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ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟ ΤΟΥ ΤΟΜΕΑ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ  
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# Before *mimesis*

## Reflections on the early Greek technologies of looking

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### ABSTRACT

*Material agency has been puzzling archaeologists for almost three decades now. The idea that artifacts, a priori perceived as passive and inert ‘creations’ subject to human volition, have the capacity to interact with their makers, users, or viewers may be seen as a challenge to archaeologists and their inherently humanist discipline. Classical archaeology, and the study of Greek and Roman art in particular, seem to have been avoiding the issue, choosing instead to privilege artistic agency or – in more recent years – a cultural-historical discourse primarily informed through linguistics and sociology. This paper explores the concepts of materiality, agency, and personhood as cultural mediators in order to investigate the ways Greeks interacted with the images they created. Through a number of case studies borrowed from the wider repertoire of early Greek ‘art’ it is argued that artifacts are invariably conceived as animate entities, at least in early Greece; moreover, that technologies of representation in early Greek art (what art historians understand as ‘styles’) are devised and promoted as cultural agents within Greek society.*

### ARTIFACTS TO THINGS

Classical scholars tend to describe ancient Greece as a realm of images,<sup>1</sup> this metaphor however seems to be missing one of Greek culture’s most fundamental qualities: the way Greeks understood *things*, and the extent to which they allowed their lives to be entangled with them. As classical archaeologists, or even as mere Graecophiles, we are of course surrounded by things – albeit disguised as archaeological artifacts, idolized as museum exhibits, glorified as historical treasures, coveted as valuable possessions, studied as exquisite works of a now lost art.<sup>2</sup> We interact with them in quasi-linguistic terms; assuming, somewhat arbitrarily, that ancient artifacts are *phonemes* communicating to us the particulars of the culture that created them.<sup>3</sup> Whereas, in fact, we have been studying Greek art through a strictly empiricist canon, whereby things – especially things bearing or acting as images – convey ideas, that is words, in a straightforwardly, and quite conveniently monosemantic way.

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1 Chiefly, among many others, Vernant 1984, emphasizing the need for an iconology of Greek vase painting, and investigating latent structures of meaning in the visual arts of (mostly) Archaic Greece.

2 See, e.g., Schnapp 1993; Shanks 1996, 22–52; Thomas 2004, 1–34; Dyson 2006, 133–71.

3 See, e.g., Mertens 2010; Stansbury-O’Donnell 2011.

How does one treat images as things? In recent years, archaeologists have tried to incorporate a more anthropological reasoning into their discipline, thus upsetting its traditionally anthropocentric bias. (Ironically, classical archaeology's inherent anthropocentrism has been often expressed through the intense de-humanization of the material record, as for example with its predisposition for mind-numbing typologies and tedious cataloguing.<sup>4</sup>) This new turn has indeed encouraged a decidedly materialist reading of material culture, one significantly departing from the humanist tradition. Greek archaeology, in particular, including its prehistoric components such as the 'Mycenaean', the 'Minoan' and the 'Cycladic', has spent the last two hundred years or so striving to demonstrate how artistic intelligence created singular meanings and how these affected modern ideas of humanity – hence the emergence of 'classical' art and our infatuation with it. This allowed for multiple readings of the past – idealist to materialist – though not for the possibility that classical culture was nothing like what modernity had ever made of it. Treating artifacts – that is objects imbued with meanings supposedly created by the humans that made them – as things, with the capacity to transform human experience by determining our behavior and identity through the properties inherent in them from their own make, reverses the hitherto accepted cultural flow from maker to viewer; this enables the epistemological shift from innate, stable, and 'dead' objects available to our ostensibly scientific scrutiny to enmeshed, engaged, and entangled things which create 'continual flows of matter, energy and information'.<sup>5</sup> Whenever this line of reasoning has been used in the study of Greek art (mostly of the early periods)<sup>6</sup> it has produced encouraging results. The inherent asymmetries within classical archaeology's disciplinary apparatus seemed thus to be rectified somewhat, to the frustration of some of its most conventional exponents.<sup>7</sup> Adopting an 'impartial', and categorically non-humanist approach to scientific methodology, symmetrical archaeology was expected to encourage cross-disciplinarity while at the same time questioning the coherence of the conventional archaeological paradigm.<sup>8</sup> Although this 'turn' was not welcomed by all (and one may even question the extent to which it has been achieved in the first place),<sup>9</sup> it has become clear that material agencies operated in ancient – and indeed any premodern – societies in ways often imperceptible by modern epistemic discourse.

How did pre-modern images look like? A quick comparison of two literary texts may serve as an introduction to our discussion. Take, first, the parodic chant from Euripides' *Ion*, (c. 419–418 BC), where the chorus of Athenian maidens escorting the queen of Athens to the sanctuary of Delphi takes hold of the captivating spectacle (vv 184–215).<sup>10</sup> A striking variety of verbs and verbal units signifying seeing and looking are deployed in order to suggest the divine epiphanies surrounding the mesmerized travelers:

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4 Cf. Shanks 1996, 25–6; on the question whether archaeological interpretation may be ultimately disassociated from human (that is "scholarly") inference, see Garcia-Rovira 2015.

5 Hodder 2012, 7; cf. Brown 2001; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Knappett 2011, 149–90; Hodder 2018.

6 See Whitley 2013; 2015.

7 One only needs to cite here the bitter, and on-going debate on the importance of the individual (by which traditional archaeologists mostly refer to the *artist*) as opposed to other factors – human or non-human, historical, social, cultural – affecting the creation, diffusion and reception of 'art' in antiquity. See, briefly, Bruneau 1975; Elsner 1990; Beard 1991; Whitley 1997; and so on, among the 'challengers' of the established views on classical art and contemporary approaches to it, as opposed to Morris 1993; Oakley 1998; 2009; and so on, arguing for the defense of the traditional methodology.

8 Shanks 2007 (after Bloor 1976).

9 Cf. Hodder and Lucas 2017.

10 On this passage, see chiefly Müller 1975; and cf. Zeitlin 1993, 147–54. For a recent survey of the discussion, see Gunther 2018, 179–82.

[...] *Look!* come see, the son of Zeus is killing the Lernean Hydra with a golden sickle; my dear, look at it!  
 I see it. And another near him, who is raising a fiery torch [...]  
*I am glancing around* everywhere. See the battle of the giants, on the stone walls.  
*I am looking at it*, my friends.  
 Do you *see* the one brandishing her gorgon shield against Enceladus?  
 I *see* Pallas, my own goddess. [...]  
 (transl. Robert Potter; emphases added)

What this text does is to describe a complete strategy of the gaze, at least in the way understood by Athenian audiences in the 5th c. BC. The technologies of looking revealed in this passage may surprise the modern reader or spectator: some of us may have been expecting a more historically sound description of what is now lost – temple pediments and friezes, free-standing statues or stelae, monumental wall-paintings and mosaics. Our art-historians may have wished for a more accomplished account of the details we sadly miss: who made those images, and how were they precisely executed? On the contrary, the text lacks any interest in connoisseurship: no specialist terminology, description or analysis is present; we hear of no ‘statues’, ‘reliefs’, ‘pediments’, ‘metopes’, and the like. We are told nothing about the nature of the sights these women behold: are they free-standing statues, architectural sculptures, tapestries, wall-paintings? Euripides seems solely interested in exhausting the possibilities his language affords him in describing the gaze in order to suggest a full-blown strategy of vision as a first-hand cultural experience, unmediated by art or craftsmanship. The queen’s maidens never ask themselves ‘who’ made the images surrounding them, ‘when’, or ‘why’. Poetic license notwithstanding, Euripides’ text places its human spectators in direct interaction with non-human objects, carrying unmediated divine presence.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to a Greek strategy of the gaze represented by Euripides, modern approaches are based on a completely different referential system. Let us ponder, as an example, on John Keats’ famous *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, written in 1819.<sup>12</sup> Through a series of questions, forming a strategy altogether dissimilar to that of Euripides, Keats is organizing his own approach to the ancient artifact: his repetitive question-marks (‘What men or gods are these?’ [v. 1.8]; ‘What mad pursuit?’ [v. 1.9]; ‘What wild ecstasy?’ [v. 1.10]) allow him to pose as a modern thinker, an art-historian and a connoisseur, perplexed by those enchanting, ‘Attic’ ‘marble men and maidens’ whose interpretation eludes him (vv. 5.1–2). The modern scholar’s *aporia*, imposed by the ancient monument’s silence (cf. vv. 4.9–10: ‘and not a soul to tell | Why thou art desolate can e’er return’), is somehow soothed by the recognition (or manufacture?) of the message hidden in the urn’s classical lines: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’, a hyper-temporal reality which, as the poet claims, ‘is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’ (vv. 5.9–10).

The comparison of the two texts, random as it may seem, suggests that they exemplify two separate visual strategies: contrary to the spirituality we tend to attribute to what we describe as ‘classical art’, the Greek gaze seems to have appreciated those very same artifacts for their own *materiality*, as we have decided to call – inevitably risking to sound rather tautological – their self-value as inanimate things, which are however imbued with the ability to act as animate agents.<sup>13</sup> Borrowed from anthropology and cultural studies, this somewhat dull term

11 See the discussion of analogous texts in Gordon 1979, 6–7.

12 Keats 1996, 213–4; see Heffernan 1993, 107–15; Scott 1994; Kolocotroni 2012, 1–3.

13 On materiality, its definitions, and its applicability for an archaeological context see chiefly: Meskell 2005;

has proven quite useful for archaeologists in the last decade or so, even though its full potential remains largely underexplored. It does, however, mark a shift from an art-historical discourse focusing on 'the' producer and the technologies of production he (very rarely 'she') employs – to an emphasis on the user and the viewer. Thus, from emphasis on *the* meaning of the object ascribed during production we move to multiple, even contradictory meanings, created in hitherto undetected ways: engendered, embodied, mnemonic, sensorial.

The departure from an earlier anthropocentric agenda to a discussion of human and non-human alike, and consequently to an understanding of material culture as the agent of social interaction through memory and sensual experience, rather than as merely the product of humans, allows us to move from the mere recording of material properties to understanding the affordance of these properties and the ways they enable or restraint interaction between humans and non-humans. In this paper, I will endeavor to rethink an early Greek 'history of looking'<sup>14</sup> based on recent approaches to agency and materiality in the classical world, and in archaeological discourse at large. My aim is twofold: on the one hand to explore the way Greeks interacted with things (especially images of things or, more to the point, things bearing images) outside a persistently anthropocentric and inherently humanist discourse; and on the other to imagine ways in which this rethinking of Greek art might affect the ways we receive classical culture today. In the following pages, therefore, I wish to examine ways in which early Greek art might have interacted with its viewer and the cultural concepts it helped create; my aim is not so much to 'free' our discipline from a limited, as well as limiting discourse which has brought us where we stand after a long century of meticulous art-historical reasoning, but to investigate whether new tools might help us pose some new questions – and help us resolve them to any extent. I have chosen early Greek art (c. 800–480 BC) mostly because I find this to be a rather underexplored field; also because, it may be argued, pre-classical art is fundamentally different from its post-480 BC successor, and not merely a hopeless attempt at achieving what would only 'come naturally' in the 5th century, that is a decisive turn towards verisimilitude in the visual arts. As Raymond Prier has argued in his study on the phenomenology of sight and appearance in Archaic Greece (a terminology reflecting precisely an art-historian's idealistic bias towards the 'High' art of the 'Classical' Period), modern and postmodern scholars insist on reading pre-classical Greece through an anachronistic dichotomy between subject and object; in semiotic terms this would suggest the split between signifier and signified.<sup>15</sup> As shown by Prier, this dichotomy does not apply to pre-classical Greece: contrary to the Platonic distinction between ideal forms and their material manifestations, seventh- and sixth-century aesthetics seem to maintain that abstract ideas become present 'through the emotional and experiential commitment of the participants *and* an affective appearance from without'.<sup>16</sup> According to this hypothesis, sights are indeed wonders to behold (*thaumata idesthai*) and images are not mere copies of an essential truth, but true and essential in themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Representation was to be theorized by the Greeks as *mimesis*, a term that literally means

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Miller 2005; Hicks 2010; Knappett 2012; Olsen 2012; Hodder 2012; Van Dyke 2015.

14 Cf. Barthes 1980, 12.

15 Prier 1989.

16 Prier 1989, 71; cf. also the pioneering study by R.L. Gordon (1979), in which he discusses matters of religious art-production, departing from the standard art-historical paradigm.

17 In this, Prier anticipated the work of cultural historians such as W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) who, working independently of archaeology and anthropology, spoke of a "pictorial turn" in social sciences explaining how "made" things such as pictures are imbued with agency, and thus the ability to freely interact with humans.

'imitation [of reality]', though not as plainly as that.<sup>18</sup> *Mimesis* was understood by Greek philosophers of the Classical period as an elemental artistic faculty, representational rather than mimetic.<sup>19</sup> What this representation entailed changed significantly from the Early to the Late Classical period and again with Roman critics. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, *mimesis* as described by Plato and his pupils marked the momentous shift when 'in Greek culture the turn is completed that leads from the 'presentification', the making present, of the invisible to the imitation of appearance'.<sup>20</sup> This would mean that effigies of divinities in the Archaic period were not perceived as mere depictions, or 'art', but as manifestations, divine epiphanies, produced by the viewer's own interaction with the realm of the divine.

This kind of empowerment of inanimate objects with a quasi-human quality retained its strength, it seems, until much later than the naturalist turn in the early fifth century. In her study of the emergence of the physical body as a delimited ontology in Early Greek thought, Brooke Holmes describes the 'person' as a space of passage, a transformation process between daemonic forces, on the one hand, and symptoms and actions, on the other, what she defines, respectively, as the 'felt' and the 'seen' in Greek experience.<sup>21</sup> Holmes argues that felt experience is elemental in 'constituting the boundaries of a person in early Greek poetry'<sup>22</sup> and Greek culture at large, and that a concrete notion of a body (individual rather than 'dividual') emerges in Greece only after the end of the Archaic period.<sup>23</sup> Art's inherent disposition for 'making things present', therefore, thus turning what may only be felt to some *thing* that is, in addition, seen (as well as touched, smelled, tasted even)<sup>24</sup> is crucial in this regard. Avoiding old, and somewhat anachronistic polarities between mind and soul, the divide – as well as dialectic relationship – between the felt and the seen enables us to study the intricacy of embodiment in the crucial passage from the Late Archaic to the Early Classical period. Early Greek technologies of representation, what we like to refer to as 'styles' in art history, are meant to deploy made likenesses as agents of their own materiality. This is why Euripides, writing in the last quarter of the fifth century, still feels at ease with the idea of a number of artistic likenesses at Delphi interacting with his female protagonists as real presences instead of mere images of absent beings. Rather than as an imperfect attempt at verisimilitude, therefore, Early Greek representation must be understood as a technology of imbuing inanimate objects with the power to affect the life of humans and help articulate their sense of cultural identity.

## PRESENT MATTERS

Some time in the mid-seventh century BC, a woman named Nikandre dedicated an effigy of the goddess Artemis at her sanctuary on the island of Delos (Fig. 1).<sup>25</sup> The statue, 1.75m tall, is now displayed at the National Museum in Athens as one of the first attempts at monumental sculpture – and it is perhaps no coincidence that its inventory number is, simply, 1.<sup>26</sup> Although

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18 On the nature of *mimesis* in Classical thought, and the development of the concept, see chiefly Halliwell 2002; Halliwell 2005; Elsner 1995, 21–8; 2007, 2–11; Squire 2009, 117–20; 231–2.

19 Cf. Halliwell 1987, 71.

20 Vernant 1991, 152–5; cf. Potolsky 2006, 15–7.

21 Holmes 2010.

22 Holmes 2010, 38.

23 Cf. Whitley 2013.

24 See Hamilakis 2013.

25 Boardman 1978 fig. 71; Despina and Kaltsas 2014, 3–8.

26 Cf. Kaltsas 2007, 189, 'one of the earliest life-size stone statues representative of the Daedalic style'. On the Daedalic style, more below.



Fig. 1. Marble effigy of the Goddess Artemis; found on Delos, c. 650-640 BC. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1. Photo: Yiannis Koulelis (2018).

some recent finds have shown that the early history of Greek sculpture is more complicated than we once believed, and that such 'first attempts' were both more numerous and perhaps significantly earlier as well, this particular statue still remains a starting point for anyone wishing to survey the art of Greece in the 1st millennium BC. At any rate, back in 1975, when the study of Greek art seemed to have reached a point where the definitive narrative for it could be composed with relevant certainty, Martin Robertson, one of the most prominent ancient art historians of the later twentieth century, felt confident enough to dismiss Nikandre's dedication as 'rather clumsy, alike in design and execution'. He would, furthermore, 'guess' that its maker 'was a novice in marble, surely because he was among the first to practice this art in Greece, and not from any provinciality'.<sup>27</sup> In the following paragraphs I will discuss Robertson's approach to early Greek art, not because his remains the dominant paradigm; I am interested in his discourse because even if it has been refined, modified, developed, improved-upon and fine-tuned by an ambitious generation of successors (Andrew Stewart, Nigel Spivey, Claude Rolley, Tonio Hölscher, Robin Osborne and Richard Neer to name but a few of the more influential ones), Robertson's *Problematik* lies in the heart of any anthropocentric exploration of Greek art (or any other form of 'art' for that matter).

Robertson belonged to a long series of art historians who studied art (classical, post-classical, pre-modern or modern) for its own sake. His agenda entailed the compilation of a continuous narrative of types, techniques, styles, and the craftsmen, often anonymous, who made it all happen; like many others in his discipline, he talks of masters and pupils, workshops and circles, all in anticipation of the much more accomplished Renaissance. Although he is well aware that '[h]istories of the arts, inevitably stamped more deeply even than other history by personal taste and the fashion of the time, can hardly satisfy many generations',<sup>28</sup> his synthesis strikes us as monumental, authoritative and extremely useful today as it must have looked when first published. In that it resembles a much earlier work of significantly wider scope, Ernst

27 Robertson 1975, 37.

28 Robertson 1975, xi.

Gombrich's *The Story of Art* first published in 1950. Emulating Vasari (who in many ways imitated Pliny), Gombrich endeavored to 'bring some intelligible order into the wealth of names, periods and styles' that would form a global art history, from its 'strange beginnings' in prehistoric Africa, Asia, and pre-Colombian America to contemporary art and 'the triumph of modernism' – in the West, of course.<sup>29</sup> The art-historical narrative emerging from this masterwork of epic dimensions and scholarly breadth is the single-minded quest for verisimilitude, a goal that was first achieved by the Greeks in the fifth century BC, then lost to be re-gained by western modernity. As such, Gombrich's story of art is prone to the simplistic dialectics of 'rise' and 'fall', the convenient biological metaphors of 'birth', 'maturity', and 'death', and the assuredness provided by determinism. Its teleological make enthrone its modern reader in the centre of a panoptic universe where the time is *now* and the truth comes only from the knowledgeable lips of an all-seeing art historian. Discussed, as it happens, as a stepping-stone to the Renaissance and the 'conquest of reality' as Gombrich put it, Greek art as a result is seen as little more than an incomplete first attempt.<sup>30</sup>

Assuming, on the other hand, that sixth-century artists craved for the naturalism achieved by their fifth-century grandsons (or, like Robertson does, accusing Nikandre's maker for not being accomplished enough to count as equal to his successors in the craft fifty or sixty years later) is simply anachronistic;<sup>31</sup> in a sense, it is like compiling an art history *without* history. What remains interesting in Gombrich's work, however, is his own explanation for what in another work, first published in 1959, he calls 'the Greek Revolution', that is the eventual, as well as inevitable, discovery of naturalism by fifth-century artists, mostly sculptors.<sup>32</sup> Classical *mimesis*, according to Gombrich, was achieved by the understanding of the viewer's psychological need to find in art convincing imitations of reality as he (always a *he*) imagined it. Moreover, he maintained that the reason why the Greeks turned to naturalism was precisely the narrative qualities inherent in their art – or rather their own audience's expectation of an art that would be able to sustain narrativity as provided in literature – the rather simple idea that literary descriptions of acts, situations or sentiments generate a series of mental images in the reader's (or listener's) brain that all are fundamentally naturalistic in character. Gombrich's thesis remains, to a certain extent, valid today, one would wish however for a more articulate explanation of what went on before reality was 'conquered', back in the days of 'primitivism' and 'strangeness'; as it happens, art-historical narratives seem unable to make sense of an art, or a time, they do not really admire.

Art-historical determinism seems embedded in Robertson's *History of Greek Art* and has remained ever since, at least in the more traditional readings of classical art. To return to his account of Nikandre and her dedication, the dismissal of the thoroughly un-artistic, 'almost plank-like block', with the 'roughly finished back' goes hand-in-hand with his bald-faced indifference towards what is perhaps the statue's more prominent feature – the long inscription it carries along its left thigh. Let us re-read it in full:<sup>33</sup>

Nikandre dedicated me to the far-shooter of arrows;  
The excellent daughter of Deinodikos of Naxos,  
Sister of Deinomenes, wife of Phraxos n[ow].

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29 See the critique in Squire 2011, 33–62.

30 Elsner 2006, 69.

31 Cf. Squire 2011, 53–4.

32 Gombrich 1989, 99–125.

33 Cf. Whitley 2017, 85–6.

While Robertson states that this epigraph contains a ‘rather surprising amount of genealogical information’ which ‘does not concern us otherwise, but the place-name does’ (from which he goes on to infer a Naxian origin for the statue and its maker), he does find the time to express his irritation about the fact that the long ‘verse [...] has perhaps squeezed out the name of the artist’.<sup>34</sup> According to this strictly art-historical narrative, therefore, Nikandre’s dedication is worthy of our attention (as archaeologists, as classicists, as historians of ancient art) insofar as it can help us understand style – especially the style of the centuries to come – or discern the particulars of artistic creation in its day: who made it, where and when, and how is this *artist* related to the artistic circles of his day. Still, this discourse does very little to help us understand the ways seventh-century Greeks might have looked at the art surrounding them, the very art people like themselves had commissioned and created, not in an effort eventually to achieve verisimilitude, but in order to satisfy more present needs.

In contrast to standard art-historical narratives, deeply embedded in the humanist tradition, a more recent, patently materialist approach is now adopted by many in an effort to make sense of the archaeological record: whereas the former devoted all its energy within the confines of the *atelier* – thus privileging the artist as an exceptional individual who creates culture for others to use and profit from – the latter seems more taken by an artifact’s career *after* it leaves the workshop of its maker. Concepts such as an artifact’s ‘cultural biography’ or ‘social life’,<sup>35</sup> once solely concerning anthropologists dealing with what a classicist would only dismiss as ‘primitive’, ‘peripheral’ or, quite frankly, ‘unsophisticated’ cultures, may be seen to emerge all the more often in classical archaeology, following a turn in the archaeology of the Greek prehistory that dates back in the 1990s. As already explained in the introduction of this paper, the new challenge is to make sense of artifacts in terms of their own materiality, that is the inherent ability of things to interact with humans. In many respects, classical archaeologists seem to be finding this quite a formidable task, mostly because of the textual character of their discipline: as the archaeology of Greece and Rome seems to be introduced to us through a wealth of texts, some of which are still seen as the paragons of western culture, for many of its students those texts provide all the information one needs to make sense of the classical world and the art it left behind. Furthermore, as it has been noted above, Greek art (often bypassing the fact that a great portion of it is known to us through its Roman translation) has been enlisted in an effort to explain European culture from the Renaissance on, a development that has left a discernible mark on classical studies.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, constant evocation of newly popular terms such as ‘materiality’ (or its slightly older cousin, ‘agency’, on which more below) is seriously running the risk of becoming an end in itself, unless we are able to show how, and for what purpose, this new approach might help us make better sense of the classical past. What happened in art in the period we call ‘Early Classical’, the turn to naturalism through the deployment of *mimesis* as a new representational technology, was indeed ‘revolutionary’ as Ernst Gombrich has described it, though not necessarily for the reasons he would identify. In the following sections, I revisit some of the art of the preceding centuries, in an effort to reevaluate the ways it interacted with its audience. In this exercise, I will be using the texts these artifacts carry not

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34 Robertson 1975, 36; some scholars (e.g., among others, Karakasi 2001, 76–7) maintain that the lost part of the inscription did in fact contain the name of the sculptor; this assumption however is unsubstantiated, as can be demonstrated by the statue itself: the surface where the inscription was carved shows no extended damage, and accordingly the missing part of the inscription must have only contained one or two more letters and not an entire phrase such as ‘so-and-so made me’ or the like.

35 See Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986.

36 Toner 2013.



Fig. 2. Bronze statuette of the God Apollo; from Thebes, early 7th c. BC. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 3.9997.

as 'literary sources' of historical significance – however grand or insignificant this may be taken to be – but as part-and-parcel of those artifacts' cultural identity.

Fifty-odd years before Nikandre sailed to Delos in order to erect her dedication to Artemis, another worshipper, this time a man called Mantiklos, brought an offering to a sanctuary of Apollo in Thebes in the shape of a 30 cm tall figurine made of bronze representing the god himself (Fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> The statuette, now having lost about one third of its original size, was an image of Apollo wearing nothing but a wide belt round his waist, a tall helmet (now lost), and holding his bow and arrows (now also lost, along with the statue's right hand). Now looking rather dim, with the dark green patina we have come to expect from classical bronzes, originally the statuette would have carried a highly polished, bright gold-like hue. To the classically trained eye of a contemporary scholar it certainly looks crude, schematic, unaccomplished; its patent 'clumsiness' can only tell us that any Greek revolutions will not be forthcoming for quite some time yet. Still, one cannot expect a viewer in the seventh century BC to have complained that such artifacts seemed too 'schematic' or more 'frontal' than they ought to be. The statuette commanded its own space, as well as the space around it through its make, its iconography, and the intentionality of its dedicant. The latter is declared through the inscription the figure carries splayed over the god's thighs in what to our eyes seems a rather unsightly, and thoroughly un-artistic manner (in modern terms we would be tempted to talk of vandalism):

Mantiklos offered me to the far-shooter with the silver bow  
As a tithe; and you, o Phoibos, may you give him  
Some pleasing reward.

The first striking feature the Nikandre and Mantiklos inscriptions are sharing is the fact that in both cases it is the statue, not its dedicant, who is poised to address the viewer.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the statue, as a separate entity, intercedes in the exchange between the dedicant and the viewer in order to inform the latter, in the first person, about the former's ties with the divinity the statue itself is representing. The texts inscribed onto the bodies of these divine creatures deploy an intricate network of inter-relations. The viewer is expected to appreciate the dedicant's devotion

37 The statuette is now in Boston; Boardman 1978 fig. 10.

38 Svenbro 1988; Depew 1997, 238–9.

as well as social rank and means, which permit her or him to erect such an effigy in the first place: Mantiklos' offering is described as *dekate*, that is 1/10 of his annual income, hence the viewer is invited to make the calculation in order to establish how much Mantiklos is actually worth. Similarly, the 'surprising amount of genealogical information' Nikandre's dedication offers us helps construct her as a woman of status: her offering helps distinguish her as an 'excellent' woman and an important 'Naxian' at a time when Naxos controlled the sanctuary of Delos (and its coffers). Creating a social identity for its dedicant, the statue functions as a discriminatory tool, as it makes apparent who in that society is entitled to erect such dedications to Artemis and who is not. Given the emphasis placed on Nikandre's career through family life so far, she may be safely assumed to have served as priestess to Artemis prior to her marriage. She would be then making this dedication in order to mark the end of her time at the sanctuary as she is 'now marrying Phraxos'; becoming a priestess was a coveted distinction in Greek society of the Archaic period, reserved to those of social rank and considerable property.<sup>39</sup> Ostensibly acting as mediators between their dedicants and the divinities they portray, these statues in fact mediate their dedicants' social importance to their viewers, as it is them whom they are addressing.

In this respect, such artifacts become *works of writing* as much as of sculpture. This however does not mean they can be 'read' as straightforward texts the way traditional, linguistically informed wisdom would have it. The epigrams inscribed on these statues demand of the viewer to perform the act of reading in full, which in those days would mean reading their verses out loud. Since silent reading does not appear to have been widely practiced in Greece before the mid-fifth century BC,<sup>40</sup> reading such texts in the open air would require a performance or sorts, whereby the viewer becomes an actor impersonating the statue he is looking at. In the words of American sociologist Richard Sennett, 'the Greek reader would have thought he heard the voices of real people speaking'.<sup>41</sup> Vocal reading, therefore, acquires a performative trope which employs the viewer in order to enable the statue's own agency. In this sense, the texts inscribed on these and similar dedications act through a material enframing of orality rather than their inherent textual qualities.

'Agency' is of course yet another hotly discussed anthropological term which seems to have made itself necessary in order to understand the archaeological record, classical or not. In his seminal *Art and Agency*,<sup>42</sup> published one year after his death, British anthropologist Alfred Gell argued that 'what lies behind the seductive power of Art' is neither its aesthetic deftness nor its ability to act as a highly sophisticated, and profoundly suggestive, language; he rather believed that, far from being a matter 'of meaning and communication', art 'is instead about *doing*'.<sup>43</sup> This '*doing*' was what Gell theorized as agency, in the belief that artifacts (including *objets d'art*) function as material entities which interact with their viewers and users by motivating their response. Gell's theory seemed to work better with non-representational, non-visual art, its impact onto archaeology however was such that many classical archaeologists felt tempted to experiment with it in the study of classical art.<sup>44</sup> Soon enough, scholars realized that the nature of

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39 Connelly 2007, 122–9.

40 Knox 1968; Svenbro 1988, 160–86; Johnson 2000. On the turn from loud to silent reading some time after 480–450 BC, see Gavrilov 1997 and Burnyeat 1997.

41 Sennett 1994, 43.

42 Gell 1998.

43 Gell 1998, ix [Thomas, emphasis in the original]. On the concept of art in archaeology and anthropology, see Robb 2017 and cf. Skeates 2017.

44 As in Osborne and Tanner 2007; James Whitley, in particular (2006; 2007; 2012; 2013; 2015; 2017), has so far

agency affected the way we understand the materiality of things and that a correlation between the two concepts was necessary in order to proceed with a new theory of material culture.<sup>45</sup> Although some questioned the validity of this new theoretical trend and doubted its usefulness for the study of material culture,<sup>46</sup> it seems clear that an anthropologically informed concept of materiality can improve our archaeological reasoning as well as allow us make better sense of past cultures where the human and nonhuman worlds were not treated as separable realms.<sup>47</sup> Understanding the materiality of the material world as 'processual and in flux',<sup>48</sup> enables new interpretations of the ways ancient Greeks interacted with the things surrounding them; in what follows I will discuss the examples already mentioned, as well as some more, in an effort to establish the way they interact with their viewers and the mechanisms they deploy in order to control, through their material aspects, the flow of agency within early Greek society.

As already mentioned, when composing his anthropology of art Alfred Gell was mainly interested in 'indigenous', non-mimetic art. In a way he seemed to succumb to the old Eurocentric discrimination between the high 'classical' art of Greece and Rome which was (and still is) believed to have fertilized western culture at large, and the arts of peripheral, primitive, or exotic cultures that were only significant insofar as they attracted the gaze of a westerner connoisseur or collector (what Johannes Fabian had described as the *allochronic* bias in anthropology).<sup>49</sup> However, even in an art carrying the burden of classicism, such as the art of ancient Greece, one can locate the animist beliefs inherent in the effigies of gods I described above: acting as 'indexes of divine presence', as Gell would term such images,<sup>50</sup> the dedications by Mantiklos and Nikandre are not merely attempts to represent the non-representable but to objectify divine agency, empowering it for humanity.<sup>51</sup> Animism substantiates the power of the god, his or her ability to 'offer pleasing rewards' as Mantiklos would hope, and thus the statue is employed in order to channel divine agency towards the dedicant, as well as the viewer.

A literary example may offer a very clear illustration of this: in Herodotus's *Histories* (1.30–1) we hear of the story of Kleobis and Biton, two brothers from the city of Argos who became famous for carrying their mother, a priestess of Hera, to the temple in time for a religious ceremony when the oxen designated for this task failed to turn up from the fields. The people of Argos, we are told, praised the athletic prowess of the two youths, who proved as strong as the beasts meant to drag their mother's carriage, as well as their filial virtue. Proud of her sons' feat, the priestess prayed to the goddess for a befitting reward for them and as a result they got to die that very evening as two very happy young men who had enjoyed the praise of their entire community. In the aftermath of this remarkable event, the story goes on, the people of Argos made effigies of the two men and dedicated them to Delphi, since they had led their short lives in such a distinguished manner.<sup>52</sup> This story, and the text that relates it, are thick with references to the way material agency works in early Greece. Starting with the

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produced a significant amount of work discussing agency, materiality, and personhood in the context of early art. On art and its materiality in the Greek Bronze Age, see among others Herva 2004; Matic 2012.

45 Miller 2005, 11–5.

46 See Ingold 2007; cf. Tilley 2007; Knappett 2007; also 2012; Hodder and Lucas 2017.

47 Cf. Meskell 2005.

48 Tilley 2007, 17.

49 Fabian 1983, 143–4.

50 Gell 1998, 121–2.

51 Cf. Meskell 2005, 54.

52 The statues of two sixth-century kouroi discovered at Delphi (Boardman 1978 fig. 70) have been thought to be the effigies of Kleobis and Biton, even though other interpretations exist. It is interesting to find that Herodotus's tale, a story within a story, imbues the two artifacts with its own materiality to our days.

prayer of the priestess to the goddess, we hear that the woman (privileged by her position to enter the temple, whereas entrance to the general public was forbidden) 'stood opposite' the statue (*agalma*) in order to make her wish to the goddess: as Gell had noted, agency is effected through ocular exchange, through which the effigy distributes to the viewers the godly powers of the divinity it portrays.<sup>53</sup> Since the story related by Herodotus must have taken place in the early sixth century BC at the latest, we may assume that the statue in question (possibly a wooden *xoanon*) looked a lot like the dedication by Nikandre – in our eyes, 'clumsy', 'plank-like', or 'artless'.

By classifying these idols as 'art', and quite incompetent art at that, we have 'neutralized' them, said Gell:<sup>54</sup> the rendering of Nikandre's dedication (what in standard art-historical terminology is referred to as *Daedalic*, from the mythological first Greek sculptor) is highly stylized, heavy with hieratic symbolisms, official attire and vibrant painted decoration that would surprise most modern viewers. Through the technologies we classify, often dismissively, as 'Daedalic', such as the so-called 'triangular structure of the face', the 'tri-partite wig' the statues seem to be carrying, or the angular, frontal and schematic fashioning of the body,<sup>55</sup> the sculptors of the Archaic period did not so much endeavor to emulate nature and failed, but tried – quite successfully we ought to assume – to materialize the immaterial.<sup>56</sup> These technologies work towards the production of what in Greek art can be understood as monumentality, an imposing three-dimensional presence affecting the viewer through the force of the materials it is made of.<sup>57</sup> The *agalma* of Hera mentioned by Herodotus, as well as the Apollo dedicated by Mantiklos and Nikandre's Artemis, function therefore as *totems*:<sup>58</sup> a totem is a sacred object endowed with its own materiality, which enables communication between the world of the spirits and the world of humans; not human as such, totems are recognized by animistic religions across the globe as distributors of spiritual power on the one hand and human reverence on the other, thus forging a triangular relation between man, spirit and the mediator between the two. Accordingly, the 'artworks' discussed here are meant to realize the connection between the world of the humans and the world of the spirits – in other words, rather than acting as mere carriers of cultural meaning they also function as its creators.<sup>59</sup> Entangled in a relational system of which they are at the same time objects and subjects, they are turned into agents of cultural interaction.<sup>60</sup> This is verified by the Greek texts themselves, often stating that statues are (or seem to be) endowed with soul (*empsychia*) or breath (*empnoa*): one is reminded of Lucian's *Phalaris* (1.11) and a number of couplets from the *Anthologia Graeca* (e.g. 9.736; 12.56; 12.57). A Hellenistic inscription from Rhodes (c. 200 BC)<sup>61</sup> mentions an *empnoun* bronze portrait of a man, aimed according to its epigram at reminding the passer-by of the just character of its sitter.<sup>62</sup> On occasion, viewers/worshippers may have engaged in conversation with divine

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53 Gell 1998, 109–21; cf. Steiner 2001, 105, 115; also Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015, esp. 24–33.

54 Gell 1998, 97.

55 See, e.g., Jenkins 1936; Ridgway 1977, 17–39.

56 Cf. Gordon 1979, 8–9; Morris 1992, 36–59; 238–56.

57 See Tilley 2004. In this respect, Ingold's rather reactionary view that an anthropologically informed concept of materiality would be worthless for our understanding of material culture (Ingold 2007) manages nonetheless to draw our attention to the empirically perceived materialist aspects of artifacts which for a moment seemed to escape the attention of theorists discussing materiality as a rather abstract notion: see Ingold 2007, 14–5.

58 Gell 1998, 96–154; cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962.

59 Meskell 2005, 54–8; Knappett 2007, 22–3.

60 Thomas 1991; Hodder 2012.

61 Maiuri 1925, no. 19.

62 See, in general, Steiner 2001, 44–50; also cf. Gaifman 2006; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015, 38–51.



Fig. 3. Athenian red-figure oenochoe showing man conversing with statue of the Goddess Athena; from Sicily, c. 460 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 08.258.25.

effigies, as is suggested by the scene on an Athenian oenochoe, showing a man gesticulating towards a statue of Athena (Fig. 3).<sup>63</sup>

The animistic, totemic qualities of such agents turn them, in Gell's terminology, into quasi-prosthetic members of the personages they represent – human or divine.<sup>64</sup> 'I am the seal of Thersis; do not violate me!' demands a sixth-century scarab from any perpetrator who might feel tempted to break its clay or wax impression upon a parchment, box, or cellar (Fig. 4).<sup>65</sup> The seal addresses its viewer in the first person, thus distributing the agency of its owner and in a sense invoking the sacredness of the act of sealing: for a seal-impression to be violated, either the sealing itself or the strings keeping it in place would have to be broken and this would undo the quasi-magical process of sealing the document/box/room in the first place. *Sema*, the word for seal used in this case, is the noun of the verb *semaino*, 'to mark'. *Sema* thus distributes not just the agency of a person, but also the entire narrative regarding seals and sealing practices in Greek reality – from day-to-day bureaucracy to history and myth. The same term appears on what has often been dubbed as 'the first Greek coin': 'I am the seal of Phanes', reads the inscription over the blazon of a deer, sacred to Artemis and Ephesos, which is taken to confirm the authenticity of the coin, the integrity of the alloy used, and the value promised by its weight.<sup>66</sup> Here, the object distributes – besides the agency of its issuer, whoever Phanes may have been – its inherent value, thus it seems to be promoting its sheer materiality. The entanglement of these artifacts – the statues, the seals, the coins – with a complex network of religious, political, or social beliefs and practices turns them into agents of precisely those beliefs and practices which they enforce onto the bodies and minds of their human viewers and users.

As is made clear by many literary accounts on art, mostly sculpture, written from the fifth century and until much later, *mimesis* and its technologies were primarily deployed in order to

63 De Cesare 1997, no. 220; Oenbrink 1997, no. A13.

64 Gell 1998, 168–74.

65 Boardman 1968, 73.

66 Howgego 1995, 3–6.



Fig. 4. Drawing of an agate scarab seal with inscription; from Aegina, 6th c. BC. Unknown collection.

conceptualize the divine and made its supernatural powers visually manifest.<sup>67</sup> This exercise, however, enabled the representation of humans as well, and in ways that seemed to share something of the portrayal of the gods: the statues of Kleobis and Biton as erected at Delphi, according to Herodotus, would be seen to distribute their own agency (as ‘men who have excelled in their virtue’) to their viewers, as well as their agency of their collective dedicant, the people of Argos. The latter wish themselves to be known as a community that can produce members as worthy of praise as the two young men represented by the two statues. Through the erection of the two statues, the people of Argos constitute themselves as an exemplary Greek society worthy of the attention of Greece at large; more to the point, such a notional entity may be seen to (re)gain its material presence precisely *at the moment* a passer-by stops to look at the effigies of the two youths erected on the way to the temple at Delphi and leans forwards in order to read out loud the epigraph that accompanies them. As is made clear by the examples discussed here, statues in ancient Greece were ‘imbued with agency’ as standard phrasing would have it, but only within a framework of ocular exchange between the statue and the viewer. By looking at the statue (cf. Fig. 3), and through the performance of reading the epigraph it carries, often inscribed onto its very person, the viewer is able to release the agency such inanimate objects are emanating through the psychodynamic process the later Greeks came to theorize as *mimesis*. Agency is therefore a relational manifestation, ‘a process of becoming’ rather than a state of being – or having been made;<sup>68</sup> hence these stories do not seem to pay too much attention to craftsmen and their skills, nor does the inscription on Nikandre’s dedication try to ‘squeeze in’ the name of its own carver. It is the act of looking, and the act of reading, that empower the materiality of the inanimate objects they are addressing, and it is the temporality of such actions, the *here and now* of looking at them that enables their social significance. (In the case of the Mantiklos Apollo, I would have guessed that the act of *handling* the statue, even merely for the purpose of rendering its inscription more readable, was also part of its day-to-day interaction with humans.)

This kind of human-thing interaction would be further enabled by random effects created by circumstance: light reflected on a statue’s glistening surface through windows and skylights, for example, or a gleaming torch, not to mention the fragrances emanating from the temple’s incense burners, would enhance the viewer’s sense that he or she is in the presence of a god.<sup>69</sup> Such accidental encounters would transform inert matter into a vibrant, living thing, which would initiate a spontaneous interaction with its human viewers, pretty much in the way we

67 Squire 2011, 167–81.

68 Knappett 2007, 20.

69 Cf. Steiner 2001, 101–2; Corso 1999, 101.

would now treat an interruption from a flickering i-pad screen or a buzzing cellphone. One is reminded of Dodona's prophetic sounds, triggered by the sonorous, albeit accidental, reaction of the oracle's bronze cauldrons to the blowing wind or other stimuli, random or staged.<sup>70</sup> For many ancient authorities, including some Early Christian adversaries of paganism, the priestesses of the oracle interpreted the cauldrons' sounds the same way they were able, according to other sources, to decipher the rustling of the sacred oak's leaves when motivated by a sudden breeze. Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* (275b–e) famously rejects this 'unwise' conviction: signs are just 'reminders', he says, of the things they are referring to, and in that, he adds, writing is just like painting – its creations appear lifelike even though they remain 'solemnly silent'. Plato is once again here using Socrates as his mouthpiece in order to voice an ostensibly 'rationalist' approach to the visual; his elitist iconoclasm, however, has been shown to have been irrelevant: as Michael Squire remarks, his 'philosophical line in one sense had little impact on the sorts of ritual viewing that underpinned ancient cultic practice', as Plato 'neither dominated nor controlled the agenda'.<sup>71</sup> It is the epiphany of things felt – irrational, accidental, or contrived as it may appear to us today – that turns what we tend to approach as a visual encounter into a fully sensorial ocular exchange.

The emphasis on the moment of looking is accentuated by the inscriptions accompanying the statues, such as those of Nikandre and Mantiklos, addressing the viewer in the first person, or a similar epigraph from a sixth-century burial kouros asking the passer-by to stop and look at the statue while pondering on the fate of the man buried beneath it.<sup>72</sup> The action implied by the noun used in this case – *sema*, the same as in the case of the seal and the coin mentioned above – represents an entire cultural scheme (the belief that a person's grave ought to be visibly marked, monumentalized even), which imbues the artifact with the agency released by the act itself: 'stand by the *sema* of Kroisos and weep for him' instructs the statue the passer-by; '[I am] the *sema* of Phrasikleia' introduces itself another.<sup>73</sup> The latter goes on to identify itself as a *kore* (statue of a maiden), who is destined to remain a *kore*, since the girl it stands for died before reaching marriageable age. Our humanist tradition would have great difficulty explaining the active role of inanimate objects in their interaction with humans;<sup>74</sup> such speech acts may be explained only once we recognize the role of those 'idols' as agents of what actions this precise speech act is communicating.

It is therefore quite clear that the act of reading regulates the agency flow and resets the process that imbues those artifacts with their social significance.<sup>75</sup> In the following section I will study a different category of Early Greek artifacts in order to investigate the ways in which inscriptions help empower their materiality through their visual as well as performative qualities.

## TEXTUAL VISUALITIES

One generation or so before Mantiklos commissioned his dedication to Apollo, another man, residing at far-off Pithekoussai on the island of Ischia, took a penknife to scratch

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70 See Johnston 2008, 65–8.

71 Squire 2009, 118.

72 Boardman 1978, fig. 107.

73 Svenbro 1988, 26–43.

74 Cf. Svenbro 1988, 29–32.

75 Whitley 2017.

three lines, in dactylic hexameter nonetheless, on a rather humble drinking cup:<sup>76</sup>

I am Nestor's cup, good to drink from.  
Whoever drinks from this cup  
straightaway emptying [its contents], the desire of beautiful-wreathed Aphro-  
dite will seize.

Nestor is most likely the legendary king of Pylos, and his cup the fabulous *depos* described by Homer in the *Iliad* (11, 632–7).<sup>77</sup> The unassuming *kotyle* from Ischia looks nothing like the 'splendid cup' we find in the Homeric text; the ditty is demonstrably a joke between men in a state of inebriation. In this example, however, we find a pot imbued with the same totemic powers we came across in the case of the dedications of Mantiklos and Nikandre, as well as (and perhaps more crucially) with the seal of Thersis. Pots are, it seems, systematically inscribed in late-eighth/early seventh century Greece and often within the same convivial context:<sup>78</sup> a fragmentary cup from Methone in Northern Greece identifies itself as the property of Hakesandros, warning (those who might steal it?) that they will lose their eyes (Fig. 5);<sup>79</sup> likewise, an early-seventh century aryballos from Cumae identifies itself as a *lekythos* belonging to Tataie (a woman), adding 'whoever steals me will be struck blind';<sup>80</sup> several more pots are in the habit of identifying themselves as the property of a human: Qoraks;<sup>81</sup> Tharios;<sup>82</sup> ...]oem[...;<sup>83</sup> and so on. And although the scarab of Thersis is the most elaborate example of an Archaic inscribed seal known to-date, other, less detailed ones, exist: 'I am [the seal] of Ermotimos' reads a chalcedony scaraboid from Dimitsana in Arcadia,<sup>84</sup> while others simply name their owner in the nominative: Stesikrates;<sup>85</sup> Aristoteiches,<sup>86</sup> and so on. As it has already been noted,<sup>87</sup> such inscribed pots, or other objects such as seals, enable a spiritual/human/thing entanglement, channeling (in fact generating) divine agency onto their human beholders, carriers, and users.

There are two points about this triangular interaction that have so far been underrepresented, I find. First, the intrinsically performative character of this interaction: the seal, for example, 'works' only as so far as it is being used, time and again, inscribing on the body both of its own user as well as of those using or looking at the objects sealed with it, its divine powers – precisely because the *act* of sealing carries more weight than the seal itself.<sup>88</sup> In the case of Nestor's cup, its divine powers are explicitly deployed by the act of drinking-up, a task that only a half-drunk man can appreciate in full. Playful or ironic as such inscriptions may seem, they nevertheless establish a social space-time continuum where things are turned into *objects* in

76 See, among others, Buchner and Ridgway 1993, 219 nos 168–9; Jeffery 1990, 239 no. 1; Powell 1991, 163–6; Whitley 2017, 76–82.

77 The reading 'Nestoros e[m]i...' in the graffito's first line is preferable, I find, to the much less possible 'Nestoros e[n] to[i]...' ('Nestor had a cup...'), accepted by Manganaro 1995 and others; on the controversy, and a different, albeit rather farfetched, reading to the one proposed here, see Chaniotis 2011, 196–8.

78 See Osborne and Pappas 2007. Cf., though, Rudolph Wachter's strictly philological, and rather restrictive approach to the matter of such "speaking objects" in Early Greece (2010).

79 Besios *et al.* 2012, 339–43; cf. Pappas 2017.

80 Jeffery 1990, 238, 240 no. 1; Powell 1991, 166–7; Whitley 2017, 82–4.

81 Jeffery 1990, 356 no. 1.

82 Jeffery 1990, 76 no. 4.

83 Besios *et al.* 2012, 350–1 no. 7.

84 Boardman 1968, no. 516.

85 Boardman 1968, no. 561.

86 Boardman 1968, no. 427.

87 Cf. Whitley 2017 based on Hodder 2012.

88 Plantzos 1999, 22.



Fig. 5. Fragmentary skyphos with inscription; found in Methone (Northern Greece), late 8th/early 7th c. BC.

order to interact with humans.<sup>89</sup> As the human in the presence of a non-human entity imbued with divine agency is trying to make out the scribbled letters it carries, in order to enunciate its meaning, he or she is releasing whatever powers the object is supposed to contain for the benefit of him/herself and others.

Second, such oral performances are inherently pictorial in nature, in that they enable quasi-visual encounters;<sup>90</sup> incidentally, it seems quite ironic that artifacts like Tataie's perfume bottle or perhaps Hakesandros's cup would threaten their perpetrator with loss of vision! The lines sprawled along the hip of a marble Artemis or across the thighs of a bronze Apollo affect the statues' visual impact – to the extent that modern viewers might feel they spoil their aesthetic integrity. The verse on Nestor's cup, on the other hand, may also be seen to affect its appearance, at the same time however creating a mental image of a cup altogether dissimilar to the one at hand: the 'magnificent work [...] studded with gold', with its 'four handles [...] around each one of which a pair of golden doves was feeding' (*Iliad* 11, 632–5). Are we to suppose that the well-versed symposiast handling the humble *kytyle* at Pithekoussai imagined it being turned, even as a joke, into a golden *depos* or himself drinking from Nestor's cup 'studded with gold'? Literary descriptions, it was pointed out above, generate mental images in our heads, reproducing what we know or what we can imagine. If a drinker could imagine his cup being turned into a golden *depos* and the reader of a letter could recall the face of the person who wrote and sealed it upon reading a name stamped on a piece of raw clay, then pilgrims to a Greek sanctuary were very likely expected to imagine the man or woman who dedicated the statue in front of them while performing the act of the dedication itself. In many cases, as with the examples of Kleobis and Biton or the innumerable burial *kouroi* and *korai* commemorating a departed boy or girl (cf. the examples of Kroisos and Phrasikleia mentioned above), the visual agency of the statue would create a pictorial aid so that the passer-by could imagine the long-gone individuals in their prime.

The performative nature of the act of writing *onto* an artifact invariably produced by someone else, very often taking place long after the object's making, helps us chart the nature of non-human agency itself.<sup>91</sup> From within the western humanist tradition, the idea that

89 Gell 1998, 62.

90 See Pappas 2017.

91 As Jesper Svenbro was arguing in 1988 (30), 'it is only thanks to writing that [assertions made by artifacts] have been conceived and have come into being'. Although Svenbro, wishing to promote an anthropocentric reading of early Greek images bearing inscriptions, concluded that 'this does not mean to say that [artifacts

inanimate things can affect the life and thoughts of humans seems preposterous. Yet, we all feel comfortable with the notion that humans can nurture feelings *about* things. Gell's scheme was revolutionary in that it opened art history's apparatus to concepts more appropriate for the study of such things-turned-objects as described above. From the discussion of various forms of non-human agency it is clear that although it is humans who imbue things with agency, once a thing has been turned into an agent, there is no turning back: as an object, it is now inseparable from its newly-found agency.<sup>92</sup> It is within this relational system described above that things become significant in themselves and to the extent human actors have agreed to surrender portions of their own agency to them.

Certain directions in post-humanist thinking have further developed this idea of a society constituted not exclusively – not primarily even – by humans. Bruno Latour's work from the middle 1990s is a case in point: attempting to understand ways in which materials influence the life and thinking of people, irrespective of human agency, he has professed to 'reassemble the social', that is reincluding non-human objects, which are 'nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt',<sup>93</sup> in social interaction. According to this line of reasoning, non-human ontologies are seen as active agents within the social networks and not mere bearers of social structures and meanings. Society is literally (and not metaphorically) built 'of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles', Latour claimed.<sup>94</sup>

Having said that, who is this kind of agency attributed by? Dedications customarily name a dedicant, though other inscribed artifacts, such as the pots and seals discussed in this section, may be less forthcoming in this regard: where does the agency of Thersis' seal or Nestor's cup come from? The owner of the seal (even when unnamed) is naturally the agent of the act of sealing itself, but not the agent instilling the inanimate object (as well as – crucially – its imprint) with the quasi-divine powers it has come to possess. These have to come from the far more intricate web of entanglements between humans, things, and the ideas invested in the latter by the former; the owner of the seal thus becomes a co-agent. A clay seal-impression is powerless in a world that does not respect privacy or has no concept of the right to property. Likewise, the little poem on Nestor's cup would be meaningless to anyone not familiar with the Homeric text – and indeed in such a detail so as to get the reference to the king of Pylos and his goblet hidden within a subplot of what was to become the *Iliad*. The two inscriptions, like those on numerous other such objects, imply a collective 'we', a shared sense of agency and empowerment, for whom the relational system of ideas and values expressed in the artifacts at hand makes perfect sense. It is this collective subject – a subject distributed in itself – that helps distribute the agency of the things in question, an agency for which this collective subject acts as both the attributor and the receiver. Even when immediate agents are named (Mantiklos, Nikandre, the people of Argos and so on), we have yet to imagine a collective subject enabling the agency of those actors through the powers invested in it by the relational system of human and non-human interactions, factual or ideological, we have come to understand as 'the social' at large. Then, we need to allow for those 'gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles' Latour counted as parts of the social and their roles as active agents.

In the cases where dedicatory inscriptions are not phrased in the first person (cf. the *semata* of Kroisos and Phrasikleia discussed above), when that is the dedication is not 'heard' to address

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carrying inscriptions] are their own authors', it is quite clear that their users and viewers treated such artifacts as material agents, capable of interfering with their own sphere of consciousness.

92 Cf. Knappett 2011, 172–4.

93 Latour 2005, 62–86.

94 Latour 1993, 54; cf. Knappett 2008.



Fig. 6. Marble statue of a man bringing a calf to sacrifice; found on the Acropolis in Athens, c. 570-560 BC. Athens, Acropolis Museum 624.

the viewer in person as is the case with the statues offered by Mantiklos, Nikandre, and so on, it is the agency of this collective 'we' that comes into play: the so-called 'calf-bearer', a dedication from the Athenian Acropolis showing a man carrying a calf as a sacrifice to the goddess Athena, is accompanied by a retrograde inscription informing the viewer that 'Rombos dedicated [this], the son of Palas' (Fig. 6).<sup>95</sup> Although the pronoun implied here might be 'me' (that is the statue) rather than 'it', it is safer to assume that such inscriptions are meant to deploy a collective agency of reading and seeing for the benefit of the viewer. The man portrayed is *not* the dedicant himself, but a third entity, an idol symbolizing the dedicant's piety (as well as exceptional social standing). The technologies employed – frontal pose; austere carving; an eerily smiling face; inset eyes so as to enhance the statue's gaze; meticulously applied color decoration – are meant to communicate the statue's meaning through the distribution of its dedicant's agency.

A slightly later dedication from the same sanctuary, the so-called 'Antenor kore', shows a robustly built young woman carrying an offering (now lost) to the goddess.<sup>96</sup> The accompanying inscription names its dedicant as Nearchos, identifies the statue as a tithe (*aparche*) for Athena, and names Antenor, son of Eumares, as its sculptor. The gender discrepancy between the dedicant and the statue itself confirms that such dedications were meant to define separate entities and not representations, however symbolic, of an individual. For some uses, as in

95 Trianti 1998, 167; 170–1.

96 Trianti 1998, 94; 118–9; cf. Whitley 2007, 187–90; Whitley 2012, 584–5.

burial customs, gender and age had to agree with those of the deceased, whereas elsewhere, as in sanctuaries, these appear to have been site-specific. With the Antenor kore, once again, the statue's iconography and style are used to deploy the agency of its dedicator – and in this case its maker as well. Incidentally, this is a time when sculptors tend to advertise their skills through their work,<sup>97</sup> pretty much the same way as dedicators advertised their social standing through displays, often extravagant, of their wealth disguised as religiousness and virtue.

Concluding this section, it seems evident that inscriptions on things – dedications or appliances – in Early Greece exploited their own materiality in order to effect the passage from what was felt to what could be seen; in doing so, they were meant to distribute the agency – collective or individual – of their owners, viewers, users or (less often) makers, thus constructing, as well as negotiating, social notions of selfhood. The last section of this paper will investigate how 'art' enables flows of social agency in Early Greece through its interaction with current ideas of what constitutes a 'self' or indeed a 'person' in the seventh and sixth centuries BC.

## FLOWS OF AGENCY, CONSTRUCTIONS OF PERSONHOOD

In the scheme proposed by Alfred Gell,<sup>98</sup> personhood is distributed through inanimate objects carrying a human subject's agency. Gell's persons are of course social, not biological ontologies; as such, they can be neither spatially nor temporarily contained. Human agents are themselves objectified, dehumanized so to speak to the bare essentials of their own cultural biographies. As social persons, '[they] are present, not just in [their] singular bodies, but in everything in [their] surroundings which bears witness to [their] existence, [their] attributes, and [their] agency'.<sup>99</sup> Material agencies interfere with human fields of vision in order to re-center social dynamics and control cultural flows. Following Bruno Snell,<sup>100</sup> James Whitley has argued that, based on their entanglement with objects and stories, Homeric heroes in particular, come to us as 'unstable assemblages of parts, neither properly responsible nor properly "persons" at all';<sup>101</sup> that is, they come to us, narrated and narrativized as dividual ontologies, fluid and multi-semantic. As my discussion here has shown, early Greek art – through its technologies of stylistic renderings, textual framing through the performativity of inscription, and narrativization through myth – deploys such dividual 'persons', mythical or mythologized, as indices of cultural meaning.

Let us revisit some of the examples already discussed in order to investigate ways in which they construct their subject's personhood by means of generating and controlling agency flows. The dedication by Nikandre seems crucial in this respect: the statue, an effigy of the goddess Artemis, functions, in Gell's terminology,<sup>102</sup> as an index, a 'material entity', that is, designed to motivate 'abductive references' and 'cognitive interpretations' derived from the complex system of social beliefs and practices within which the 'work' is conceived, produced, and used. Nikandre, the agent apparent in this example, commissions an anonymous craftsman to produce the work in order to inform the public at large of her devotion (as well as family situation and social standing). Thus (Fig. 7):

Nikandre ► Artist ► Statue ► Viewer

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97 Cf. Boardman 1978, 74–5.

98 Gell 1998, 21; 98–154.

99 Gell 1998, 103.

100 Snell 1953, 1–22; 1975: 13–29.

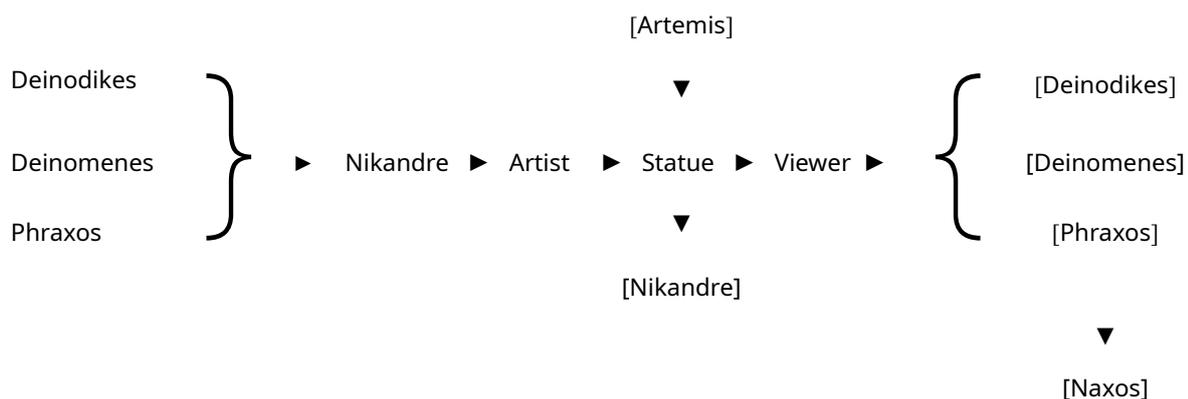
101 Whitley 2013, 397.

102 Gell 1998, 27.

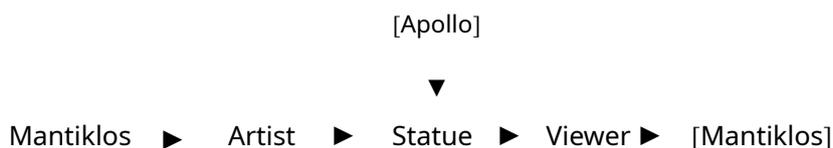
As an index of cultural values and social practices, however, the statue is imbued with agency by means of the goddess it portrays (whose divine powers it distributes) and the inscription it carries, the performative qualities of which distribute the agency not just of Nikandre, but also of the male members of her family – her father, brother, and husband (Fig. 8):



Artemis serves here as the Prototype, ‘represented in the index often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily’; at the same time, however, the goddess, a social construct in itself, appears in this scheme both as an Agent, to whom ‘causal responsibility for the existence and characteristics of the index’ is ascribed, as well as a Recipient, considered to ‘exert agency’ via the index. Nikandre is distributed as a socially constructed personhood (‘excellent daughter’ and so on), herself implemented as an index motivating abductive inferences to her family’s standing, as well as the nexus of political and social economies that have established the island of Naxos as a leader in Archaic society (Fig. 9):



The brackets framing the end results of [Deinodikes] etc, [Naxos], and so on suggest the multi-facetedness of the end-dynamics, created by the multitude of viewers and the multi-directionality of views generated. Although the schemes we use to suggest agency flows seem linear, they are in fact describing a non-linear, non-predictable dynamics. Along the same lines, Mantiklos is both the agent and the recipient of his own distribution, imagined by the reader of his dedicatory inscription as a very powerful person, as well as the recipient of the divine benevolence exerted by the statue, via Apollo (Fig. 10):



Similarly, the recipient of the agency exerted by the Kleobis and Biton dedication at Delphi is the city of Argos itself, acting also as the agent of the cultural values leading to the dedication in the first place. The quasi-mythologized, long-dead brothers, are evoked – in fact created – for the benefit of their viewers by their own effigies bearing witness to their existence so that the people of Argos can communicate their cultural values to a panhellenic audience.

The examples I discussed in this paper argue for a social construction of personhood in Early Greece; the 'persons' revealed by Early Greek art are relational, partible, as well as multi-authored.<sup>103</sup> Following French phenomenology and its emphasis on embodiment,<sup>104</sup> a wave of more recent studies,<sup>105</sup> have argued – albeit without reaching a universal consensus – for a more nuanced definition of personhood, permeable and fluid, though at the same time 'firmly embedded in social relations, moral traditions and historical conditions'.<sup>106</sup> Although these readings of the past – and especially its cultural productions such as art and the uses of art within the social nexus – might seem dehumanized and threatening,<sup>107</sup> they nevertheless allow for a layered, historically sound, and anthropologically convincing reading of 'art' as an index of cognitive inferences and cultural values enmeshed in a world consisting of things both seen and unseen, real and imagined, natural and supernatural.<sup>108</sup> Whereas, to return to this paper's main case study, traditional art-historical discourse would limit itself in noticing that Nikandre 'takes pride' in her family background as outlined in the inscription cut on her dedication,<sup>109</sup> the careful examination of the statue as an artifact imbued with its own materiality suggests that the flow of agency in this case, as with many others in Early Greece, was in fact reversed: it was Nikandre herself that was deployed as a social agent through a ritualized act of dedication meant to construct her, as well as the male members of her family, as 'real' persons entitled to affect society with their actions (or mere symbolic presence). Classical archaeology's traditional, fundamentally anthropocentric paradigm compels us to imagine that 7<sup>th</sup>- and 6<sup>th</sup>-c. korai display such a degree of 'individuality' so as to count as quasi-portraits of real girls, preferably the dedicators' own daughters;<sup>110</sup> as the discussion attempted here shows, however, the sheer materiality of these 'abstract', 'stylized', 'schematic' images constructs objectified, culturally-specific, non-personal versions of social personhood, to be distributed as generators of cultural meaning, through ritualized gestures and performative tropes deeply embedded in the social structure which they are used in order to maintain.

In Early Greece, personhood was constructed, distributed, and in effect 'dividualized' through the technologies of representation we tend to classify as 'Daedalic' or 'Archaic' styles (by which we mean 'primitive', 'unaccomplished' or plainly 'clumsy'); that is a representational economy prior to the naturalist turn of the 490s BC – which in our eyes seems 'revolutionary' more or less because it looks like an eager anticipation of the Renaissance. The *dividuality* of ancient persons is evident even later, well into the Classical period, when a single man, such as Dexileos son of Lyssanias, could be commemorated, by name, on three different memorials in Athens, even if his remains could be laid only in one place.<sup>111</sup> Dexileos, in this case, is distributed over space, offering the monumentalized materiality of his presence (as idealized imagery or merely through his name inscribed on marble) so that his state, kinfolk and immediate family may promote separate social and political agendas through three different monuments,

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103 Fowler 2004; see also Budja 2010.

104 Merleau-Ponty 1962.

105 Cf. Meskell 1996; Tarlow 1999; Thomas 2002; Voutsaki 2010. For a selection of recent studies with reference to Classical art, see the papers in Gaifman and Platt 2018, especially the Editors' introduction.

106 Voutsaki 2010, 74.

107 Fowler 2004, 86.

108 Cf. Creese 2017 for a case study referring to seventeenth-century Iroquoian art, leading to the conclusion the art, in the article defined as both "form-taking" and "form-relating", "generates emergent realities, proliferates kinds and makes relations, including novel thoughts and selves" (p. 652).

109 Despinis and Kaltsas 2014, 8 [G. Kokkorou-Alevra].

110 Cf. Karakasi 2001, 139–41.

111 On Dexileos and his stele, see Hurwit 2007.

all singly commemorating one person's passing from this life.<sup>112</sup> Even though by the time of Dexileos's death style in Greek art had changed dramatically, and effigies of gods and men now sought to imitate appearances – heavily idealized as they may have been – rather than simply, and poignantly, turn invisible entities into things present, we may still detect in these later works a deeply held belief on the ability of images to distribute personhood through their own materiality. Material agency helps us reevaluate cultural flows within Greek society to the extent that, on the one hand, we may form a better understanding of what 'style' is in Early Greece, and what Greek craftsmen – or indeed 'artists' – are really trying to achieve during the long 7<sup>th</sup> c. BC; and on the other hand, the notion of a 'dividual' personhood deployed within (and on the basis of) an intricate web of material and immaterial entanglements helps us reassess social dynamics at large.

Finally, the exploration of these case studies confirms that agency is not a faculty, but a process distributed across human/non-human networks.<sup>113</sup> This process decenters human actors in favor of non-human ones, who, in turn, become quasi-humanized. The *things* discussed in this paper – statues, pots, seals – are always *seen* in the process of becoming their own agents: it is the ocular exchange with their viewers (not always subject to the latter's initiative) that enables inert matter into becoming a cultural agent.

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112 Cf. Leader 1997, where the matter of multiple representations of the same individuals on grave stelae is further discussed.

113 Cf. Knappett 2008.

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