MTI PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Caltech and The Huntington have established a collaborative interdisciplinary research program, formally titled “Materialities, Texts and Images,” whose aim is twofold: to investigate the historical relations between the material world and different forms of cultural representation; and to examine the strategies by which knowledge and taste have been and are constituted. The object of study within MTI is neither a form (the novel, graphic culture, the book), nor a discipline (history, art history, literary criticism), nor a place (America, Asia, Europe, the Atlantic, the Globe), nor even a specific time period (early modern, modern or contemporary), but rather methodological: a focus on the dynamics between material and other (ideational, calculative, inductive) forms of instantiation. With that focus, how can we reframe and rethink the processes that shape the production/creation, dissemination and reception of knowledge and taste?

The Caltech/Huntington Collaboration.

MTI is a broadly conceived inter-disciplinary program designed to connect the academic interests of faculty in Caltech’s Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), who trained within different disciplines, but work within a division that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, both with one another, and with the resources, individual, departmental and institutional, of The Huntington. It links the research interests of literary scholars with historians of many stripes (economic and social, cultural and intellectual, as well as historians of science and philosophy). The project has three main components: this fellowship program to bring untenured young scholars to Pasadena/San Marino to work on their own projects and help coordinate activities between the two institutions and across disciplines; a series of workshops designed to bring together the work of scholars within Caltech, The Huntington, and the academy at large; and regular informal mechanisms (such as work-in-progress presentations) to maintain year-long continuity in the program.

Scholarly Agenda.

MTI aims to build upon two of the most important and innovative trends in the humanities and social sciences over the last twenty years: an increased attention to the importance of ‘things’ and their ‘thingness’ (or materiality) in relation to the human (not that the human is without materiality); and an acute awareness of the processes (some bearing on the material, others not) by which man’s relations to the world are shaped. It is worth looking at these contexts in more detail.

1. Materiality.

The 1980s and 1990s can now be seen as the high point of a humanistic concern with language, texts and signification, a preoccupation that originated in linguistics and literary studies but which came (with varying degrees of success) to colonize many other
humanistic disciplines. Yet, even at this juncture there were already signs of a move away from what was very much a dematerialized and highly abstract endeavor. The shift can first be observed in the sociology of science and science studies, notably in the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, which deliberately sought to erode the line between humans and things, and to emphasize the agency that material objects might have in scientific inquiry. But it was also found in historical work on material culture and consumption; in anthropological work on the social life of things; and in the literary-critical engagement with the nexus of literary and material histories, as with genres (the “it-narrative”) where objects assume a voice of their own. At the same time, there emerged not only a substantial body of literature addressing the history of material texts, but also a growing rapprochement between conservators and art scientists, on the one hand, and art historians and curators, on the other, in understanding the relationship between the facture and meaning of works of art.

In all of these fields there has been a strong recognition that humans and things have had a long and tangled relationship which text-based scholarship might illuminate but can hardly comprehend. Underlying such work is also a growing skepticism about the subject/object divide and its basic protocols (where humans are assumed to be agents that act upon objects) for understanding experience and knowledge. Admittedly, the range of relations between people and things posited within different disciplines is very broad. On the one hand the long-standing tradition of things-as-objects is alive and well, notably in economics and economic history with their investigations into the processes by which things were and are rendered as commodities; and in social and cultural history, which have been concerned with the role of objects as vehicles of symbolic communication and distinction, and as a means for the shaping of identities. But more recently scholars have tried to move beyond the human/subject thing/object relation. The emphasis on the materiality of objects and the object-form of the human (i.e. embodiment) imply complex relationships in which practices and performances are shaped and informed by one another: one of the most obvious and frequently cited examples is the case of reading, another is the laboratory experiment, though there are a whole series of human routines or habits to which the same dynamic would apply. Here the aim of the program is not to advocate one particular version of the relationship between humans and things, but rather to explore the ways in which that relationship could be understood to work in particular cases.

Making materiality a major focus of scholarly investigation brings together different constituencies with different sorts of expertise, breaking down the mind/hand distinction that has been so powerful in establishing hierarchies of knowledge. Thus in both literary and art history, the expertise of librarians, archivists, curators, conservators and technicians – of those whose task has been to attend to the material properties of texts and art works – becomes less a system of support for the real (abstract) endeavor of scholarship than an integral part of our understanding of the import of such meaning-bearing artifacts.
2. **Techniques for the constitution of knowledge and taste.**

A second important area of recent inquiry in the humanities has been the attention paid to the processes and practices by which knowledge and taste have been constituted. The sources of this concern probably lie in the Foucauldian tradition of investigating predominant or hegemonic epistemes, though now with much less emphasis on their structural power than on the processes of their creation (an emphasis shared, of course, with the concerns of those studying materiality). One of the largest areas of scholarly investigation has been the study of collecting practices and the articulation and presentation of objects, texts, artworks, and naturalia. What began primarily as a history of collections – the analysis of surviving bodies of material – has increasingly become an investigation of the processes and techniques by which collections were constituted, articulated and, in some cases, lost or deliberately dispersed. Similarly, there has been increasing interest in the processes of archiving, of library building (both structures and their contents) and of bibliographic accumulation; and growing attention to the processes through which what we come to know has been informed by the ways in which we have accumulated, classified and arranged the resources for knowledge and taste. This has been paralleled, at a less institutional level, by studies of the processes of intellectual and aesthetic investigation: the use of excerpts, note-taking, diagramming, modeling, common-placing, filing systems, indexes and the like.

Again, The Huntington offers special opportunities here, not just as a great repository of materials (textual, visual, graphic and printed), but also in itself as a living laboratory for the investigation of the processes by which knowledge and taste have been shaped. The history of the institution – the development of its collections and archives (already the subject of analysis by some members of The Huntington staff) - provides an ideal case study of the processes with which the MTI program is concerned.