

Monsters and Monuments: *Real Spaces* and the Survival of Art*

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Introduction: In the Spirit of “Real Spaces”

A truism of art history is that the lifespan of artworks can exceed their original social spaces: Artworks can sometimes be successfully transplanted into completely different settings where they continue to be valued. Does their potential to outlive their original context have to do with a specific feature of artworks’ ontology? Or with how human brains are wired? Or is it a mere function of their historical and social circumstances? In what follows, I will argue that David Summers’s *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* contains elements of a different answer.

As Summers puts it, “part of the historical interest of any work is determined by the series of real spaces through which it has passed.”¹ The historical interest stems from the fact that, throughout its material existence, one and the same art object may become the subject of different “decorums,” that is, “specialized habits and skills of responding competently and appropriately.”² To use Summers’s example, the reasons why Duccio’s *Maestà* (1311) in Siena’s city museum holds sway over us today are different from those

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¹ David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London, 2003), 52–53.

² Summers, *Real Spaces*, 54.

that made it a captivating image in fourteenth century in the city's cathedral.³ In other words, we shouldn't assume from an art object's continued relevance under different circumstances that it has maintained its original significance. Rather, a historical work is required to reconstruct the decorums and the social spaces in which the art object has acquired significance.

The fact that one and the same art object may remain meaningful as it moves through radically different circumstances opens the possibility that this is due to its inherent potential to be meaningful across contexts. And what complicates this possibility is that the reasons for its significance often change with the circumstances. In Western art history and theory, this complication has sometimes been treated not as a good reason to rule out the possibility, but rather as its confirmation, that is, as a consequence or a symptom of arthood. In other words, the complication has been viewed as a sign of the irreducible complexity of artworks' meanings.⁴

In the move from complication to complexity, the negative valence of the former turns positive in the latter. As Sam Rose characterizes the move, "to make an artwork more complex is to show how it may have all manner of unexpected ties to the historical moment in which it was produced, and all manner of significant connections to audiences and interests since."⁵ Complexity thus marks off artworks as subject to a specific ontology: Any true and successful work of art escapes or undermines at least to some extent its historical conditioning as well as any effort at straightforward conceptual classification of what it is and what it is about. It is an inexhaustible treasury of valuable experience. This condition establishes a special relationship of art to its times and places: an artwork can thrive in more than one context, revealing new facets of itself. The relationship does not mean that true artworks are guaranteed survival. Rather, it means that if artworks do outlive their intended circumstances *qua* artworks, it is because of their complexity.

³ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 356.

⁴ See Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (New York, 1982), 53–59.

⁵ Sam Rose, *Interpreting Art* (London, 2022), 71.

Real Spaces rejects the complication-to-complexity conversion:

As visitors to a modern museum of art, we must see and use a cult figure very differently from the worshippers for whom it was made. But the work itself is still normative, if in different ways, involving a different decorum, not because it is inherently polysemous (although people may always find it meaningful in many ways), but simply because it must be significant in any institutional circumstance into which it survives.⁶

This passage is buried half-way through *Real Spaces* and is left without immediate explanation. While Summers asserts that the reasons for the authority of the *Maestà* in the fourteenth-century Siena cathedral and in the city's museum today are different, he insists that the authority itself "must" prevail "in any institutional circumstance." But what are the reasons or causes for the continued normative pull of art objects outside of their original circumstances of use? In looking for an answer compatible with the spirit of *Real Spaces*, one must come to terms with two strictures that the book imposes: Its anti-formalism prevents any explanation involving universal aesthetic norms and its focus on art's spatial conditions rules out merely historical or sociological explanations.

The Lamassu as Icons

For the present purposes, I will simply accept the inner perspective of *Real Spaces*, including Summers's rejection of the complication-to-complexity conversion, and I will explore its consequences for the above formulated question about the normative pull of art beyond its original context.⁷ My main example will be the Assyrian lamassu guardian

⁶ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 356.

⁷ That is not to say that the perspective is beyond reproach. For example, and as I have claimed elsewhere, Summers's identification of aesthetics with formalism prevents him to see that his own "ambitious project of a postformalist world art history aims at developing tools for the reconstruction of historically specific norms for privileging certain looks of artefacts," that is, tools for reconstructing local aesthetics. Jakub

figures (figs 1–4). The lamassu are majestic winged bulls or lions with human heads that once guarded the gates of Neo-Assyrian palaces and now count among the highlights of major art museums.⁸ They are also typical examples of composite monster images that populated Mesopotamian imagery for millennia. Summers references them as prime instances of “icons.”⁹ Icons are substitutive images in that they occupy social space on behalf of an absent authority.¹⁰ Given the use of composite monster images as amulets in Mesopotamia, it is very well possible that these apotropaic sculptures were not meant to portray any specific creature at all, but rather to summon protective powers associated with the animals whose parts are depicted in the resulting monster. The parts which the lamassu figure is composed of—wings of an eagle, torso of a bull or a lion, human bearded head—represent powers associated with the substituted protective spirit. The sculpture is thus not supposed to trace truthfully the looks of an actual lamassu (for all we know, such protective spirits may have had no “looks”), but make it as fully present as possible through a combination of features associated with its powers.¹¹

Stejskal, *Objects of Authority: A Postformalist Aesthetics* (New York, 2023), 12. Recent developments in philosophical aesthetics hint at a possible convergence between global art history and aesthetic theory; see Dominic McIver Lopes, Samantha Matherne, Mohan Matthen, and Bence Nanay, *The Geography of Taste* (New York, 2024).

⁸ For details, see Virginie Danrey, “Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh: Genesis of an Iconographic Motif”, *Iraq* 66 (2004): 133–39.

⁹ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 325.

¹⁰ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 284–85.

¹¹ Philological study reveals that there is no account of the looks of a lamassu as a human headed winged bull or lion in the surviving cuneiform inscriptions; see Danrey, “Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh.”



Fig. 1: Lamassu, 721–705 BCE, Louvre.



Fig. 2: Lamassu, 883–859 BCE, Metropolitan Museum.



Fig. 3: Lamassu, 710–705 BCE, British Museum.



Fig. 4: Lamassu, 721–705 BCE, Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago.

Summers maintains that we (present-day, metropolitan observers) tend to misconstrue what such an iconic full presence entails.¹² Making the content present does not mean, as we would assume, resorting to optical naturalism in order to create a mirage of real presence. Such naturalistic images organize their figurative content in a virtual space and

¹² Summers, *Real Spaces*, 326.

with respect to a particular focal point. But iconic images in Summers's sense achieve their authority precisely by not organizing figurative content with respect to any particular point of view. Rather, they organize the content with respect to a planar (and not virtual) order. In the extreme, explicitly planar images suppress any notion of depth and as if roll out their figurative content onto a notional geometrical plane (as in fig. 5). Because the content does not recede into a virtual space, it is more present in the real space, while at the same time remaining as independent as possible of any implied viewing position (the viewer is not treated as a witness to a scene).¹³



Fig. 5: Temple of the Feathered Serpent, Xochicalco, Mexico, 9th century CE

As Summers notes, it is from this perspective that the otherwise incongruous feature of many lamassu starts to make sense.¹⁴ Seen obliquely (figs 2, 3), many lamassu figures appear as having five legs; they are depicted as walking in profile, but as standing when observed from the front. But the lamassu figure is not a statue mediating the experience of seeing what it represents. It is an icon that needs to appear as wholly present as possible at all times, with as little occlusion as possible.

The lamassu example can thus be used to argue that how we experience composite monster images today is radically different from how they were observed in archaic Assyria. The argument finds indirect evidence in the general manner monsters are framed in modern and contemporary cultures across the “lunatic fringe”, as Ursula Le Guin once

¹³ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 350–55.

¹⁴ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 325, 357.

referred to fantasy and science fiction genres.¹⁵ Le Guin claimed that the average American male was afraid of dragons not because he believed they had agency in his world, but rather because he feared the power of his own imagination to divert him from what was real and serious. Arguably, the cultural moment has shifted from the 1970s when Le Guin wrote her observations. The lunatic fringe has moved to the mainstream; fantastic beasts and composite creatures now populate large sections of popular culture such as global movie franchises or video games. But what hasn't changed, is that the beasts, no matter their naturalism, live in parallel, fictitious universes cordoned off from what is real and serious. They are the products of human fancy, of "the free play of the mind" understood as "the recombination of what is known into what is new."¹⁶ And thus, when we encounter the lamassu, we see distant, perhaps cumbersome efforts (five legs, really?) at fanciful representations of fantastic creatures, whereas they were meant to be icons, standing in for the supernatural powers and instantiating their agency.¹⁷ More importantly for the present purposes, however, the lamassu example can also serve to demonstrate that one and the same object can maintain its normative pull even under radically different circumstances: in today's major global art museums, the lamassu remain one of the main attractions, although they are subject to very different observation patterns (Summers's "decorums").

Generic Survival

Summers's assertion that the "normativity" in question cannot be explained by art's "inherently polysemous" nature, that is, by individual art objects' inexhaustible aesthetic character (and given the two mentioned strictures imposed by *Real Spaces*) suggests that we have to look for its conditions in its generic characteristics. One consequence of this claim is that art's survival into other circumstances would be a matter of the afterlife of an

¹⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" (1974), in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (New York, 1993), 34–40.

¹⁶ Le Guin, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?", 36; cf. Summers, *Real Spaces*, 324–26.

¹⁷ See Jakub Stejskal, "Substitution by Image: The Very Idea", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77 (2019): 55–66.

art *kind* rather than of a particular art object. So, although Summers references specifically one lamassu statue from the palace of Sargon II in Dur-Sharrukin (today's Khorsabad, Iraq), now in the British Museum (eighth century BCE; fig. 3), he could have just as well discussed another two from the same palace on view in the Louvre (fig. 1), or two pairs of lamassu from Nimrud (ninth century BCE), one in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 2) and another in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. That is, nothing would really change about any claims Summers makes with respect to the Neo-Assyrian lamassu guardian figure.

Once we allow for the possibility that the normativity Summers has in mind is made possible by the generic qualities of a particularly conditioned type and not a singular art object, the problem of the survival of an art object's normative pull extends now to the survival of the normativity of a whole category of artefacts. From this perspective, the matter of explaining the lasting relevance of an artefact across varying circumstances must also take into account the distribution of the type's tokens both temporally and geographically. For the distribution and spread of artefacts beyond their original circumstances should surely count as a supporting empirical evidence for the continued normativity of art objects or images.

However, notice that this kind of evidence is lacking in the case of the lamassu guardian figures. While they were reproduced at the centres of Neo-Assyrian power within the span of two centuries (ninth – eighth cent. BCE), they were not sculpted anywhere else.¹⁸ On the other hand, the fact that the lamassu were excavated, transported to museums (under the ideological pretext of imperialist accumulation), and exhibited there serves as much as empirical evidence of their normative pull in modern and current circumstances as would

¹⁸ With the notable exception of Achaemenid Persia where winged human-headed bulls, clearly inspired by the Assyrian lamassu, guarded the Gate of All Lands in Persepolis (5th cent. BCE) and likely also Gate R in Pasargadae (6th cent. BCE). See Edith Porada, "Classic Achaemenian Architecture and Sculpture" in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 2, *The Median and Achaemenian Periods*, ed. Ilya Gershevitch (Cambridge, 1985), 800–801; David Stronach, "Pasargadae", in Gershevitch, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 842.

their actual reproduction.¹⁹ Imagine, for example, if the excavated lamassu were left at their original sites and only replicas were displayed in Western museums—in fact, plaster casts of the lamassu were produced and exhibited at the Crystal Palace’s ‘Nineveh Court’ at Sydenham, London (1854–1866).²⁰ Both the reckless transportation to Europe and North America and their reproduction provide empirical evidence of the lamassu’s normative pull outside of their original circumstance.

That the empirical evidence carries similar weight in both the transportation and the reproduction of the lamassu leads us to an important observation about art’s potential to survive into radically different circumstances: depending on the decorum, it does not always matter whether what survives under the new circumstance is the identical art object or its reproduction that retains its generic properties. But what are the generic features of the lamassu?

Epidemiology of Composite Monster Images

¹⁹ On the historical context of their discovery and transportation, see Frederick N. Bohrer, “Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France”, *Art Bulletin* 80 (1998): 336–56; *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003); David Kertai, “The News from the East: Assyrian Archaeology, International Politics, and the British Press in the Victorian Age”, in *Art/ifacts and ArtWorks in the Ancient World*, ed. Karen Sonik (Philadelphia, 2021), 367–414.

²⁰ See Kevin M. McGeough, “Assyrian Style and Victorian Materiality: Mesopotamia in British Souvenirs, Political Caricatures, Theatrical Productions, and the Sydenham Crystal Palace”, in *Art/ifacts and ArtWorks in the Ancient World*, ed. Karen Sonik (Philadelphia, 2021), 415–46. By comparison, only plaster casts were made of Angkor Wat; see Michael Falser, “The First Plaster Casts of Angkor for the French *métropole*: From the Mekong Mission 1866–1868, and the Universal Exhibition of 1867, to the *Musée khmer* of 1874”, *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 99 (2012–13): 49–92; *Angkor Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritage*, vol. 1, *Angkor in France: From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions* (Berlin, 2020).

One obvious generic feature of the lamassu is that they are composite monster images. It is relevant in this context that Summers brings up the well-known westward transfer of such images: “Like other ‘eastern motifs’, composite ‘monsters’ like the lamassu passed into currency in the Mediterranean, where they were eventually to assume very different kinds of meaning.”²¹ To Summers, this transformation of meaning serves to demonstrate that the survival of motifs need not be correlated with the survival of uses: the images of composite monsters eventually ceased to function as icons and became images recording the imagined looks of fantastic beasts. And one may be tempted to assume that explaining what has driven the survival and diffusion of the composite monster motifs will also provide a sufficient answer to what makes composite monster images like the lamassu keep their normative pull in various contexts.

In a contribution to the scholarship addressing the geographical transfer of composite monster images, the archaeologist David Wengrow suggests that this has as much to do with modern humans’ evolved psychological biases as with the underlying social organization.²² He draws critically on the work in cognitive anthropology and cultural evolution, particularly that of Pascal Boyer, Dan Sperber, and the so-called epidemiology of representations.²³ Namely, he is inspired by the hypothesis, developed by Boyer, that what explains the omnipresence of supernatural representations in human cultures is their

²¹ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 325. For an overview of “monster studies,” see David Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Princeton, 2014), chap. 1; Caroline van Eck, “From Nineveh to Pergamon and Back: Animal Hybrids in German Historiography of the Nineteenth Century,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 81/82 (2024): 184–98.

²² Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters*.

²³ Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley, 1994); *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001); Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays* (Cambridge, 1985); “Why Are Perfect Animals, Hybrids, and Monsters Food for Symbolic Thought?” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 143–69.

minimal counterintuitiveness.²⁴ Supernatural representations are successful because they exploit our naturally evolved, hard-coded expectations, securing basic recognizability, while violating some of these expectations and thus attracting attention.

In this vein, Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld propose that the widespread practise of devising fantastic creatures not present in the local ecology is due to the naturally evolved mental module for “folk biology” that is manifested in the structural overlap in animal taxonomies different cultures have developed independently of each other. The quick and early adoption of the taxonomies by children supports the hypothesis. This module can then be exploited to produce “superstimuli” that exaggerate some characteristic features of a living kind, or, as is the case with fantastic monsters, combine these features, to produce a more attention-grabbing representation. Our expectations rooted in natural dispositions are both met and contradicted at the same time, securing for the representation its cultural attractivity and recurrence.²⁵

Following the suggestion from Sperber and Hirschfeld, Wengrow applies this idea to composite monster images, but asks why these seem to proliferate only in certain cultures. Out of the thousands of Palaeolithic depictions of living creatures surviving on cave walls, only a handful might qualify as monsters. We see a real proliferation of monster imagery only starting with the fourth millennium BCE and the circulation of monsters on seals via trade routes from Mesopotamia to Egypt and the Mediterranean. Wengrow suggests that the spread of composite monster images has as much to do with the underlying social organization as with modern humans’ evolved mental biases. His answer is that composing distinct animal parts together requires a certain mindset that is born out of the necessities of early forms of urban life, which include the introduction of bureaucratic state apparatus, incipient stages of mechanical reproduction, as well as dwellings made of composite furniture and architecture.²⁶

²⁴ Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*.

²⁵ Dan Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld, “The Cognitive Foundations of Cultural Stability and Diversity,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2004): 40–46.

²⁶ Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters*, 33–73.

The details of Wengrow's proposal need not detain us. Suffice it to say that according to him, the successful spread of composite monster images under various circumstances of use cannot just be explained by their minimally counterintuitive nature. Their replication coincides with the mindset of "seeing like a state," that is, of seeing the world as composed of separable and combinable parts.²⁷ However, Wengrow does not stop to consider why these composite monster images continue to attract our attention today (as already mentioned, there is no shortage of dragons and other fantastic beasts in our global popular culture). Could one extend his argument about the nature of early urban civilizations to the present and thus explain the pull the lamassu have over us today?

Philippe Descola, a scion of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, rules this option out. According to him, Wengrow's line of reasoning gets the causal order backwards. It is not that the social transformation that characterizes urbanization precipitated the bureaucratic seeing like a state that favours modular assembly in various media (architecture, hieroglyphics, seals). Rather, combining disparate parts into a coherent whole is a typical manifestation of what Descola calls "analogist ontology" that had already been shared by the Mesopotamian archaic communities prior to their centralization into early states. The state apparatus and the technological innovations only made it easier for the imagery to spread.²⁸ Descola supports his claim by pointing to the existence of communities producing composite monsters that have existed outside, or even in defiance, of any state structures.²⁹ What they have in common with the early urban societies is the understanding and organizing of their environment in terms of analogies that help make sense of the perceived irreducible heterogeneity of the world.³⁰ And the composite monster is "the

²⁷ Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters*, 110.

²⁸ Philippe Descola, *Les Formes du visible: Une anthropologie de la figuration* (Paris, 2021), 309–10.

²⁹ Descola, *Les Formes du visible*, 310–19.

³⁰ Descola, *Les Formes du visible*, 298–99.

classic figure of the analogist ontology that makes it possible to identify with the greatest probability an image as depending on this register.”³¹

Importantly, in Descola’s view, analogist ontology is foreign to the naturalist construction of the world that has governed the West since early modernity. In other words, that the lamassu have kept their normative pull under modern Western conditions cannot really be explained by pointing to structural similarities between the Neo-Assyrian and modern cultures. That is not to say that within Descola’s theoretical framework, pockets of alien ontologies cannot survive within a hegemonic one. As he insists, analogist ontology informed European cosmology till early Modernity and its residues are still palpable in Western thinking today.³²

Formatting

My aim here is not to adjudicate on the dispute between Wengrow and Descola. The point is rather to understand the nature of their respective approaches and their limits when it comes to explaining the continued draw of the lamassu. Importantly, both Wengrow’s and Descola’s strategies are ill suited to address the question we have been occupied with. To recall, our interest lies in what makes a physical art object sustain its normative pull under different circumstances where what is understood by “normativity” – what I take Summers to understand by it – is the art object’s potential to figure centrally in a social space and attract a pattern of habits and skills (“decorum”). The assumption is that the art object provides by its generic physical appearance and presence reasons to respond to it in specific ways. And if it can maintain this potential for other decorums, this must be because of the nature of its generic appearance. That is why Summers claims that the art object “must” prevail “in any institutional circumstance.”³³ The respective strategies adopted by Wengrow and Descola, on the other hand, do not really address the problem of the

³¹ Descola, *Les Formes du visible*, 303: *La figure classique de l’ontologie analogiste, celle qui permet avec la meilleure probabilité d’identifier une image comme relevant de ce registre.*

³² Descola, *Les Formes du visible*, 299.

³³ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 356.

normative pull. With them, the focus is no longer on explaining the impact an artefact makes by being placed or reproduced in varying social spaces, but rather on how its content's abstracted structure betrays a mindset, an "ontology," or a social organization behind it.

Wengrow's and Descola's explanations can be usefully compared with the attitude of the cultural evolutionist. The latter is devoted to the study of cultural stability and change, one that instead of looking at norms and values that motivate human actions and reflections focuses on aggregated effects of individual behaviours. In this perspective, cultural change amounts to a change in the distribution rate of a pattern of behaviour over time within a population and it may be measured and compared to other such developments in other populations. The pattern's stable, increasing, or decreasing occurrence can then be linked to an underlying feature (such as an evolved mental module or bias) explaining the statistical trend.³⁴ By contrast, Wengrow's and Descola's explications of why people make composite monster images do not (or at least not only) rest on discerning what makes them culturally attractive due to humans' innate biases, but rather on identifying underlying social or cosmological structures that shape the meaning-making activities of humans.³⁵

³⁴ See Tim Lewens, *Cultural Evolution: Conceptual Challenges* (Oxford, 2015).

³⁵ More could be said on the overlaps and differences among the three approaches. For example, unlike the cultural evolutionists, Wengrow is more attentive to regional historical conditions, the "social or political particulars," which, as the cognitive anthropologist Olivier Morin comments, rob his approach of the predictive power that the evolutionists' general hypotheses, theories, and models aim at. See Morin's comments in "*The Origins of Monsters*" *Book Club*, ed. Olivier Morin (The International Cognition and Culture Institute, 2017), 40, 42–43, <https://cognitionandculture.net/wp-content/uploads/TOM.pdf>. As for Descola, although he does not see eye to eye with the evolutionists, his methodology aspires at a similar level of generality. His brand of structuralism could well be characterized as "transcendental" as he devises his four ontological registers (analogism, totemism, animism, naturalism) from four basic ways a human subject can relate to other non-human beings. See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago, 2014); Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An*

Yet Wengrow's suggestion that composing distinct animal parts together requires an urban mindset and Descola's argument from ontology remain still at some distance from Summers's approach. Wengrow and Descola treat the material objects carrying composite monster imagery as documents of underlying circumstances, whether it be of a cosmology, an urban constellation, or a mental bias toward minimally counterintuitive representations. For this reason, they pay limited attention to differences in medium, format, setting, and delivery of the composite monster image carriers. This approach leaves largely untouched the question about the effects concrete objects were supposed to have in their particular social and spatial settings. In other words, Wengrow and Descola contribute little to our understanding of the historical motivations and reasons for particular monster images' mode of presentation, as their primary focus is on how their general content's structure betrays a mindset or a social organization behind them.

It turns out that asking about the conditions of art objects' normative pull across contexts – for example, what makes the lamassu meaningful across these contexts – is a different question from asking what makes one of their generic features (say, composite monster imagery) take hold in various populations. The former is the question Summers is interested in, the latter occupies Wengrow or Descola. But we must not understand the nature of this difference to trace neatly the fault line between “explainers” and “understanders,” traditionally the two main tribes in the historical and social sciences.³⁶ Understanders, typically humanists, will maintain that, especially in cases of ancient or otherwise remote art, any overlap between what attracts us to the object and what made it relevant in its original context will likely be minimal and superficial. In any case, it will be of little import when it comes to *understanding* (or interpreting) the art object's cultural relevance – that is, people's motivations in producing and attending to it – and therefore

Anthropological Exposition (Cambridge, 2017), 62–65.

³⁶ I borrow the terms from Paul A. Roth, “Beyond Understanding: The Career of the Concept of Understanding in the Human Sciences,” in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, ed. Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth (Malden, 2003), 311–33.

also reasons for its appearance.³⁷ If one wants to know what draws one to the lamassu today, the understanders would suggest that one look at the circumstances of one's own culture rather than the nature of the object.

Explainers, typically of a more scientific or naturalistic bent, hedge their bets on the overlap, no matter how slight. They will treat the fascination objects like the lamassu evoke today as an indication of a shared baseline of human responses to such objects. Contemporary fascination will hence be a suitable subject of psychological experiments and the incidence of similar objects in other cultures will document the presence of similar responses. All this will help *explain* better why humans might be attracted to such art objects.³⁸

The understanders talk of meanings, intentions, and reasons, not necessarily to imply that adequate or sanctioned responses to artworks need always "make sense" or be "reasonable," but rather to suggest that artworks provide grounds for responding to them mediated by the norms and habits of a given culture—this is the case also when artworks subvert or undermine these very norms and habits. Either way, their "meaning" cannot be divorced from their context. The explainers ignore the peculiarities of the local context for the benefit of explaining why human beings in general would resort and respond to such

³⁷ To mention a notorious example, treating "primitive" premodern or non-cosmopolitan art as sharing in the same sensitivities that gave rise to "primitivist" Modernism is for the understander an illegitimate move insofar as the treatment assumes competence about a practice without acknowledging its participants' perspective; see the (at times ill-tempered) debate in the wake of the 1984 exhibition on "'Primitivism' in Twentieth-Century Art" at MoMA, anthologized, in part, in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, ed. Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York, 1998), 149–258.

³⁸ See Gregory Currie, "Art and the Anthropologists," in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience*, ed. Arthur Shimamura and Stephen Palmer (Oxford, 2012), 107–28; see also his critical remarks about the explanation – understanding distinction in Gregory Currie, "Aesthetic Explanation and the Archaeology of Symbols," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 233–46.

means of communication. Whereas in the former case, the goal is to shed light on the perspective internal to the “source culture,” the latter approach provides an external perspective that aims to deliver as general an account as possible.

The centrality of “planarity” to the arguments Summers develops in *Real Spaces* shows that his strategy cannot be easily assimilated to either the explainers’ or the understanders’ approach. Planarity is the ability to organize relations within an art object with respect to a geometrically planar order (that is, with respect to symmetry, horizontality, verticality, centrality, frontality, and so on).³⁹ Planarity itself is abstracted (in an historical process the account of which is arguably *the* grand narrative of *Real Spaces*) from real spatial conditions that underdetermine any human form of life (for example, human “cardinality”—uprightness and its spatial implications). Crucially, planarity provides the central condition for any means of artistic presentation; any art object’s formatting relies on it to situate the observer vis à vis the object in real as well as social spatial terms (we saw the implications of this in the previous discussion of explicit planarity in the case of icons). Formatting, so understood, provides boundaries—or external limits—for the variety of patterns of behaviour (decorums) that the art object may warrant. A Summersian answer to the question about what makes possible the continued normative pull of art objects outside of their original circumstances must thus take into consideration how the changing circumstances of use exploit their formatting, or, to put the same point differently, how the art objects’ formatting can sustain sometimes very different patterns of use. Whereas the understander seeks to explain the conditions of meaningfulness in the inner perspective of a given culture, Summers approaches these conditions in terms of external limits for decorums.

It is thus the formatting of the art object—its size, framing, but also the general organization of its figurative content with respect to its material carrier and the viewer—that provides external constraints on the sorts of decorums involved in responding to the art object and it is its formatting that anchors the continued normative pull of the art object. The pull cannot be addressed by abstracting from the art object’s formatting just one feature—for example, a lamassu’s nature of a composite monster image—that it shares

³⁹ See Summers, *Real Spaces*, 369–80.

with other, otherwise very differently formatted objects (seals, small amulets, and so on). The class of objects identical in their formatting (the lamassu class) is different from the class of objects sharing a formatting feature (the class of composite monster images). Interpreting the spread or attraction of the former across various contexts will accordingly require paying attention to what conditions of spectatorship and use their formatting implies or sanctions, whereas explaining the distribution of the latter across various populations is only possible when one abstracts from these very conditions.

It is easy, however, to overlook the difference between the two general approaches, as both involve scaling upwards from individual objects. Once we abstract from one art object (say, the Dur-Sharrukin lamassu) to the general formatting of a series (all similar lamassu), abstracting from the formatting to the motif (composite monster) may seem as a harmless next step. After all, in both cases the subject matter is generic features of a class of objects, not one unique art object. Even Summers moves seamlessly from describing the circumstances motivating the formatting of the Dur-Sharrukin lamassu to discussing the successful spread of composite monster imagery westward.⁴⁰ The move is innocuous as long as it does not imply that considering the normative pull of the lamassu answers the question of what made Mesopotamian composite monster motifs take root in the Eastern Mediterranean, and vice versa. That a lamassu is a composite monster may certainly play a part in answering the question, but its other features that contribute to its formatting as a lamassu—such as size, spatial positioning, or shape—will not help us make sense of the transfer of sphinxes or griffins in various formats and media. (In fact, the historical transfer in question did not even involve the palatial lamassu, as it predates their existence by more than two millennia.) Nor will answering the question solve the problem of why the lamassu may successfully figure in various decorums. If we want to explain the normative pull of the lamassu across various decorums, we cannot just point to their nature of composite monster images; we also need to pay attention to the real spatial conditions that their formatting implies.

Conclusion: Documents and Monuments

⁴⁰ Summers, *Real Spaces*, 325.

I started with a truism: art objects' lifespan can exceed their original circumstances. They can be successfully transplanted into completely different settings where they continue to be meaningful, if for very different reasons. As suggested, that is likely the case with the lamassu on display in present-day museums. Because they remain meaningful for different reasons, a question about what makes them so cannot be answered by referring to an uninterrupted interpretive tradition. There must be something about the lamassu that makes them the focus of very different patterns of meaning-making. *Real Spaces* offers a perspective that avoids dissolving the lamassu in their underlying conditions—understanders' local cultural norms or explainers' general workings of the human mind—and thus losing sight of what in their appearance causes them to be the focus of various patterns of behaviour. In the Summersian perspective, when it comes to trying to make sense of the reasons and causes behind the looks of ancient or archaic art, the major fault line should not be that between explainers and understanders, but rather between those (like Summers) who want to comprehend the impact of the art object's appearance on its environment(s) and those (like Wengrow or Descola) who want to use the art object as a document of underlying structures or currents, whether social or mental.

A way of understanding the contrast I am drawing is to redeploy a familiar pair of concepts, that of "document" and "monument." In the humanities, exploration of the distinction, recently revived by John Guillory, has a long and grand pedigree, which includes the likes of Alois Riegl, Erwin Panofsky, Michel Foucault, Jacques Le Goff, or Paul Ricoeur.⁴¹

⁴¹ See John Guillory, "Monuments and Documents: On the Object of Study in the Humanities", in *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago, 2022), 105–24; Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin" (1903), trans. Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, in *Oppositions Reader*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York, 1998), 621–51; Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline", in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, 1955), 1–25; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 7, 137, 139; Jacques Le Goff, "Documento/Monumento", in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, ed. Ruggiero Romano (Turin, 1978), 5:38–43; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans.

Typically, this exploration has aimed at relativizing the difference: supposedly impartial documents turn out to have been intentional monuments all along;⁴² or what for someone is a mere document providing context to a monument is for another the real monument.⁴³ For my purposes, I want to retain Panofsky's understanding of documents as instruments the humanist uses to access their subject-matter (the monument), but I want to resist the implied relativization (someone's document is someone else's monument), for I believe it overlooks an important feature of monumentality, that is, its aiming to retain relevance beyond the monument's original context.⁴⁴

Let us consider again Wengrow's account. To be sure, there are obvious overlaps between Wengrow's and Summers's explanations. Wengrow's suggestion that composing distinct animal parts together requires a certain mindset that is born out of the necessities of urban living could be neatly incorporated into Summers's larger narrative about the historical development of planarity and the potential it opened for creating composite structures and images from the Neolithic onwards. But Wengrow treats the actual material objects carrying composite monster imagery as documents of underlying circumstances, whether it be of the urban constellation or of the psychological bias toward counterintuitive representations. By contrast, in *Real Spaces* the spotlight is always reserved for the monuments—art objects in their real and social spatial settings. That does not mean they cannot play the role of documents helping us understand the underlying developments; but the goal of these understandings is always to appreciate the reasons for art objects' mode of presentation in real as well as social spatial terms. What is more, the question of art's continued normative pull helps bring to the fore another important aspect of monumentality, that is, the potential of the monument to transcend local context and address audiences beyond the here and now. When we search for the enabling conditions

Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 1988), 117–19.

⁴² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 117–19.

⁴³ Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline"; Guillory, "Monuments and Documents".

⁴⁴ See Jakub Stejskal, "Monumental Origins of Art History: Lessons from Mesopotamia", *History of Humanities* 9 (2024).

of an art object's normative pull beyond its intended social space, we are searching for the source of its monumentality.

Let me close with a note on the place of *Real Spaces* in the recent theoretical landscape. What made it very much of its time when it appeared more than twenty years ago was that its perspective rhymed with a current swing away from historicism, cultural relativism, and ideology critique—roughly, interpretive strategies cultivated by understanders and relying on cultural context as the sole or primary means of interpretation—toward forms of comprehension that would acknowledge what has sometimes been called the “agency” of objects and materials, that is, their potential to shape independently the nature of their relations with humans. Writing on the heels of these developments, the cultural and literary theorist Rita Felski advocates a “cross-temporal thinking” that would recognize artworks’ potential to “resonate” with audiences at various historical periods.⁴⁵ According to her, that they thus resonate is due to both the contingent social constellations they happen to pass through and what they bring to these constellations themselves. However, Felski insists that we must not understand the latter “affordances”, as she calls them (borrowing the term from J. J. Gibson), as residing in artworks’ perennial aesthetic appeal anchored in their formal qualities. Doing so would deny the necessary mediating role of context that, for example, makes things come in and out of fashion. Rather, art objects “‘make available’ certain options for moving through them” that “are the very reason that [social] connections [involving them] are forged and sustained.”⁴⁶ In other words, neither the art object nor its context can secure or explain by themselves the nature of their reception.

Felski says very little about the nature of these affordances. But one does not have to commit to her championing Bruno Latour’s actor network theory (or other popular options such as Jane Bennett’s “vibrant matter” materialism or Alfred Gell’s art nexus anthropology) to see the appeal of an approach that would recognize the power of art to transcend its circumstances without closing “our eyes to the historicity of artworks.”⁴⁷ The historian of Mesopotamian art Zainab Bahrani explores this path, for example, without explicitly subscribing to any of the “new materialisms.” She interprets the fascination of

⁴⁵ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015), chap. 5.

⁴⁶ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 165.

modernist sculptors like Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore with Near Eastern ancient art not just as “an imposition of a modern form of viewing,” but as responding to “something in the ancient sculpture that transcends time” and that “was recognized and even intended” by the Mesopotamian artists.⁴⁸ For example, she suggests that the modern concept of the sublime is not completely unrelated to the Akkadian word *melammu*, typically rendered as “aura, divine radiance, awesome splendour.”⁴⁹ According to Bahrani, the concept was associated with vast natural objects such as mountains as well as with colossal sculptures like the lamassu. Our experiencing awe in their presence, Bahrani suggests, is not a completely unreliable guide to explaining what made its makers endow them with the remarkable appearance that they have.⁵⁰

But perhaps Bahrani is too optimistic about the prospects of such an experiential overlap. As suggested above, there are good reasons to think that the content of our experiences of the lamassu may be very different from the original mandated responses. The perspective of *Real Spaces* meets the challenge formulated by Felski while stopping short of proclaiming the possibility of re-enacting remote experiences.

⁴⁷ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 154. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, 2010); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

⁴⁸ Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London, 2014), 25.

⁴⁹ Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*, 242n33.

⁵⁰ Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*, 45–46.