

Historical Materialism

Symposium at Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

Organized by Rietveld Fine Arts (Clare Butcher and Jasper Coppes)

30th of September 2015

What could have become just another dry series of lectures on the topic of historical materialism, soon became a magical travel into the fictitious and real world of fantastic(al) objects and the meaning we humans are able to attach to them. The symposium was an exercise in the associational power of thought and the wilful suspension of disbelief, and was hosted in the splendidly befitting (material) location of the Teylers Museum in Haarlem. The museum is the oldest one in the Netherlands, filled with objects such as minerals, stones, bones, paintings and scientific instruments, all items displayed in the exhibit personally collected, numbered and ordered by Mr Teyler himself.



Entering the auditorium at Teylers museum. Photo: C. Bengtsson



Clare Butcher introducing the symposium. Photo: C. Bengtsson

The symposium that was organized by Clare Butcher and Jasper Coppes on behalf of Rietveld Fine Arts, started off in the classically ambient auditorium with lectures by Jasper Coppes, Emilio Moreno and Noa Giniger. Jasper Coppes took us on a journey from peculiar looking stone formations on

graveyards in Scotland via eroding marble-lions at the Greek island of Delos and Armenian patterns on stones, to end up in the middle of a conflict between land preservation and mining at the Canadian, eastern island of Nova Scotia. Throughout his lecture Coppes made connections between the stones that he talked about and language, archaeological realities, and the very real power and impact that material can have.



Jasper Coppes. Photo: C. Bengtsson



Emilio Moreno. Photo: C. Bengtsson

The following speakers, Emilio Moreno and Noa Giniger both shared parts of their artistic practices wherein material items play an important role. Moreno, in a personal and performative way described his works, dealing with the tension between the original object and the copy. Via the process of precise replication of objects the emotional attachment and mythical reality that individuals tie to certain objects became exposed. Giniger, who has an expanded idea of what material is, among other things during her lecture played the song “Everybody loves somebody sometimes” sung by Frank Sinatra. Having removed all other verses of the song except the core sentence, she let the ‘material’ of the sung sentence interrupt her randomly during the course of the presentation and by doing so inscribed the sentence in a physical sense into the audience’s synapses.

After a coffee-break that concluded the lectures, the audience was split into groups and taken on guided tours through the museum. For visitors who had never before frequented the museum (including the writer of this text) the experience became an overwhelming one, where objects, visual and audible information showered the participant in a non-ending stream of interesting, fun and playful input. During the tour, the fictitious story of Mr Teyler as weather forecaster was told by David Bernstein, the participants 'accidentally' overheard a phone call by the young scientist Johann Beringer where he describes to his mother how he was betrayed by his colleagues (a work by Michelle Son that referred to the Lügensteine which are part of the Teylers collection), the amazing collection of stones by Jasper Coppes was presented in the mineral-room at the museum, and a secretive and intimate, site-specific exhibition made by Martine Neddham some twenty years ago in the museum was revisited and presented by Neddham herself. The guided tours were concluded with short group discussions where participants were encouraged to bring and share their own artistic practices into the light of historical materialism.



Guided tour by David Bernstein. Photo: C. Bengtsson



Martine Neddam. Photo: C. Bengtsson



Group discussion. Photo: C. Bengtsson

The symposium in the Teylers museum turned out to become a lively meeting and sharing event for people who are interested in material and the (hi)stories that are connected to them. During the afternoon the term 'historical materialism' opened up to encompass not only pure political theory but also gave way for the personal and intimate and the possibility to look at material on its own right.

At precisely 17.00 the Teylers museum closed and so did the symposium end; streaming out onto the sunlit street its participants left the brown enchanted world of objects behind. There, in the sharp and cleansing bright sunlight (the particular Dutch kind of sunlight that through the flat and water-full landscape is reflected and easily pierces its way through the skin) thoughts were brought to yet another material history, that of light-depicting 17th century Dutch painting. And the world materially continued to revolve.

Lecturers and guides: David Bernstein (Artist and resident at Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht), Clare Butcher (teacher and writer, connected to the Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam and the Piet Zwart Insitute, Rotterdam), Jasper Coppes (Artist and former student of Rietveld Fine Arts, currently

theory tutor at Master of Artistic Research in den Haag), Noa Giniger (Artist and guest teacher at Rietveld Fine Arts, studied at ENSBA, Paris and at the Ateliers, Amsterdam), Emilio Moreno (Artist and teacher at Rietveld Fine Arts, currently resident at Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht), Martine Neddham (Artist and teacher at Rietveld Fine Arts), Michelle Son (graduating student at Rietveld Fine Arts)

Text and Photographs: Cecilia Bengtsson