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Review of S. Blick and L. Gelfand, eds. Push Me, Pull You. Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art

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Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand, eds. *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*.

2 vols. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 156/1–2. Leiden: Brill, 2011. cvi + 1296 pp. \$339. ISBN: 978–90–04–20573–4.

Blick, Gelfand, and their thirty-four contributors take as their subject the complex phenomena of late medieval and early modern devotional art and practice. Each of the chapters appearing in these two volumes deserves an in-depth review of its own, but given space constraints, I will limit my comments to the overall quality of the project and will highlight five of the works in it as examples of what the project has to offer.

The editors and their contributors deserve high praise for tackling such a large-scale project with essays on a variety of topics including manuscript studies, architectural history, pilgrimage, theater, ritual theory-performativity, and reception theory. Blick and Gelfand privilege “devotional interactivity” (something of a religious viewer’s share, to paraphrase Gombrich) as the uniting principle of both volumes. As is often the case with edited works of this size and scope, however, the focus of various chapters often seems to stray — at times quite significantly — from the project’s nominal subject matter and direction. This subject matter drift occasionally leads to a certain lack of cohesion in the various thematic groupings in both volumes. This is certainly the case in the fourth section of volume 2, which contains intriguing articles but ultimately does not hold together as a whole. To be sure, these observations are minor and do not affect the overall quality of this ambitious project.

The first volume is dedicated to imaginative and emotional engagement with devotional objects. In “Art and Advertising,” Amy Morris examines the role of so-called “indulgence panels” in the creation of personal-yet-institutionalized religious experience. Rather than simply promising a spiritual boon, she argues, indulgence-bearing panels relied on the votary’s active participation for their efficacy. The instructions for receiving the promised indulgence elicited physical and spiritual responses that engaged the votary with the image, his surroundings, and his fellow Christians. The faithful were exhorted to kneel, recite particular prayers, and engage in pious acts: physical and emotional actions expected to bring about spiritual change. The votary’s interaction with the image constituted and was conditioned by a push-pull relationship in which he operated the panel, performed the required actions, and imagined achieving his desired outcome.

Mark Trowbridge examines the creation of religious experience through the action of medial figures. In “Sin and Redemption in Late-Medieval Art and Theatre,” he discusses the central role that the Magdalene plays in Hugo van der Goes’s *Fall of Man Diptych*. The object, comprised of a *Temptation of Adam* on one side and a *Lamentation* on the other, presents the votary with an unusual pairing. This juxtaposition is jarring but the artist places Mary Magdalene in a prominent position near the center of the diptych in order to bridge the two sides and ease the viewer’s transition between them. Trowbridge argues that this is no coincidence, but rather the result of the audience’s familiarity with religious plays in which Mary Magdalene acts as an intermediary between the viewer and the holy story being enacted. In Hugo’s diptych, Mary is a link between the fictive world of the painting and the lived experience of the votary. As a bridge, the Magdalene “allows an imaginative and empathic entry into the scene” (445). Such entry does not occur passively, but requires the viewer to make use of the figure of the Magdalene and imaginatively activate the larger salvation narrative embedded in the panels. Trowbridge’s analysis demonstrates how lively and layered the encounter between images and devotees could be.

In “The Middle of Diptychs,” Alfred Acres investigates how the physical form of objects addresses potential viewers. Acres focuses in particular on the middle portion of diptychs, where the internal frames supporting each half of the object insistently draw the viewer’s attention to the materiality of the illusionistic world before him. What is implied by this juncture, Acres argues, is the votary’s presence. It is the viewer who has the ability to move across the frame and join the parts of the diptych into a meaningful whole. In other words, only the votary’s participation can activate the narrative and create meaning. According to Acres, “the middle of a diptych is always asking something of us” (621), and is more an invitation to contemplation than an impediment. Like Morris and Trowbridge, Acres asks readers to think quite seriously about the myriad ways that objects speak to viewers and facilitate the construction of imaginative and emotional responses.

The second volume picks up where Acres’s article (which ends the first volume) leaves off and explores physical and spatial interactions with devotional objects. Suzanne Schmidt’s “Momento Mori: The Deadly Art of Interaction” takes interactive prints — those with flaps, wheels, or other moveable elements — with

a *momento mori* theme as the object of her study. Schmidt argues that the necessity of manipulating these objects to get at their hidden meanings forced the viewer to confront his mortality if he wished to explore the image in full. Given the wear evident on extant examples, it appears that viewers made frequent use of such opportunities. In part, Schmidt argues, frequent use was at the heart of how the viewer came to his own meditation on death. As she notes, “[o]ne could not simply remember death as a fact, but imagined and came to terms with it in a repetitive cycle” (269). Schmidt’s study demonstrates how the physical act of reconfiguring devotional items connected the intellectual content of an image to the visceral reaction to it and created a dynamic “devotional interactivity.”

In “The Guiding Illusions of the Morrison Triptych,” Mark Tucker and Lloyd DeWitt discuss how images can manipulate the viewer. Whereas other chapters in both volumes discuss the ways that viewers activated images, this article is intriguing because it focuses exclusively on how images activated viewers. As the result of a thorough restoration to the triptych, the authors have been able to re-create the painting’s illusionism as it appeared in its original viewing context. The *trompe l’oeil* effects discussed not only demonstrate the painter’s skill, but also underscore how closely all the parties involved in the altarpiece’s creation paid to the effects of mimetic representation. Such illusionism sets the terms by which the viewer can make sense of the information presented and directly conditions how he interacts with it. Though not a new idea, such discussions of how perspective controls the viewer add another layer to the ways scholars ought to think about interactivity.

The articles in this anthology represent both well-worn and novel ideas that the authors put to the test in their studies. The variety of subjects and methodologies, as well as each contributor’s conclusions, creates a nicely inclusive model of scholarly inquiry. As such, the project is an excellent example of the types of collaborative scholarship many are now turning to in an attempt to build a more complex understanding of the late middle ages and the early modern period. The matrix assembled here is rich and interesting, and *Push Me, Pull You* is a welcome addition to the ongoing discourse on lay piety and the role of devotional images, spaces, and objects in late medieval and early modern Europe.

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