It seemed to her that everyone was shouting too loudly and moving too quickly. This sensation was accompanied by nausea, and she had had the impression that something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself.

—Elena Ferrante, My Brilliant Friend

Romance is a plot driven by interaction among willful, desiring persons within constraining envelopes of social conventions and natural laws. In romance, both the desire-shaping resistance to will and the acquiescence of the world in human ambitions are concretized in things, naturalia and artifacts alike, endowed with unexpected powers. Characters acquire, exchange, hide, and converse with rings, swords, articles of clothing, trees, birds, and the like. According to Italo Calvino, “The magic object is an outward and visible sign that reveals the connection between people or between events.” Such tokens function as protagonists in medieval legends and sagas, chivalric romances, the neochivalric epics of Ariosto or Spenser, and the modern novel. “Around the object there forms a kind of force field that is in fact the territory of the story itself.”1 The thing arrests and then restarts the plot. Interactions with things or animals substitute for interpersonal, psychological relations when the literary means to represent such relations are lacking. The bundle of shifting desires and emotions that is a person can more easily “settle” on a jewel or a horse than on another unstable person.

In the romance, the thing provides a background against which personhood is profiled. The thing shares some qualities with persons but lacks other crucial attributes such as will, voice, or conscience. The effects of agency granted to things within the fiction intensify awareness of the non-human qualities of such things outside the fiction, in reality. The gem or the ribbon comes into focus as a thing, as the reduced double of a person, inside a narrative. The thing is a precipitate of story that arrives to assist the story.

ABSTRACT This paper argues that the “anthropomorphizing” discourses that attribute agency to images and things, stressing their efficacy and power, are motivated by a perception of a lack in the artwork, or in art itself. REPRESENTATIONS 133. Winter 2016 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 130–51. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2016.133.5.130.
The thing decenters personhood and is at the same time anthropomorphic, in the sense that it stands in for something that is prior to or outside the human, but is customized by the story for human apprehension. The anthropomorphism of animal or artifact in romance is uncanny because partial.

In the last several decades the device of partial anthropomorphism, or attribution of some human qualities to nonhuman entities, has been favored within critical and historical writing across several disciplines. The project signaled by the phrase “Images at Work,” title of the conference from which the present special issue arises, is a good example. Someone who writes or speaks about what images “want,” the “life” of things, or “things that talk” would seem to be making a claim, against common sense, about reality. I am personally unconvinced that pictures desire anything, or that images think, or that things live. Awaiting better demonstrations of such unlikelihoods, I can only speculate about what people really mean when they speak this way.

In the literary mode of romance, partial anthropomorphization signals not only an awareness of the limits of narrative to convey the whole of personhood but also an awareness of the limits of a person’s ability to control his or her own destiny. Similarly, the modern critical trope of anthropomorphization signals a recognition of, perhaps even a resignation to, the limits of personhood. To speak about nonsentient things as if they were almost persons is to ironize the concept of the person. It is a way of speaking that calls attention to the way persons win unearned prestige by inserting themselves in advantageous positions within sentences. Sentences create subjects by associating substantives with predicates, including verbs. The subject is the source of the movement produced by the predicates. Grammar invites anthropomorphism, for inside a sentence or a plot you can simply replace “she” with “it,” and the verb does the rest. Sentences and plots threaten to expose the human subject as an artifact of grammar. The trope of misanthropic anthropomorphization is basically contending that people are things that have been activated by grammar. The trope is antifictional, discrediting modern stories—not just romances, but any story that exaggerates the autonomy of the person. The trope is antihumanist, if humanism is defined as the attribution of too much humanity to people. Writing reveals that from a standpoint outside writing, things would look more like persons and persons would look more like things. To redescribe reality as a series of interactions among persons and things is to replace the hierarchy of animate and inanimate entities with a nonhierarchical network.

The discourses of the “life of things,” actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology restore credence to pre- or nonmodern anthropomorphisms and animistic psychological habits. The tactical, calculated anthropomorphisms of modern scholarly discourse overturn the modern
common sense that rejects animism as superstition, undoing invidious hier-
archies of enlightened and unenlightened, Western and non-Western, mod-
ern and unmodern. Enlightened thought dismissed belief in an animated
cosmos as a fiction permitting people to imagine that they participate in an
eexternal world greater than they are. Enlightenment was an assault on
anthropomorphism, dedicated to replacing comfortable human-shaped fic-
tions such as “God” with the impersonal laws of physics. The modern critical
discourse of animism exposes hidden anthropocentrism within enlight-
ened thought that support an “imperialism” of people over animals, the
earth, or things. The deepest aim of the new, counter-Enlightenment ani-
mism may not be so remote from those of traditional animisms, namely, to
persuade each other that we participate in something greater than our-
selves: if not a cosmos, then an ecology or a system.

The visual arts are well suited to this project, even better suited than the
literary arts, because images, anyway, have limited means of reproducing the
words or gestures that carry interpersonal relations. A simple, effective way
of reducing the person is to deprive him or her of speech. The image or
picture delivers a partial person, outside grammar. Within a picture, the
leveling of people and things is already half-accomplished. “In iconic com-
munication,” according to Gregory Bateson, “there is no tense, no simple
negative, no modal marker.” Modality, or open-endedness, is a key to any
ambitious model of the person as emergent, contingent, and unlimited.
Because art has difficulty reproducing emergence, intersubjectivity reappear-
within art as misrecognition and misunderstanding, as if people all
along, each time they try to communicate, have been mistaking things for
people. The pictorial arts, where persons and things share a mutism, give
the cue to the recent critical discourses—materialist, antihumanist, and
antihierarchical—that redistribute agency across a spectrum of entities. It
is especially in art history, art criticism, and art theory that the anthropo-
morphizing discourses of the thing have taken hold.

The visual arts have a privileged relation to things that poetry and nar-
rative can only emulate. A depiction transfers the look of things from the
world onto a surface or a screen, reframing them. An artistic depiction,
making a virtue out of a necessity, is generated by an artist’s intuition, an
awareness, that lies open to things instead of bearing down on them or
researching them. Empirical science, by contrast, starts with appearances,
mistrusts them, and then proposes models of reality that account for the
appearances. Hermeneutics, sharing with empiricism a mistrust of appear-
ances, is an attempt to find deeper sense behind the surface meanings of
texts and persons. Depiction proceeds differently. Depiction suspends the
skepticism and dissatisfaction with appearance that drives both scientific
and hermeneutic inquiry. The stable “thing” that depiction recovers from
the flux of experience inaugurates—even from within an artwork—a resistance to the open-endedness of the artwork demanded by hermeneutics. Excerpts from the perceptual field reappear inside the pictorial work of art isolated and immobilized, as “forms.”

Painters painting in a certain modern mode isolated things from the environment and, by flattening and framing them, made them things once over. By delivering apples or houses as things, and extending this treatment to people, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, and Vincent van Gogh introduced closure, opacity, and nonresponsiveness as contents of art. Painting in this central, not marginal, tradition hyperbolized its own simplifying, condensing operation by reproducing reifying operations in the modern environment. Collage and pop art revealed the ways that media or consumer cultures already created still lifes. These developments ran in tandem with the autonomization of the artwork. Painted canvases translated out of the inhabited environment and into galleries and museums became themselves more like things, opaque and dense. The artwork became a thing more thingily than any literary text could ever be. The thing predetermined the form of the modernist artwork, in the sense that it was the telos of the work. And then it reappeared within the work as content.

Painting’s or photography’s leveling of everything in the perceptual field invites convertibility. Because depiction, like plot but more intensely, levels persons and things, all art and literature acquire what Susan Sontag called an “epicene,” or promiscuous, potential. Sontag described camp as the “triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ ‘person’ and ‘thing.’)”. From this observation she drew the conclusion that “all style, that is, artifice, is, ultimately, epicene.” The epicene quality that Sontag identified encourages a proliferation of subjects and objects of desire. Gender convertibility makes two into three or more. The binary that turns out to be a triangle or a polygon is the engine of the romantic plot. The other is first a person, then a thing, then a person again, and so on. The plot of romance is driven by lack: persons pursue something they lack, objects are perceived to have something that the subject lacks, and what makes them desirable is their lack of lack. They are desirable because they are not needy. Things both symbolize unavailability and permit reroutings that enable communication among people, even if the content of the communication is only to agree that they each lack the same thing.

Depictions make a static picture of a plot. The convertibility of person and thing is visible all at once. In a picture, the person is a thing and a person at the same time. The epicene convertibility of depictions dramatizes a condition of desire-driven plots generally. Images and plots are places where things come into focus. The image or plot diagrams the effect of simultaneous presence and unavailability that accounts for the prestige of things in
human experience. The mind represents the thing to itself as an alterity, creating the effect of the thing’s power to shape the real and psychic spaces that surround it.

The thing, by no means a “natural unit” of reality, is an artifact of perception, experience, and discourse. It is brandished as a principle against nonmaterialist or insufficiently materialist concepts of the person. The romance or the still life corrects an excessive attribution of agency to the person. What is matter, that it is believed to frame so powerfully personhood? Matter itself is barely available to the person. Matter only comes into focus through things. Matter *per se* cannot play a role in a plot, or occupy a principle, because minds have little access to matter until it is shaped into a thing. Matter first appears as thing when it behaves like a person:

And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out. (Luke 19:39–40, King James Version)

It is not “stone” that will cry out in praise of Jesus, but the stones, the round stones of the street or perhaps the walls of Jerusalem, stones like little heads. The stoniness of stone—the real unlikelihood of it ever expressing its thoughts—is manifested by the conceit of an exceptional outburst of unstony behavior. The thing is an artifact of discourse, or a precipitate of depiction, demanded by the mind’s inability to grasp matter. The biblical passage reveals the hidden anthropomorphism of the thing. Minds have access to matter only through things that act out materiality and at the same time screen matter. The self-sufficiency of the thing is marked by its discontinuity with the rest of matter. But this discontinuity also pushes it in the direction of closure, shapedness, and organicism.

The thing is prestigious because it is remote and self-sufficient, deaf to human pleas, resistant and so indispensable to human therapies and inquiries. The thing “talks,” but it does not listen, and that is the source of its apparent sovereignty over us.

The physical sciences recognize matter, not the thing. The dissolving of the margins of things experienced by Elena Ferrante’s character (see the epigraph with which this essay began) is the onset of something like a “scientific” picture of reality described as a delirium. Lila’s vision of the apparition of “something absolutely material” that is “present” all around us all along, even if “imperceptible,” and that breaks down “the outlines of persons and things,” brings loss of orientation.

The thing is prestigious for nonscientists because science does not recognize it. Modern humanistic and critical thought is often shaped by attempts to find the lacunae in the scientific picture of the world. Martin Heidegger, for
example, said that Western thought “understates” the thing. The thing is wrongly understood, according to Heidegger, as “an unknown X to which perceptible properties are attached.” Another common but fallacious definition of the thing, Heidegger says, is “the unity of a manifold of what is given in the senses.” Still another false understanding sees the thing as a fittedness of matter to form. Heidegger replaces these scientific or logical concepts of the thing with something like a religious concept; the thing is something that “gathers” the “fourfold”: “The bridge gathers to itself in its own way earth and sky, divinities and mortals.” The person who understands the thing merely as an attractor of attributes, as a bundle of percepts, or as a conformity of matter to form will misrecognize this gathering: “Everything that already belongs to the gathering nature of this thing does, of course, appear as something that is afterward read into it.”

Where does Heidegger think one is likely to meet the thing as “gathering”? We have noted that one of the places that things are made available to apprehension is the image, and Heidegger would agree with this, with an important qualification that will be addressed later. Things appear in images as objects of perception. Van Gogh painted fishing boats on a beach (fig. 1). Boats are not self-sufficient, sovereign, alien entities. When they appear not in a painting but on a beach, or in the water, they are not “things.” The boat is a technical object designed to realize human ambitions (floating, sailing, catching fish) and to compensate for human shortcomings (inability to swim in the ocean for long periods of time). It is continuous with the human body. These boats have already been zoomorphically shaped. Their fish-like qualities have been elicited by the boatwrights, with curves and paint. Van Gogh’s treatment of the beached boats augments this effect and then moves beyond into an extramarine sphere. The masts and spars splay like limbs. They seem to quiver, as they do not—as on the boats at sea at the right—when they support sails. The spars seem to generate the concentric rippling of the cloud cover. On this extension of the boatmakers’ zoomorphisms the painter overlays a secondary thing-quality. The boats are flattened; their colors isolate them from their environment. The animation of the boats—their slight mutual displacement, as if aware of one another—exceeds reality.

The boats are determined by their image-host. But things are also locked in rivalry with images. Within the projects of material cultural studies or “thing theory,” the concept of the thing often serves to ironize the concept of the image. The thing mounts a critique of its host, the image, from within. The thing interferes with the evidentiary pretensions of the image. The image pretends to show something plainly, more plainly than a mere linguistic message could say it. From the point of view of “thing theory,” modern thought is overly impressed by the capacity of images to depict and represent and insufficiently attentive to the ways images behave like things,
that is, fail to behave at all and simply sit there. It is not enough that images are mute; they are still accused of being too semiotic. An image is a production or reproduction of appearance. Because an apparition points beyond itself to something absent, the image is too easily employed as a sign. Signifying is also a mode of doing or acting, and yet one that many theorists, critics, and historians no longer take to be the most important thing that images or art do. The anthropomorphizing discourses often aim to move “beyond” representation, by noting, for example, the ways that the material signifier reasserts itself and so defers or disperses messages. The materiality of a sign ensures that the sign does not always say what it was meant to say. The resistance of material to semiosis is the basis for the role of the thing in recent models of cultural exchange. Materiality interferes with dreams of perfect translatability between cultures. Communities meet one another in things, but the thing foils any drive to identification. Culture is therefore best understood as a dynamic process of exchange and hybridization of meanings carried unreliably by things.7

Because things can only be shown—they cannot be explained—they are dependent on the very image that they seek to ironize. The thing is esteemed as something that reveals images and other signifiers to be overly functional, too narrowly adapted to human requirements. But van Gogh’s
boats were exactly that—equipment—before the image transformed them into things. The boats, if they are to become things, depend on the image they will then, once they are things, supposedly, reproach. They will reproach the image for failing to invite its beholders beyond the horizon of human concerns. Van Gogh’s boats—and all sorts of other boats encountered on beaches or in harbors, once you have seen van Gogh’s painting—hint at some principle of animation beyond commonsensical understanding. The uncanny zoomorphism of the boats becomes a figure for someone’s (van Gogh’s) special insight or feeling.

Something similar happens in romance, where plot focalizes and frames. Birds, stones, swords, and other things, insofar as they function as actants within the story, are interchangeable because they are all less than persons and yet manifest some principle that is more than human and to which storytellers have access.

The thing “needs” an image or plot in the sense that it does not begin to exist until it appears within an image or plot. But the story or the depiction also “needs” the thing, especially if it functions within a system of art, as a literary or pictorial work. Heidegger would not concede that a mere image is capable of bringing out the thingly quality of a thing. Only artworks can do this. Van Gogh’s paintings, to be sure, are not just any images. They are works of art; that is, they signify within a complex system of relations among images and beholders’ memories of images, where showing and saying, making and matching, are counterpoised, recalibrated, in every image; where the historical position of each work within sequences of works spanning both time and space is an element of the meaning of that work. An art system is a web that stretches across families of artifacts and communities of human recipients. The system hosts an infinity of interpictorial relations, past, present, and potential. No system that generates and shelters meanings will function well if it has constantly to check signification against a reality outside the system. The system, to work, requires a high degree of detachment from reality. And yet it will also need to be tethered to some stable points outside itself, just as a language is tethered to reality by names and by deictic markers. The system identifies its own other, which cannot be processed by the system and which underwrites that system. The thing that shows up inside an image is the placeholder and the figure of that external guarantor. Art needs the boat.

Many tendencies within twentieth-century modernism indulged a reproachful fascination with the indifference of the thing. José Ortega y Gasset said in his Dehumanization of Art (1925) that modern art surrounds us with “objects with which human dealings are inconceivable.” He described the unapproachable, alien entities as “ultra-objects.” “What those ‘ultra-objects’ evoke in our inner artist are secondary passions, specifically aesthetic
sentiments." The gulf between the human subject and the “strangled victims” produced by art, according to Ortega y Gasset, is the essential content of modern art. The ultra-object produced by modern art invites but frustrates interpretation. Such an object, paradoxically, only enhances the human subject’s sense of its own singularity. Surrounded by ultra-objects, the human subject feels more alone in the world. And yet the ultra-object holds a promise that there might be something real beyond human experience and cognition. The art-generated ultra-object is a figuration of the obduracy and impenetrability of the thing, its monadic resistance to human will.

A main theme of modernism was the resistance of things, sometimes successful, sometimes less so, to the imagination. The aim of art in the twentieth century, Lionel Trilling generalizes, was to “startle [the] dull pain of the social-object world and make it move and live, to retrieve the human spirit from its acquiescence in non-being.” Modernism was responding to the worries of nineteenth-century thinkers—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Karl Marx, John Ruskin—about machines, commodities, and money, or to the “loss of social will” depicted by Herman Melville and Gustave Flaubert. Painting or literature of the new century offered itself as a form of creativity struggling against engulfment by other products of creativity, such as technology or consumer goods. Modernists, according to Trilling, did not acquiesce in nonbeing, but rather tried to reconnect with nature or life or to assert an autonomous authorial will against everything that is the case.

In modernism, things were lowly, which is why art could undertake to raise them up. Marcel Duchamp, the inventor of the readymade, was not so impressed by things; he dominated them.

Things are designed to stand outside a system of meaning. Their closure renders them unfit to serve as signs. And yet their closure is also related to the concept of the person, that is, to the principle that humankind is not a continuous substance but is parceled into individual embodied minds with limits. The person is a bundle of sensation, cognition, and affect that is partially, not entirely, closed off to other such bundles. Persons partially resemble things. In Luke 19:40, the stones were unlikely instruments of praise of Jesus, and yet in order to cry out they had to be imagined as bodies. The thing, sharing some properties of closure with a person, must be recognizable against a ground of nonthings, including formless matter. Its autonomy and detachment—its framedness—is borrowed from the person. But to admit this dependency on the concept of the person would be catastrophic because the whole point of the thing is to be either prior or posterior to the human; to be an entity that precedes or follows mind, consciousness, and art making. Modernist art attempted to reconnect with this thing that came to represent an internal horizon of transfiguring creativity, an apparent dead end marking the limits of the fabricating imagination.
Modernist art of the sort analyzed by Ortega revealed the anthropomorphism of the thing by conceiving of the thing as an object. The object is unthinkable apart from the human subject, a grammatical origin point. There is no access to the object except through subjects. By naming objects, the subject ensures that the object is conceived as limitation. Modern ethics are based on this imbalance. The core precept of modern humanistic ethics is: do not objectify, that is, do not treat other subjects as if they were objects. The word “object” always designates an undesirable condition of subjection. The object-world is an alienated world. In the psychoanalytic context, the object-relation designates merely partial apprehension. Phobia operates through cathexis of an object to be avoided. Ortho Stice, a character in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest, finds it difficult to adjust himself to objects: “Do not underestimate objects, [Lyle] advises Stice. Do not leave objects out of account. The world, after all, which is radically old, is made up mostly of objects.” Later Stice is confronted by a therapist:

“My suggestion would be to forget linoleum and objects in general. In for instance an analytic model, the types of traumas counterphobic reactions cover are almost always pre-Oedipal, at which stage objects’ cathexis is Oedipal and symbolic. For example small children’s dolls and Action-Figurines.”

“I don’t play with no goddamn Action-Figurines.”

“GI Joe typically being cathected as an image of the potent but antagonistic father, the ‘military’ man, with ‘GI’ representing at once the ‘General Issue’ of a ‘weapon’ the child both covets and fears and a well-known medical acronym for the gastro-intestinal tract, with all the attendant anal anxieties that require repression in the Oedipal phase’s desire to control the bowels in order to impress or quote ‘win’ the mother, of whom the Barbie might be seen as the most obviously reductive and phallocentric reduction of the mother to an archetype of sexual function and availability, the Barbie as image of the Oedipal mother as image.”

“So you are saying I’m overestimating objects?”

As soon as someone warns you not to underestimate objects, he is already overestimating objects.

A recovered relationship to objects can become in some counterenlightened discourses a weapon against the hubris of apprehension, for example when Walter Benjamin poses the child’s exchanges with objects or objectified things against the world of adults: “The tip of the thimble was itself pale red, and adorned with tiny indentations, as if with the scars of former stitches. Held up to the light, it glowed at the end of its shadowy hollow, where our index finger was at home. For we loved to seize upon the little diadem, which in secret could crown us. When I slipped it on my finger, I at once understood the name by which my mother was known to the maids.”

Unless we wish to multiply origin points by entertaining anthropomorphisms, the human (or animal) subject is the one source of desire. The
subject disappeared from art history when art disappeared, that is, when art
was explained away as an artifact of institutions and ideologies. The often
contradictory use of the term “object” within art history gives us a clue to this
disappearance. Art historians who retain confidence, courageously or naively,
in the creative subject as the source of art will sometimes speak of the “art
object” as the object of their own study. But other art historians who have long
since abandoned both a transhistorical concept of art and a concept of schol-
arship as a fixing of passive objects by inquiring subjects will also frequently
speak of “objects” in order to designate an entity that is more than a thing but
less an artifact (and certainly less than an artwork). The thing in its classic
definition, however, is precisely not an object. The thing is notable for resis-
ting subjection by a subject. This inconsistency in the usage of the term
“object” is a clue to the occlusion of the subject from most art historical and
art theoretical language.

The thing, self-sufficient, nontransitive, delivered by art, settles in this
world, “settles” the incessant doublings of mind that convert everything into
object. The thing is a partner in an alternative understanding of mind not as
a static (even if distorting) mirror of reality, but as an emergent process,
pragmatic rather than critical or inquiring: know-how rather than know-
what. The thing rescues the subject from consciousness, which is always
seeking, like Ortega’s modernist artist, to dominate its surroundings.

In the sense that the thing stands in for an unknown that is prior to and
outside the human and is at the same time customized for human appre-
hension, it resembles the artwork, which is also anthropomorphic, human-
scaled, and available to the senses, and yet points beyond the horizon of
experience. The thing is supposed to be anterior to cognition; in fact, it is
posterior. Not only that, but the thing comes after art. The thing arrives to
meet a perception of lack or loss in an artwork, a poem, a performance. Art
produces the thing as its own reduced and more authentic origin point. The
thing is a parodic double of the artwork that is found inside artworks. Art
invents the presymbolic thing and discovers it inside itself. The thing is the
precipitate of art and the destination of art. Many artworks are messages
whose content is: “I wish I were a thing.”

Because the thing is not alien to art, it makes no sense to offer to restore
the thing’s agency, as if to introduce the thing into its postcolonial future. Art
did not colonize the thing; it created the thing. The thing is not a subaltern.

To recapitulate: the “thing” was precipitated out of matter as an alter-
native to the person. But to draw it out of matter, it had to take on qualities
of shapedness and closure that were borrowed from the person and rendered
its absolute nonpersonhood incomplete. It is no great achievement to recog-
nize the anthropomorphic qualities of the thing, because they were constitu-
tive of it. The thing was also designed to be the opposite of an artwork, which
was itself designed on the model of the person. And yet the artwork was also different from the person; it had no voice or mind, and so it served equally as a model for the nonhuman aspects of the thing.

The image, meanwhile, emerged as a surrogate both for the thing and for the artwork. The image is made to play the role, in some discourses, that the artwork used to, as the Other of the thing. In other discourses, the image plays the role that the thing used to, as the Other of the artwork. The capacity of the thing to relativize humanness was dramatized as a triangular romance, in which a third, absent term is replaced by a second term that enters into rivalry with a first term. The image shows how much the thing is like an artwork. The thing shows how much the image is like an artwork. Both amount to the same thing: image and thing together reproach the artwork for being too “human.” Image and thing, supposedly, are sovereign, not as dependent as the artwork on a subject of creation. Their sovereignty is sustained by a forgetting of their origins in art.

Art is the “scene” that produces the thing in the first place, but is then occluded by the thing as the thing enters into partnership with the image. The “scene of art” is the source of the romance’s inquiry. Art is a place where questions about the effects of things (including but not only artworks) on subjects (embodied minds) are posed. The art/nonart frontier and the life/nonlife frontier run straight through the scene of art. The artwork predicts confusion about the relation of image and thing to art. Art responds to questions about agency, efficacy, and the limits and extent of personhood. What is art other than a working on minds and bodies through a balance of conventional and invented forms, in space and time, that takes the form of an expression or message mediated by forms that escape convention and therefore interfere with or retard communication? That is, art is a place where inquiry is initiated, but the results of the inquiry are scrambled.

In an essay on nineteenth-century aesthetics, Whitney Davis discusses the writer and theorist Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) and her engagement with the so-called empathy theories of her day. Some theorists had proposed that artworks work their effects by inviting bodies to imitate the work or, through the work, the creative bodily gestures of the artist: “In taking pleasure in an artwork,” Davis paraphrases, “in judging it to be beautiful, or in performing it perfectly, then, one responds naturally as a well-adapted body, moving and flexing himself or herself in motor-muscular and visual-kinaesthetic modalities as a human being is naturally selected to move and flex.” Davis credits Lee and her partner Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, however, with the recognition that the observer of the statue does not conduct an “inner imitation” of the represented gestures, as Karl Groos and other empathy theorists would have to suppose. The observer responds not to a real human bodily motion but to a sculpted figure, and therefore his or her empathy must include the
organization of the matter of the representation itself, its formal "balance," not simply the thing denoted. (The "balance" includes the configuration of visual, spatial, and mechanical relations between various things represented, for example, the way in which a sculpted foot seems to "press into" the "ground" of a pedestal.)

Response is framed by art. This qualification "transpose[s] the psychological question from the iconography of a work of art to its form, a transposition Lee believed that [Bernard] Berenson had failed fully to make in spite of what we would now call his formalism."\textsuperscript{13} The empathetic response cannot be lifted out of its artistic staging. Failure to understand this also invalidates the "empathy theories" of our own day, the attempts to ground art making and the response to art in neural activity.

Artworks have become over time increasingly images of themselves, images of images, and images of things. Artworks move in and out of these multiple identities by absorbing the frames that divide fiction from reality. A work of art pulls those frames into itself so that it no longer requires a frame, precisely when it would seem to require one more than ever, so as not to be mistaken for nonart. \textit{Prada Marfa} is a recent example of a work constantly cycling in and out of image-like and thing-like identities, and for that very reason expressing considerable security in its identity as art. \textit{Prada Marfa}, which sits alongside Route 90 in Texas, northwest of the town of Marfa, is a model of a store that sells shoes (fig. 2). The model has a door and windows like any store, but it is sealed shut. The shoes in the window are real. The store is a little smaller than such a store probably should be, and it stands isolated in the desert, far from any other buildings. The slight miniaturization and the isolation are the frames that label it as art. (There is also an inconspicuous sign as well as several other clues.) In \textit{Prada Marfa}, a store reappears as a thing. The work is not an image of a store. The framing function that the image used to serve, for example in the painting by van Gogh, is no longer required. "Image" recurs, instead, as the content of the work: image as brand name, fashion as image, the storefront window that frames the display cases, inside the store, that frame the shoes. The main feature of art today is its lack of doubt about the nature and significance of art. Art is confident that it knows how to handle the image and how to be, if necessary, a thing.

Why then is the artwork once again, within the anthropomorphizing discourses, under challenge from the image and the thing? The artwork is challenged because art, or the discourse of art, or the discipline of art history is thought by someone—generally not someone who is committed to the study and criticism of contemporary art—to lack something. Image and thing are serving as substitutes for an absent object of desire. The image or the thing is the phallus that substitutes for something that art is seen to lack. What does art lack? It lacks a connection to reality. Art does not deliver
reality because it is fictional. Art, hiding behind the axiom of its own underrivability, is unrealistic—supposedly—about its own relation to power. In an academic context where real embeddedness in history and in materiality is expected, art is therefore seen to be lacking. Image and thing, proposed as substitutes for the artwork, are used by art historians as levers against the aestheticist presumptions, in fact much diminished by now, of an academic discipline once but no longer sustained by an alliance with art museums and the art market and centered on art made in Europe between the early Renaissance and the early twentieth century. The standings of image and thing in this new discourse of the image, which replaces the older, supposedly aestheticist, discourse, are not low—as they were in modernism—but high. The image, for a historian of medieval European art, for example, is now the place where all the things happen that art used to make happen, but now these happenings are finally relieved of the philosophical, historical, and social burden of the concept of art. Medieval images and artifacts propose fictions, project futures, shape pasts, make absent persons appear to be present, interfere with evidentiary or semiotic ambitions, and shelter as a privileged content *beauty*, even when the work depicts something

**Figure 2.** Elmgreen and Dragset, *Prada Marfa*, 2005. Photo: Author.
unbeautiful; for in a painting or a sculpture beauty and ugliness converge in
a higher order of beauty peculiar to art. Although they do all these art-like
things, medieval images and artifacts are no longer called “art.” This move is
self-described as “historicist,” in the sense that it aims to achieve adequacy to
historical reality by shedding presentist prejudices.

The historian of historical art aspires to bore down through the crust of
the present to a layer before and below art, before modern concepts of art,
entangled in the paradoxes of apparition (the dialectic of presence and
absence), were imposed upon artifacts and images. On this layer, the
affective, performative, and substitutional qualities of images are revealed.
The historian of historical art wishes to elude—or perhaps just bracket—
the mirrorings and hierarchies entailed by representation. Art history
reveals the suppressed thingly qualities of artifacts, images, and artworks,
puncturing their symbolizing, communicating, adequating, and revelatory
aspirations.

The function of the concepts of image and thing, within such large-scale
historical and critical projects as *Bildwissenschaft* (in the German-speaking
world) or visual cultural studies (in the English-speaking world), also in part
within anthropology, has been to ironize the concept of art. From the point
of view of “image studies” or “thing theory,” the work of art is an artifact of
a modern Western system of art. The value assigned to art in modern West-
ern society, from the point of view of “image studies,” has been anachro-
nistically projected back or outward onto artifacts produced by societies that
did not share this concept of art, so masking those images’ original histor-
ical functions. The modern system of art, again in this view, protects a fiction
of the noninstrumentalized and self-sufficient nature of the artwork, screen-
ing the ways that even modern paintings and sculptures resemble more
obviously functional or status-conferring artifacts such as furniture, cos-
tumes, or machines. From the perspective of “image studies,” the ideology
of art has generated an artwork that would appear to resemble a thing, but
that in fact is only a superficial imitation of the historical things that people
interacted with in devotional or ancestor cults, collecting and hoarding, the
adornment of bodies, pageantry and other displays of authority, rituals, the
shaping of public spaces, exchange of gifts, and so forth.

For both its adherents and its detractors, the concept “art” names an
ideal of an artifact that, although produced by humans, is barely intelligible
to humans—think of Ortega y Gasset’s “ultra-object.” The concept of the
“image that works,” by contrast, names an artifact that does comprehensi-
ble, explicable things. This latter discourse pulls the art object back down
into the human sphere, by comparing what it does to what machines do, or
to what people do when they converse, make deals, persuade, seduce, sur-
vive, and so forth. The image in its evidentiary efficacy, or alternatively the
thing in its opacity, is seen as the substrate of art. The artwork, in this view, was the result of an imposition, in modernity, of attributes upon this substrate that were meant to elevate the image or thing but in fact neutralized it. Is the image or thing really the substrate of the work of art? It might be possible to think of prose as the substrate of poetry, and poetry as a patterned enhancement of prose designed to endow linguistic formulations with an aura of finality but that in fact only extract language from the to and fro of life and drain it of its force. One might therefore wish to “undo” poetry, just as dancing, a patterned kind of walking, could be “undone,” restored to its substrate of walking.

Image or thing would seem to be ways of driving art out of its shelter within the concept of the artwork. The artwork is the creature, in this view, of aestheticism. Aestheticism is defined by its protagonists as a high estimation, and by its antagonists as an overestimation, of art’s priority. Aestheticism has several ready responses to the challenge mounted by the image and thing. First, art cannot be “undone.” The artwork cannot be reverse engineered or restored to some simpler state because it is not derived from anything. Second, art is uncircumventable: you need to go through (and not “back through”) art to get to life. Third, the image or thing is already stationed inside the artwork as its own internal horizon. Art overwhelms its other by recreating it as its own core. But the image-like or thing-like quality of an artwork never “covers” the work; there is a remainder.

The invocation of image or thing as a more stable alternative to the artwork is an attempt to discredit that remainder as a fantasy. Stressed instead are the ways artworks operate, work, act, live, and in general are continuous with the rest of reality. Admired are the ways art delivers knowledge: art “thinks,” art is “intelligent,” art is “technical.” If artworks fail to do these things, if they demur, if they hesitate, if they decline to affirm, then they are lacking, they fall short, they shirk.

In stories or pictures, we have seen, a thing masks a lack. The object of desire cannot be expressed, so the desire is sustained through converse with a thing. The thing is a phallic object imposed on a plot, in the sense that it stands in for the real, unquestioned object of desire, which is in fact—a phallus is designed to hide this fact—absent. The phallus brings symbolic order by marking a possible location of the source of power, a marking that defers the identification of the real source of power. Because the recent shift in emphasis in the discourses of art responds to an apprehension of a lack in art, I am inclined to describe the discourses of the “power of images,” the “image-act,” “image as presence,” the “efficacious image,” the “technical image,” “iconoclash,” the “pictorial intelligence,” the “intelligence of art,” and “art as a machine for thinking” as phallic discourses. They identify phallic substitutes that mask a perceived lack in the artwork.
In Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” a very modern romance indeed, the letter was a message whose contents we as readers never learn. The queen was in possession of a letter that, if it fell into the hands of the king, would damage her honor and diminish her authority. The minister D— steals the letter and blackmails the queen. The queen charges the police with the recovery of the letter. Unable to find it, the police enlist the private detective Dupin, who visits the minister’s chambers. The letter, as he had suspected, was hidden in plain view. Dupin distracts the minister, steals the letter again, and replaces it with a facsimile. Possession of the letter brings power. The letter creates the “territory of the story” (Calvino) twice over, for it is both a thing and a message. Restored to the queen, the letter restores her power. The letter functions as a phallus, masking the lack of the “natural” referent of phallic objects that distinguishes her from the king. The queen was subject to the law of the king. The letter, if released from its closed circuit of readership, would attest to the queen’s defiance of that law. Such a defiance would threaten the traditional structure of romance, whose exchanges require, as we saw, a rigid framework of natural and naturalized laws and usher in a new, epicene, promiscuous mode of romance. The letter—so long as we conceive of it, guided by the story, not in terms of its contents but as a pure signifier—was material, indivisible, and integral. It would not be enough to know the contents of the letter to bring down the queen: you need the physical letter itself as evidence. “Division” of the letter would bring about the queen’s total subjection to the king’s rule, guaranteed by his possession of the “natural” referent of every phallic substitute. So much was brought out by Jacques Lacan’s reading of Poe’s story.¹⁴

Image and thing appear within stories of art as phallic substitutes for what the (queenly) artwork lacks, namely, a “natural” base in power. They sustain this substitutional function, like the purloined letter, by being unreadable, that is, by blocking the kind of reading invited by artworks.

The simplest plot of art history is this: the artwork is challenged and demystified by nonart; it regroups, adjusts, absorbs nonart; and then it reappears more complex and sophisticated than ever, only to face a further challenge. This is the basis, for example, of one narrative of Western realism: the conventions of painting are exposed by observation of reality as mere conventions; artists develop new conventions that better render reality; those conventions in turn are discredited.¹⁵ This is also a narrative of modernism: art is challenged by but quickly absorbs popular culture, mass culture, technical representation (photography and film). This is also one narrative of Christian art that gives way, in modernity, to a narrative of modern art: the cult image is challenged by an iconoclastic skepticism about the capacity of images to deliver a true image of the god; the cult image responds, and outflanks the critique, by depicting its own caducity as an
aspect of its content. The artwork is always converting the opposition between art and nonart into its own signified. These are stable plots that need never come to a close. Art—in the Christian West and in the modernity that succeeded it—stages its own demise but never retreats. The plot is further stabilized when nonart splits by fission into image and thing, forcing the artwork to defend itself on two fronts at once, creating romantic triangles. This creates the picture of image and thing as a rivalry: the image made by the thing to look too much like an artwork, or the artwork made by the thing to look like a mere image. Triangularity sets in motion the endless phallic switching. The rivalry between image and thing is sustained and stabilized by the positing of a third term, the artwork, an ideal construct that did not exist before modernity and that always disappoints. The absent object of desire that image and thing stand in for is an artwork that works, that is efficacious, that is finally legible. This is just what everyone wants from the artwork: that it reveal its contents either all too plainly (qua image) or not at all (qua thing). Compare Lacan’s confidence in “the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier,” that is, the material, indivisible letter. The access to signifieds that artworks offer, however, does not lend itself either to the orientation of subjects or to the resolution of plots, such as histories of art. The lack of the artwork is its “irresponsible” failure to resist, as matter, division and so to function as a stable object of desire. It displays its own lack and invites imposition of the substitute, the efficacious image.

The diagramming of binary rivalries (queen vs. minister, minister vs. Dupin) into stable triangles (queen, king, minister; minister, police, Dupin) is the work of psychoanalysis as well as of a “genre,” like romance. Lacan asserts that Poe’s story delivers the truth of psychoanalysis. He believes the story functions like an image: it illustrates; it really does show. But Barbara Johnson, developing Jacques Derrida’s analysis of Lacan’s text, critiques Lacan’s geometrical analysis of the efficacy of the letter. Johnson shows that the stable triangle sought by psychoanalysis systematically excludes the context of the triangle, namely, literariness or the “scene of writing.” Lacan, in Derrida’s and Johnson’s readings, forgets the involvement of Poe’s narrator in the content of the story he narrates. The narrator, for example, sees himself doubled in the figure of the clever detective Dupin. The narrator mentions Dupin’s recent triumphs, such as the affair of the murders in the rue Morgue, which is also the subject of a story by Poe. Lacan eliminated the literary frame of the internal narration, the story about the letter. He forgot the frame—the narrator, the signature, the parergal edges of the story—so that he could treat the “real narrative” as if it were true, like a patient’s narration. The psychoanalytic reading of the embedded story, in order to create balanced triangles, lopped off the fourth corner of a quadrangle, the point outside the plane of the story from which “literature” comes. But no
such rescue of the integrity of the romantic or psychoanalytic triangle is possible. Frames are always framed by part of their content. Derrida and Johnson instead pointed to that fourth point outside the Freudian romantic triangle: the textual signifier’s resistance to being totally transformed into a signified. The textual signifiers fall short of this transformation because it is material—and this is the partial, only partial, truth of the anti-aesthetic discourses of the “thing,” “object,” and “image.” The thing, object, and image, incompetent vehicles of meaning, more material than texts, will of course disappoint any optimism about the artwork’s capacity to handle meaning responsibly.

Derrida’s and Johnson’s analyses are invaluable because they reveal that the source of the discourses is not the artwork—in that case the triangular structure would remain undisturbed—but *art*. For the artwork, a construct that borrows properties of closure and framedness from the person, and to which are attributed person-like powers, was itself all along functioning as a phallic substitute. The artwork is framed on the model of the framedness of thing and person. The artwork is allied with the figure of the narrator, or subject—it is the creative subject’s self-portrait. The artwork’s real failure to cohere is the subject’s failure to cohere. The triangle of the romance is therefore succeeded by a quadrangle whose fourth point is the source not only of image and thing but also of the entire interplay of image and thing with the artwork, and that source is art itself, or the “scene of art.” The origin point of the discourses of image and thing is invisible; it lies “behind” us. The triangle cannot be lifted out of the scene of art.

The triangle image-thing-artwork seemed securely bounded. Image and thing asserted themselves, feigning a rivalry, whereas in the end they both ended up superior to the artwork; that is what mattered. Image and thing were superior because they had no authors, in the same way that Poe’s letter, in order to play its role within the story, depended neither on its signified (representation is downplayed) nor on its subject (except insofar as it appears as signatory). The artwork is the fiction of art’s frameability. The artwork, according to its ideology, is cut off from its author. It has its own independent destiny once it leaves the scene of making. Whereas art, unframeable, is “involved with” its author. The artwork was itself a phallic substitute for something else that “art” was seen to lack, namely closure, and cannot be allowed to stand in for art. Johnson says that Lacan ignores the unframeability of the literary text. The “crumbling, abyssal, non-totalizable edges” of a story’s frame subvert any application of a logic of inside/outside to interpretation.\(^{20}\) The unframeability of art is its porousness to subjectivity and experience, its quality not as an object but as a field spanning minds, acknowledging everything that image and thing, whose anthropomorphization diminishes humanity, are directed against.
The “scene of art” cannot be accused of lack because it is constituted by lack. The scene of art hosts a condition so impaired, seemingly so unbearable, that even its occupants (artists) must envision art’s own internal horizons—image, thing, and artwork—creating false contours and closure, just as they envision a source, an abyssal inwardness, “creativity.” The “scene of art” provides this and other placeholders for art’s own singular, dimly perceived source.

The phallic discourse is the fallacy that the rivalry of image and thing, which is really the rivalry of a straw man, the artwork, with its various Others, succeeds in escaping the scene of art by connecting with experience. Image and thing serve successfully as phallic substitutes—they “become” phalluses—for the missing phallus of (queenly) art because they are believed to “have” phalluses, namely, naturalized relations to power and knowledge.

The discourses are unwilling to let artworks cease to be screens for the supposed lack in art and instead let them begin to be “artistic,” that is, unframeable. To do that would bring an end to the cascading plots of art history that leave artwork, image, and things intact.

By describing all style as “epicene,” Sontag was pointing to the chains of substitutions, conversions, and transformations, man to woman, person to thing, that make art unframeable. The discourses of anthropomorphism are precisely not epicene, or queer, because they are unable to recognize art itself as the site of its object of desire, the place where that object is most likely to appear, even if fleetingly. Why is the scene of art the site of the object of desire? Because art is the working through of a principle of unknowability, situated on a horizon between two kinds of knowing, knowledge through experience and knowledge beyond experience. Knowable to whom? That is the wrong question. Art does not “become,” as a site of knowledge, a site of desire for this one or that one; rather, it is structured as such a site, which may or may not include surrogate objects such as artworks, images, or things. It answers, in its own incomplete way, to a lack (of understanding, of contact, of participation in nature of which beauty is the symbol). The discourses of image and thing are expressions of impatience with art’s enigmatic answer to these lacks, calling instead, prematurely, upon the opaque surrogates to cover the lack. “As Lacan says elsewhere, the letter amounts to, comes back to Being, that is, to the nothing that would be opening itself as the hole between woman’s legs. Such is the proper place in which the letter is found, where the minister believes it to be in the shadows and where it is, in its very hiding place, the most exposed. Possessing the letter in the shadows, the minister begins to identify himself with the Queen (but must not Dupin, and the psychoanalyst within him, do so in turn?).”21 The minister is like an art historian who, because he holds
onto the artwork believing it covers a lack in himself that he, in fact, lacks, identifies too much with art.

The decision to pretend not to know about the scene of art as the source of artistic objects, and instead to replace it with an unambiguous surrogate, is sheltered by historicist dogma and a patronizing lack of sympathy for non-present (past or non-European) cultures. The discourses of the image or the thing mask an unwillingness to recognize the art of the past or the art of the non-European as art. This is paradoxical because those discourses have often been launched in the name of non-Western or premodern art. This misrecognition follows upon an adherence to an overly narrow view of art. If your view of art is narrow, then of course it will only fit a very few worlds.

Elena Ferrante’s character had “artistic” or prophetic visions:

It was—she told me—as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon’s circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, reducing it to its true nature of rough insensate material. Lila imagined, she saw, she felt—as if it were true—her brother break. Rino, before her eyes, lost the features he had had as long as she could remember, the features of the generous, candid boy.²²

The older brother is unframed, disorienting the sister. The sister learns, and she experiences this learning as a breakdown of contours. The brother had functioned as a brother through his quality of containment. Until then the sister had falsely seen her brother as a “thing.” But this was already an “artistic” way of seeing. And to revert to a reifying way of perception would be again “artistic.” Artists (van Gogh) and philosophers who want to think like artists (Heidegger) persist, even after having “learned” what Lila learned, in seeing the world parcelled into things, entities gathered and bounded and possibly even ensouled. Lila sees “artistically” and undoes her own “unreal” enhancements of the thingliness of things around her. There is no progression from illusion to reality, from the idol to the true god. Lila comes to us from the scene of art: Ferrante’s novel, which itself comes to us from a hidden scene. Lila’s being extends beyond the edges of the novel, we feel sure, even though the real source of the novel is occulted (the identity of the author has been concealed). The novel and its characters have no stability, their edges are always crumbling away. This is not a lack that needs to be covered. The stable image, the stable thing, are shown to us only from within the novel, as elements of the experience of one of the characters. Only one who misrecognizes the very process of reading a novel would think to turn the experiences of a literary character, for example the image of a person as framed and integral, as a thing, against the novel itself, which pretends to a spurious boundedness. The experience of the dissolving margins of a person, or a thing, can be turned against the novel. But not against writing.
Notes

16. See Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Iconoclash* (Karlsruhe, 2002), especially the essay by Joseph Leo Koerner, as well as Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York, 2012).
22. Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend (L’amica geniale)*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York, 2012), 176; the passage used as an epigraph to this article appears on pages 89–90.