« – is not a consequence of the usual setting of relics, which are, by the way, also included here (i.a. the relics of the Cross) in order to testify to its authenticity. This new comparative image of reminiscence rather originates in reflexive completion and dynamic reevaluation of what had been previously seen and is now just being derivatively exhibited in a surprising way. Not without relevance in this case is also the strategy of phenomenological personalization of the object: the paten appears no more as a common place of action rooted

in the form of the Eucharistic table – a definitely horizontal setting originally designed for the collective participation in the holy meal⁵ – but, as it is frontally fixed as its own depiction, it assumes the role of an independent speaking object that separately addresses every individual beholder with its »facial« surface. This unexpected change forces us to an objectifying look upon the object of already passed history. The »speaking« paten presents itself almost as if it were an illustration in the book on the history of liturgy: in its artificial, but optimal exposition, it delivers the whole information of itself as an object of extensive visual investigation and not as a practical tool to handle.⁶

Another interesting example of such liturgical or semi-liturgical derivation is delivered by a certain object, the enormous career of which results exactly from its transitory position. The veil of Veronica, a textile object containing traces of Christ's bodily fluids that already at the beginning of the 13th century turned into an »imago,«⁷ preserves its appealing agency due to the usual vertical frontality of its exposition. The well-known etching of 1516 by Albrecht Dürer, however, is an exceptional, if not exclusive, example, of depicting the Holy Veil horizontally and upside down, independently of and beyond the reach of the beholder, thus making God's



Fig. 1 Monstrance with the »Paten of Saint Bernward«, paten c. 1180–1190, monstrance c. 1350–1400. The Cleveland Museum of Art



Fig. 2 Francesco Mochi, *Veronica holding the Holy Veil*, 1640. Vatican, St. Peter's Basilica

appearance strongly dependent of seeing him exclusively »*facie ad faciem*.«⁸ This sophisticated play with the reverse »*acheiropoieton*« is, on the one hand, an obvious attempt by the Renaissance artist to create his own personalized »relic« as a proof of pictorial invention. The question is, however, to what extent this strange construction that escapes our desiring look corresponded to Dürer's melancholic self-reflection upon the troubles with artistic vision uncomfortably situated between reason and empirical practice. In other words: does the confusing upside-down-image of the »*sancta facies*« avoid eye contact with the beholder and turn instead into an operative object exactly because of the essential inaccessibility of what it actually implies?⁹

If we try to further explain this argumentative physicality of the Holy Veil as an object in terms of such inefficiency, or maybe rather through the category of loss, we can cite its most emotional staging ever: in the crossing pillar of the Vatican St. Peter's Dome, in which the very original of the Veronica's cloth is said to be still preserved. In the upper part of the pillar, there is an architectonic »*aedicula*« adorned with a depiction of the cloth held by an angel and the small treasury chamber behind it arranged by Bernini.¹⁰ In the lower part, the monumental marble figure of Veronica, sculpted by Francesco Mochi in 1640, addresses the beholder crying and almost running out of the niche with a gesture of despair, holding the cloth, which is simultaneously stretched and folded so hard that it is hardly recognizable as the desired relic with the likeness on the fabric's surface (fig. 2).¹¹ In this strongly unusual presentation, the very materiality of the cloth with the imprint of Christ's face is put to the extreme at the cost of the imaginary value of the trace. But, we can ask whether this affectively overloaded staging does not result from the

experience of the void. As the fate of the original cloth of Veronica actually remains unknown since the »*sacco di Roma*« of 1527,¹² it became – despite several new »originals« that appeared immediately after – a double synonym of loss: from its nature as an insufficient trace of the absent body and from its history as a missing object. We can therefore assume that Mochi's overwhelming staging of the presumably present, but in any case invisible cloth in its very objecthood beyond the standard level of its recognition was motivated to some extent by a need of compensation of a loss directly on the place designed for preservation of this medialized object, under the balcony that was actually never to be used for the display of the original Veronica, a kind of visual liturgy against oblivion. The more the truth about a loss is commonly known, the more its blank space is filled with an extensive rhetoric of consolation and distracting compensative strategies. The more an artifact becomes a cultural phantom, the more its desirable presence can be communicated through mediation of diverse »speaking« images that intentionally stress its objecthood. Such a procedure includes the veiling technique of unexpected visual shifts that attract our attention at the costs of the matter we are longing for and let us think about the media instead of the depicted. So, in these terms, an object can become an object thanks to its dubious existence within a very special zone in-between: between being and showing itself or being substituted by an appealing projection of its materiality.

Bearing these points in mind, the question emerges in how far these procedures result from the nature of liturgy itself. Basically, liturgy can be seen as a domain of permanent and cyclical strategy of reminiscence that works with semantically conditioned images of substitution for what is gone and will be experienced first at the end of days: the body of Christ. Its all-embracing presence manifests itself in the liturgical practice despite its invisibility, as Christ is said to be present everywhere, but only personally: »*ubique personaliter*.« The liturgical climax of the object: the exposition of the consecrated host, is moreover, based on the comprehension of the present, but invisible, as the small tiny white wafer being the substantial body of Christ usually disappears from sight within its bewildering imaginative staging and turns into a »*punctum*.«¹³ So, if we speak about »liturgy« in terms of analogy, it is not only about the Byzantine stiffness of the canon. It is also about the permanence of compensation, about the loss paradoxically signaled in a prospective way through visual strategies of embodiment, and also about levelling the media-related borders between object and picture as put against the primary goal of bringing the lost subject to life.

If we try to raise this issue of veiling the loss of the object in the context of contemporary flood of images and digital projections, it will also provoke questions on how artifacts become museum objects and how they are being made adequate and measurable due to their new pictorial values for exhibitions. The institution of the museum, an Enlightenment project of aesthetic detachment and subsequent sublime confrontation, is inevitably charged with absence and thus often accused of being a cemetery, a mausoleum, or even a slaughterhouse.¹⁴ The museum is at the same time a model playground of presence-restoring techniques, an autopoietic system of ascribed meanings.¹⁵ Therefore, I will discuss one of the most recent and, according to me, one of the most prominent examples of what I would call »exhibition liturgy.« Visitors of the two-stage exhibition of Italian Renaissance portraits, proudly presenting the most representative, unquestionably magnificent artworks: »*Gesichter der Renaissance*« at the Bode Museum in Berlin in 2011 and »*The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini*« at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2012,¹⁶ were witnesses of how the same objects and images can be completely differently valued as exhibition items. It may be a matter of taste, if it comes to judging

the extremely dark exposition rooms in Berlin filled with spotlights thrown on the artworks in this highly subsidized venue. But a closer look at what techniques of mediation were used in this show helps to understand the ongoing question of how to make an image an attractive dialogue partner in the museum's space. Food for thought was delivered in this context i.a. by the way the famous death mask of Lorenzo de' Medici was exhibited: on a diagonally placed support as if it were lying and simultaneously raising up towards the beholder – aiming at »facie ad faciem« (fig. 3a).¹⁷ Thus, the framed object was re-connected with its technical genesis as an imprint of the body with means of a simulated »historical touch.« The hermeneutical value of history has been, though, so far outshined by an enlivening play with the object that had been actually originally intended to function as a picture to be hung. When arranged vertically, this artifact speaks in its frontality as a »tableau« or »quadro« through its compositional balance and additional inscriptions that even say of the mask: »this body« (»quessto chorpo«)¹⁸ and thus instantly put the inserted item in relation, into an internal pictorial discourse. Dead but frontal: a surprisingly natural picture-like arrangement for a death mask, since it already delivers an image of an image, i.e. of the social body of the deceased. The artificial change of position in Berlin made it, instead, speak in a rather emotional way to the modern museum's visitor as it raised feelings of exotic animism.¹⁹ If one also takes into account the extent to which digital media were involved in this show, there appear further questions. The majority of the many visitors were looking at the magnificent paintings, sculptures and medals through lenses of their cameras and cell phones, or took the museum's slightly presumptuous invitation to concentrate on mobile side stories filling the readily available on-loan iPhones.²⁰ This multisensory scenario of mediation which included a permanent change of position and mobility as means of attraction is interesting in our context of »liturgical« compensations of a loss. One cannot get rid of the feeling that a painted or sculpted picture as it is, in this case a profane, secular portrait, even if a beloved masterpiece that has already become an icon of pop-culture, can nowadays amaze only if equipped with secular narration that makes it alive as a subject.²¹ Through changes of physical perspective, a field of its irresistible agency as a relational object is created, an irritating field of simulated »re-naissance.« Within this »liturgy,« pictures turn into agents only when reified. If this is a result of the fear of the vision of old masters thrown into a derivate white cube, it ends, in turn, in a temple of transcendence filled with »simulacra.«²² In this situation, the picture itself is actually made impotent, unable to speak, and it is as if our belief in its representational values were gone. What we experience is consequently a kind of unspoken feeling of loss of an ontological kind, despite the fact that our dreams of consumption of an artwork can be eventually fulfilled due to the amazing digital scenario and our never ending desire of possessing objects seems to be ultimately saturated. We are, though, afraid of losing our belief in representation, since its inexistence signifies our mortality and this is how our animistic digital overrun becomes a tool of existential control. As Vilém Flusser, a media theoretician who still remains neglected by art history, points out, the etymology of the digital can be found in Greek »kybernein,« which means steering, control and governance.²³ Therefore, the digital also provokes us to think about the compensating agency of digital media allowing us to conduct a virtual anatomical section of the object as an action of taming our own existential fears.²⁴

Compared to this scenario, the New Yorker venue of the same Renaissance portrait exhibition, although less »dressed« and more traditional in its basic layout, but equally visited, stressed in a subtle way the analogous value of being primarily attracted by the depicted likenesses as depictions, as made, representing images. The framed

mask of Lorenzo was not only hung vertically on the wall (fig. 3b), but the numerous sculpted portraits were also dynamically arranged (i.e. framed, to speak in museum terms) in a way that invited beholders to a kind of dialog with images, an isocephalic experience of repeatable self-mimesis in a shared space while going around and passing between them, as if they had been prepared for personal encounters (fig. 4).²⁵



Fig. 3a, b Orsino Benintendi (?), Death mask of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1492, in Berlin, Bode Museum, 2011/2012 (a), and in New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012 (b)



Fig. 4 The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, exhibition room of »The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini«, 2012

Displaying objects and pictures in an unexpected way so as to evoke rudimentary reactions of astonishment, amazement, or attraction, is, therefore, on the one hand, an advanced play with the intuitive, non-conceptual awareness of the object still before the instance of judgment. However, although based on intuitive perception and apprehension, such phenomena cannot be systematically

defined as building knowledge, since they are every time based on the power of difference confronted with an already existing mental archive and visual memory. Therefore, although these phenomena build anthropological constants, they should rather help to understand our deficiency in comprehending things and to praise the very individuality of what we see.

Notes

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- 1 Cf. most of the classical passages on positioning space in front of objects and on our experience of vertical inversions by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part II, Ch. II, as well as considerations on the anthropocentric perspective of being »subjected« to things through permanent encounters determined by our upright position by Vilém Flusser: *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt. Menschwerdung* (= Vilém Flusser, *Schriften*. Ed. by Stefan Bollmann/Edith Flusser, 3). Bensheim/Düsseldorf 1994, pp. 261–275. – See also neuroscientific theories of hemispheric specialization of the brain between recognition of routine and experience of novelty.
- 2 With the frontal inscription on its rim: »Est corpus in se panis qui frangitur in me vivit in eternum qui bene sinit eum,« the paten »speaks« as a subject and defines itself as the »place for the bread.« See: *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. Exhb.cat. The Cleveland Museum of Art/The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore/The British Museum, London. Ed. by Martina Bagnoli/Holger A. Klein/C. Griffith Mann/James Robinson. New Haven/London 2010, pp. 87, 143 (here the earlier bibliography). – Cf. on objects presenting themselves as subjects with means of inscriptions: Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*. Berlin 2010, pp. 70–89.
- 3 In this way, the paten recalls the linear time of history as it becomes a relic of Bernward of Hildesheim while still being related to the cyclical time of the Gospels re-enacted during every altar sacrifice.
- 4 Some exceptions from the 15th century are known in the Ambrosian rite.
- 5 See esp. the early mediaeval type of rounded mensa with small semi-circular niches on their edges: Joseph Braun: *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*. Munich 1924, vol. 1, pp. 159, 246–249. – Cf. Alphons A. Barb: *Krippe, Tisch und Grab: Ein Versuch zur Formsymbolik von Altar und Patene*. In: *Mullus. Festschrift Theodor Klauser* (= *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 1*). Ed. by Alfred Stüiber/Alfred Hermann. Münster 1964, pp. 17–27.
- 6 See e.g. illustrations in classical books by Braun 1924 (note 5).
- 7 Cf. Christiane Kruse: *Vera Icon – oder die Leerstellen des Bildes*. In: *Quel Corps? Eine Frage der Repräsentation*. Ed. by Hans Belting/Dietmar Kamper/Martin Schulz. Munich 2002, pp. 105–129. – The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996. Ed. by Herbert L. Kessler/Gerhard Wolf. Bologna 1998.
- 8 Albrecht Dürer: *Das druckgraphische Werk*. Ed. by Rainer Schoch/Matthias Mende/Anna Scherbaum. Munich 2001, vol. 1: *Kupferstiche, Eisenradierungen und Kaltnadelblätter*, pp. 204–205, cat. 82.
- 9 Further investigations on Dürer's horizontal Vera Icon: Mateusz Kapustka: *Pictorial Gravities: Objecthood, Authority and Artistic Invention in Albrecht Dürer's Veronicas*. In: *Matters of Weight: Force, Gravity and Aesthetics in the Early Modern Period*. Ed. by David Young Kim. Emsdetten/Berlin 2013, pp. 89–107. – Cf. also Herbert L. Kessler: *Face and firmament: Dürer's An Angel with the Sudarium and the limit of vision*. In: *L'immagine di Cristo: dall'Acheropita alla mano d'artista, dal tardo medioevo all'età barocca*. Ed. by Christoph Luitpold/Gerhard Wolf. Città del Vaticano 2006, pp. 143–165.
- 10 Cf. Irving Lavin: *Bernini and the Crossing of St. Peter's*. New York 1968, pp. 19–22, 24–27, 32.
- 11 Estelle Lingo: *Mochi's Edge*. In: *Oxford Art Journal*, 32, 2009, pp. 1–16. – Estelle Lingo: *Francesco Mochi's Balancing Act and the Prehistory of Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain*. In: *Matters of Weight 2013* (note 9), pp. 129–150.
- 12 Hans Belting: *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago 1997, p. 217.
- 13 Due to this simultaneous presence and invisibility, Ginzburg locates the origins of representation in the ambiguous status of the host: Carlo Ginzburg: *Representation: The Word, the Idea, the Thing*. In: Carlo Ginzburg: *Wooden Eyes. Nine Reflections on Distance*. New York 2001, pp. 63–78.

- 14 Cf. David Carrier: *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries*. Durham/London 2006, ch. 2–5. – Peter Schwenger: *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis 2006, pp. 132–139.
- 15 Michael Fehr: *Understanding museums: Das Museum als autopoietisches System*. In: *Platons Höhle: Das Museum und die elektronischen Medien*. Ed. by Michael Fehr/Clemens Krümmel/Markus Müller. Cologne 1995, pp. 11–20.
- 16 *Gesichter der Renaissance: Meisterwerke italienischer Portrait-Kunst*. Exhb. cat. Bode-Museum, Berlin/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Ed. by Keith Christiansen/Stefan Weppelmann. Munich 2011. – *The Renaissance portrait: from Donatello to Bellini*. Exhb.cat. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Ed. by Keith Christiansen/Stefan Weppelmann. New Haven 2011.
- 17 *Gesichter der Renaissance 2011* (note 16), pp. 182–184 (there the earlier bibliography).
- 18 »MORTE CRVDELE CHE 'N QVESSTO CHORPO VENNE / CHE DOPO MORTE EL MONDO ANDÒ SOZOPRA / MENTRE CHEI VISE TVTO IN PACE 'L TENNE.«
- 19 The practices of enlivening the dead face as a speaking image through its frontal exposition are, of course, rooted (at least) in the Middle Ages. As a good example of such pictorial strategy of astonishing hybridity one could quote the magnificent reliquary of 1450 to 1475 from St. Katharinenthal, in which the head of John the Baptist on a dish has been installed diagonally on a decorative base, which irresistibly resembles that of liturgical chalice, cf. Krone und Schleier: *Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern*. Exhb.cat. Ruhrlandmuseum, Essen/Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn. Ed. by Jutta Frings/Jan Gerchow. Munich 2005, pp. 418–419.
- 20 From numerous attempts to outline the new digital mission of museums, which however instantly become out-of-date, cf. Anja Wohlfromm: *Museum als Medium – neue Medien in Museen: Überlegungen zu Strategien kultureller Repräsentation und ihre Beeinflussung durch digitale Medien*. Cologne 2002. – Bernard Deloche: *Le musée virtuel: vers une éthique des nouvelles images*. Paris 2001. – *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*. Ed. by Loïc Tallon/Kevin Walker. Lanham/New York/Toronto/Plymouth 2008.
- 21 Cf. in this respect the winding roads of the early modern »curiositas« as a determining factor of collecting and re-constructing the world through the narrativization of things: Lorraine Daston: *Neugierde als Empfindung und Epistemologie in der frühmodernen Wissenschaft*. In: *Macrocosmos in microcosmos – Die Welt in der Stube. Zur Geschichte des Sammelns 1450 bis 1800*. Ed. by Andreas Grote. Opladen 1994, pp. 35–59. – Lorraine Daston: *Curiosity and the study of nature in early modern Europe*. In: *Word and Image*, 11, 1995, n. 4, pp. 391–404.
- 22 See Norbert Bolz: *Inszenierte Welt*. In: *Platons Höhle: Das Museum und die elektronischen Medien*. Ed. by Michael Fehr/Clemens Krümmel/Markus Müller. Cologne 1995, pp. 159–166, esp. 164.
- 23 Vilém Flusser: *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (= Edition Flusser. Ed. by Andreas Müller-Pohle). Göttingen 1996, pp. 135–143.
- 24 Cf. Bazon Brock: *Von Höhlenschatten zu neuronalen Höhlenzeichen*. In: *Platons Höhle: Das Museum und die elektronischen Medien*. Ed. by Michael Fehr/Clemens Krümmel/Markus Müller. Cologne 1995, pp. 21–24.
- 25 Gilles Deleuze on productive encounters: »This is it, the double capture, [...] not even something which would be in the one, or something which would be in the other, even if it had to be exchanged, be mingled, but something which is between the two, outside the two, and which flows in another direction.« Gilles Deleuze: *In-Between-Space. Dialogues*, London, 1987. In: *Still, the Museum/Steal! The Museum!* Ed. by Annette W. Balkema/Henk Slager. Rotterdam 1997, pp. 59–62, esp. 62.

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