

HAUNTED AND ENHANCED, MATERIAL AND VIRTUAL: THE RHETORIC OF PRE-RAPHAELITE THINGS

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“Should we think of the process of objectification as akin to the smooth curves of an oscilloscope, binding people and objects ever closer, or can the alien and haunting presence of the things that we have made also produce disjunction and incoherence?”
– Christopher Pinney (256)

In this issue on material culture and the Pre-Raphaelites, authors present a variety of approaches to materiality as a networking bond, a critique of Victorian commodity culture and popular taste, and a reflection of the robust circulation of goods across the empire. In the course of their essays a dialectic emerges between observation and veracity, on the one hand, and imaginative virtual transformation, on the other hand. By virtual I refer to Anne Friedberg’s recapturing the meanings of this term long before it became tied to the digital. The virtual derives from the view of painting as a mirror (“producing substitutive, deceptive, illusory vision,” 15), not a window, the two Renaissance paradigms of painting: “Virtual images have a materiality and a reality but of a different kind, a second-order materiality, liminally immaterial...; the virtuality of the image does not imply direct mimesis, but a transfer – more like metaphor – from one plane of meaning and appearance to another” (11, 15). In this context, I argue that artists deployed and exploited the virtuality of images to comment on Victorian material goods and to perform their own aesthetic revisionism.

Material objects can be seen, described, and revised virtually to illuminate Pre-Raphaelite historiography (Jo Briggs), artists’ relational creativity (Pamela Fletcher), everyday objects elevated in art (Andrea Korda), the hermeneutics of domestic interiors (Imogen Hart), the complications of objects’ transmission across borders (Anne Helmreich), and the power of the virtual both to free and to constrain objects towards and away from their material life (Julie Codell). These essays also explore the relationship of artists to things:

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