

Sixtus V's re-erection of the Lateran Obelisk seen in the light of Alfred Gell's Anthropological Theory of Art

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Nicolaus van Aelst, *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*: Lateran obelisk: the newly erected Lateran obelisk as seen from the north, 1589. © Trustees of the British Museum

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Studentnr:	1061100
Date:	1 September 2014
Type of paper	MA Thesis, 17,000 words
Programme	MA in Arts and Culture, course code: KG 5794VMATH
Specialisation	Early Modern and Late Medieval Art
ECTS	20 EC
Tutors	Prof. dr. C. van Eck, dr. M.J. Versluys
Declaration	I certify that this work has been written by me, and that it is not the product of plagiarism or any other form of academic misconduct.

Abstract

The subject of this MA thesis is the re-erection of the Lateran obelisk in 1588 by Sixtus V (1585-1590). Sixtus had little regard for pagan imperial monuments, and had many destroyed and used as building materials for his urban construction plans. The question arises why, after moving and re-erecting two obelisks that were in plain view, he proceeded to actively have two more excavated and re-erected. Alfred Gell's Anthropological Theory of Art (ATA) is applied in order to find an answer, and it is concluded that the ATA provides an excellent basis for an analytical approach. Based on the premise that an art object is an extension of the patron and can be assigned partial personhood, the ATA makes it possible to consider people in an object's "social circle" as both agents and patients. Their relations with the object (which is called the index) and with each-other produce some unexpected insights which provide a partial answer.

This thesis also demonstrates that it is possible to consistently apply Gell's entire theory to a single art object. What is more: the index is considered from different perspectives, as if consisting of different parts, i.e., the technical ingenuity required to excavate and erect it, and its intrinsic sacredness. The analysis shows, among other things, that the obelisk is a representation of itself in imperial times, as if it were a portrait of itself in earlier days. This is another partial answer.

It has been found theoretically necessary to alter the ATA's four term system into a structure of five terms. The theory is stretched even more in the penultimate chapter, which provides some direct insights that are of crucial importance to the answer to the research question.

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"Didn't you know," he demanded, in slow, grave tones, "that I antedate the Christian era by many centuries?"

Mark Twain, "The Living Obelisk. Strange news from Hartford."¹

1 Introduction

The subject of this MA thesis is the re-erection of the Lateran obelisk in 1588 by Sixtus V (fig. 1.1). In this chapter I will briefly introduce the history of the Lateran obelisk and the person of Sixtus, then present my research questions and the manner in which I will address them in this thesis.



Figure 1.1 The Obelisk at the Lateran Square as seen from the west. Photo by author, 2011.

¹ *New Haven Evening Register*, December 28, 1880.

1.1 The Lateran obelisk's ancient history

The only existing source for the ancient history of the Lateran obelisk are the hieroglyphs inscribed in it. The obelisk was made by order of Pharaoh Thutmosis III, who reigned during the Eighteenth Dynasty in the Egyptian New Kingdom, from ca. 1500 to 1447 BCE.² Thutmosis died after his obelisk was delivered from Syene to Karnak, but before it could be inscribed. It was left there for 35 years. His grandson, Thutmosis IV, had it inscribed and erected “at the upper gate of the Apts (Karnak), opposite Thebes”,³ and there it would stay for over 1500 years. Obelisks usually come in pairs, and the fact that Thutmosis III had a single obelisk made is so remarkable that it has been inscribed in it. It was also exceptionally tall and heavy. The obelisk is 34 metres tall, and Fontana calculates its weight at 438,157 kilogrammes.⁴ It may have been considered one of the Wonders of the World in its day.⁵

Emperor Augustus was the first emperor to have several obelisks transported to Rome. He considered moving the great obelisk at Karnak, but the auspices seem to have been unfavourable, and Augustus decided to abandon his plan.⁶ On a more practical note it is possible that Augustus simply did not see any way of moving this giant without breaking it.

Ca. 330 AD Constantine the Great had it lowered and shipped to be transported from Karnak to Constantinople. But as Constantine died the obelisk was left in Alexandria. About five years later his son Constantius had the obelisk shipped to Rome rather than Constantinople.⁷ In 357 it was erected in the Circus Maximus, at the centre of the *spina*. The Sethos obelisk, which had occupied that spot since the time of Augustus, was moved to one side. In accordance with tradition and as an act of appropriation the Thutmosis obelisk was dedicated to the sun and to the emperor, and was crowned with a gilded bronze globe. Soon struck by lightning, the globe was replaced with a gilded bronze shape of a torch and flames, which seemed to burn when hit by sunbeams.⁸

² Dates are based on the moon calendar and vary slightly with various authors. These are the dates provided by or derived from Wallis Budge 1926. McEvedy provides ca. 1450 BC as the start of Thutmoses III's reign.

³ According to Thutmosis IV's right inscription on the west face. Based on archeological findings Barguet places it to the east, on the central axis of the temple of Amen-Ra. Barguet 1951, p. 2.

⁴ The volume of the obelisk is calculated at 15,383 cubic palmi. At a specific weight of 86 libre per palmo, this adds up to 1,322,938 libre. See Fontana, *Della Trasportatione (Grand'Obelisco)*, p. 70v. According to the table in Fontana 1987-2, p. 37, a libra is 0.3312 kg. Wallis Budge gives 'about 460 tons'. He probably uses UK tons (1,016,047 kg), as opposed to metric tonnes (1000 kg), but that hardly matters here.

⁵ According to Batta 1986, p. 63. He provides no reference, but it is quite possible. Apart from the Great Pyramid of Giza (ca 2560 BCE), all the monuments in current lists of the Wonders of the Ancient World are much more recent than this obelisk. Mercati 1589, p. 152, provides 'Diodorus Siculus, book III' as a reference.

⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus 360 AD, XVII, 4 (12)

⁷ Idem, XVII, 4 (12-16).

⁸ Idem, XVII, 4 (16).

It is unclear what fate befell the two obelisks in the Circus Maximus in the centuries that followed. They fell down and over the centuries, as the ground level in Rome rose, they sank further into the dirt, and were forgotten until Sixtus V had them excavated.⁹

1.2 The Sistine obelisks

Upon his election in 1585 Pope Sixtus V started an urban building campaign that had not been seen since the days of the Roman emperors. He approached the task like a modern day property developer, removing and destroying ancient buildings and objects at his convenience. Among his many construction plans was the transportation and erection of no less than four obelisks in Rome (fig. 1.2). Though Sixtus had good reason to have the first two obelisks moved and raised, it is unclear why he proceeded to have two more excavated and re-erected.

The first to be moved was the obelisk at the Vatican (in 1586). It was in an awkward location to the south of the church, and Sixtus had it moved to a central spot in front of the New Saint Peter's, where the Square was yet to be constructed. This was not a new idea: several popes before him had attempted to have it moved, his predecessor Gregory XIII among them, but Gregory had decided it could not be done in his lifetime. In his book *Obelisk. A history*, Curran lists various reasons why Sixtus moved the Vatican obelisk.¹⁰ It is a well documented fact that Gregory and Sixtus disliked each other immensely.¹¹ I believe that this dislike carried additional motivation for Sixtus to embark on his risky endeavour. Moreover, according to historical sources Sixtus could not stand the fact that this pagan object was so close to the construction of the New St Peter's church.¹²

The success of this exceptional technological feat turned Fontana and Sixtus into heroes overnight. To make it happen Sixtus had published a competition. The engineer Domenico Fontana was eventually given the assignment. He was given free reign in the manufacture and purchase of the best wood for a *castellum*, a wooden skeleton that protected the obelisk, as well as the best materials for the ropes and the capstans that were used in the operation. Upon the successful re-erection of the obelisk, Fontana was given these materials as a gift, which practically gave him a monopoly on subsequent attempts to erect obelisks.

⁹ The information in this section was taken from my student paper *Piranesi's Egyptian Obelisk. A close-up*, written for the course "Piranesi and Architectural History in Rome" at Leiden University.

¹⁰ Mercati 1589, pp. 344-346; Curran 2009, p. 107 and pp. 145-149.

¹¹ See for example 'Sixtus V' in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹² Curran et al. 2009, pp. 147.

A second obelisk had already been excavated in 1519 by Leo X and deposited in Via Ripetta and left there. Its pieces had been an obstruction for normal traffic to and from the Piazza del Popolo for 68 years. It had been the source of much frustration and many heated debates. A secular as well as spiritual ruler, Sixtus killed two birds with one stone: he had the offending obstacles removed, had the obelisk repaired, and appropriated it for himself, erecting it on the Esquiline Hill (in 1587). This obelisk had had a place in Emperor Augustus' mausoleum complex, and so Sixtus managed to create a link between himself and Augustus.¹³

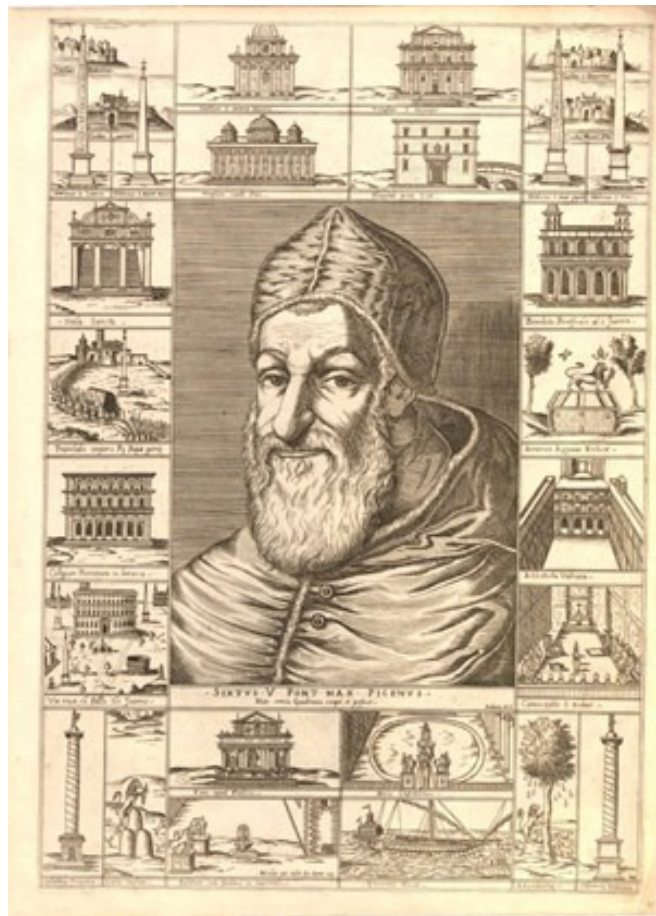


Figure 1.2 *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*. Bust portrait of Sixtus V surrounded by 28 scenes depicting buildings either completed, restored or newly erected by him, as well as other scenes relating to his life, 1589. © Trustees of the British Museum

So far Sixtus' reasons for moving these obelisks are clear. But when it was brought to Sixtus' attention that there must be two more obelisks buried in the Circus Maximus, he decided to have them excavated. He knew that one of these obelisks was very large and had previously been erected by Constantius, son of Emperor Constantine the Great, and the other had

¹³ D'Onofrio 1969-1, p. 156; Iversen 1968-1972 I, 95; Rouillet 1972, p. 78, Van Arentshals 2014, passim.

belonged to Emperor Augustus himself.¹⁴ Knowing that their excavation would be difficult to do and would cost him a fortune, why did he proceed? Was it because everything that was required was already in place: the castellum, the capstans and the ropes, and above all, the technical ingenuity of his engineer? Once they were excavated, he had the larger obelisk raised on the Lateran Square, the other on Piazza del Popolo. What did it bring him?

1.3 Sources

I consider two reference books the most relevant for the general antiquarian study of obelisks. These are Iversen's *Obelisks in exile* (1968-1972), and Curran et al., *Obelisk. A history* (2009).¹⁵ Three more books are invaluable for researching the Sistine obelisks in Rome, and these are D'Onofrio's antiquarian *Gli obelischi di Roma* (1969), and two contemporary books by Mercati and Fontana.¹⁶ Michele Mercati was a courtier at the papal court (fig. 1.3). He was a learned man, educated at the university of Pisa. In his book *De gli obelischi di Roma* (1589)



he devotes a chapter to the reasons why Sixtus V had the obelisks transported and re-erected. He knew Sixtus well and worked closely with him. He even takes credit for pointing out to Sixtus that there ought to be two obelisks still in the Circus Maximus. I consider Mercati a mouthpiece of Sixtus' intentions, especially because Sixtus asked him to write the book, and it was published in 1589, when Sixtus was still alive.¹⁷

Figure 1.3 Petrus Nellus, *Bust portrait of Michele Mercati*, before 1717, Private collection.

Domenico Fontana was the engineer who, after having won the competition to find a method for moving the Vatican obelisk (fig. 1.4), completed this and many other great feats of engineering, and wrote a book about them: *Della trasportatione dell'obelisco vaticano et delle fabbriche di nostro signore papa Sisto V*, published in 1590.¹⁸



Figure 1.4 Domenico Fontana, Frontispiece of his 1590 book (detail)

¹⁴ Mercati 1589, pp. 377-378.

¹⁵ Curran 2009, Iversen 1968-1972.

¹⁶ D'Onofrio 1969, Mercati 1589, Fontana 1590.

¹⁷ Mercati 1589, Dedication, first text page (no page number).

¹⁸ Fontana 1590.

And of course we have another contemporary source, i.e. Sixtus' own words on the bases of his obelisks. There is very limited room on a base, so we would expect the words to be carefully chosen because they are carved in stone to last an eternity. I assume, then, that these texts show which of his intentions Sixtus wished to make explicit.

I will make use of the texts on the base of the Lateran obelisk and of Mercati's and Fontana's books as contemporary sources throughout this thesis, because they provide information on the history of the obelisk as it was known to Sixtus.

1.4 Questions

Rather than producing another antiquarian piece on the Lateran obelisk, I will take a different approach in this thesis. In section 1.2, I mentioned Sixtus' disregard for material culture as a historic presence. When he destroyed so many ancient monuments, why did he actively excavate, save and repair these obelisks? I will attempt to find an answer by applying Alfred Gell's Anthropological Theory of Art (ATA) to the third Sistine obelisk, to research the context in which it was excavated, transported, repaired, re-erected and dedicated to Christ.

Gell's theory was published posthumously in *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (1998). I will briefly introduce and discuss Gell's theory in chapter 3. It considers every art object a residue of a performance, because it instils in the spectator the question: 'How did this thing get to be here?',¹⁹ which is exactly my research question regarding the Lateran obelisk. Does the Lateran obelisk qualify as an art object? For Gell, an art object is "whatever is inserted into the 'slot' provided for art objects" in his theoretical system. Gell's theory is about doing, agency, and may therefore be a useful tool to find the reasons why Sixtus continued erecting obelisks.

It is my firm conviction, however, that there is a question that precedes (or constitutes the first part of) Gell's central question of "How did this thing get to be here?", and that is the question: "What *is* this thing?" Before one can infer that there must have been technology at work, one first has to identify what it is that the eyes see. Though this may not be an anthropological question, any answer can and will be looked at anthropologically by asking the next question: "How did it get to be here?"

These two questions of 'what' and 'how' also raise methodological issues. My research questions are therefore the following:

¹⁹ Gell 1998, p. 67.

1. Does the application of the ATA provide useful information on the social context in which the object functioned? I am defining ‘usefulness’ as finding an answer in this social context to the question of why Sixtus continued re-erecting obelisks after the first two.

I wish to establish whether applying Gell’s theory may provide an answer to this question. I intend to explore what it is about obelisks that made them so successful for Sixtus. The use of Gell’s theory is fitting, because it is a social theory that is all about *doing*, and it allows me to investigate the ways in which the agents and the obelisk are part of the same social construct. Moreover, the theory seems suitable, as the obelisk possesses “the halo effect of technical difficulty”, a central topic in the ATA.²⁰

2. Can the ATA be applied consistently to a single art object in an art historical study and produce new and meaningful insights?

In the presentation of his theory Gell provides many examples of different objects to show all the possibilities in agent/patient relations in his theory, but he does not apply his theory consistently to a single object. In art historical research focused on a single object, it makes sense to try to apply his entire theory to that single object. In doing so we may find out how the object functioned in its social context, and at the same time we can demonstrate whether the application of the theory is relevant in such a research, in that it provides new insights.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 precedes the application of the Anthropological Theory of Art, and attempts to answer the question of the inherent nature of the obelisk: “What *is* this thing?” It discusses the spontaneous inferences that one can make upon seeing the Lateran obelisk without any prior knowledge, as well as historical facts and myths as they were known to Sixtus. Chapter 3 then discusses the ATA in a nutshell, and shows how it is going to be applied to the Lateran obelisk. Chapters 4 and 5 are taken up with the application of the ATA. In chapter 4 I will attempt to apply the ATA consistently, concentrating on the significance of the technical ingenuity required to re-erect the obelisk. In chapter 5 the same attempt is made, this time to discuss the sacred character that is assigned to the obelisk.

²⁰ Gell 1998, p. viii.

Chapter 6 takes a closer look at the concept of prototype, and its possible use in the theory, and chapter 7 evaluates the results of my efforts.

*

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours.

John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

2 “What is this thing?”

In this chapter I will briefly address the question posed in chapter 1 that precedes the application of the Anthropological Theory of Art. It is the question: “What is this thing?”, inquiring about the nature of the obelisk. The first section will list spontaneous inferences that can be made upon seeing the obelisk, the second section discusses the sixteenth-century knowledge about the obelisk using contemporary sources, especially the texts on the base.

2.1 Spontaneous inferences

What are obelisks? Obelisks are tall four-sided monoliths that taper towards the top, with a pyramidal structure on top that tapers with a greater inclination into a sharp point. This pyramid on top is called the *benbenet*, referring to Egyptian mythology, in which the *benben* was the original seat for the sun god’s creation of the universe, and marked the spot where the sun’s rays first touched the earth. Lifting the *benben* to the heavens on a stone shaft, the creators of the obelisk joined heaven and earth in a single symbol. The *benbenet* was usually clad in gold, copper or electrum to reflect the sun’s rays.²¹

Even if one has no prior knowledge about them, obelisks immediately invite thoughts about their nature. An obelisk seems alien, and is probably best defined by negatives. Its function is not immediately apparent. It is not a building, because one cannot enter into it. It does not look like any other object, so it is not figurative sculpture. It is not abstract sculpture either, though this may be the most apt comparison. But in the time of Sixtus V there was no conception of such a notion.²² Pliny’s comment that ‘it was the representation of a sunbeam’ became common knowledge probably for this reason:²³ it made the obelisk more accessible as an almost figurative sculpture, assigning some meaning to something totally unintelligible.

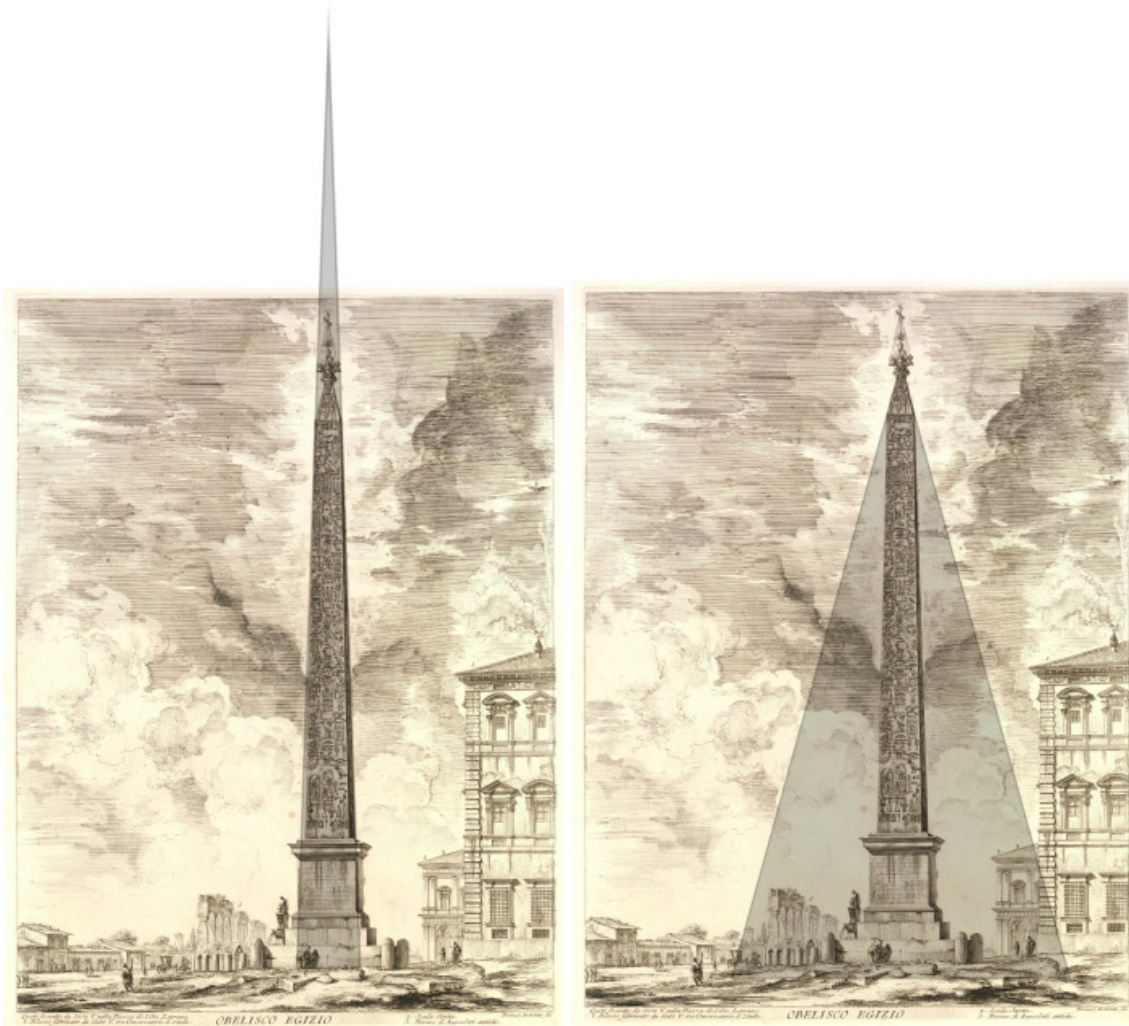
Turning to the positives: this Lateran obelisk is a big, tall, and heavy object made of granite. That realisation is the trigger for the subsequent inference that technical ingenuity

²¹ Curran et al. 2009, pp. 14-15.

²² I cannot provide evidence *ex negativo*, but dare the reader to provide a counterexample.

²³ “Trabes ex eo fecere reges quodam certamine, obeliscos vocantes Solis numini sacros. radorum eius argumentum in effigie est, et ita significatur nomine Aegypti.” Pliny the Elder 79 AD, XXXVI,14.

must have been used to defeat gravity, and this is the reason for the involuntary surprise reaction described by Gell which will be discussed in chapter 3. It points to the sky. It is perpendicular to the horizon, and much inventive technology has been used for its creation and its erection. If it or its base is badly constructed or left untended, it will fall down. It seems to symbolise an enduring organisation and control over the environment, and is therefore a symbol of long-lasting power. It is old, but without any additional knowledge it is impossible to tell how old (for factual knowledge, see section 2.2). It seems certain that it will remain where it is long after the spectator has passed away – much like Keats’ Grecian urn. An obelisk is ‘an object larger than itself’, in the sense of Peter Mason’s discussion of the Cenotaph in London.²⁴ An obelisk tapers towards the sky, which makes it seem taller than it actually is (fig. 2.1a).



Figures 2.1a and 2.1b An object larger than itself. G.B. Piranesi, *Obelisco Egizio*, ca. 1759 (shaded areas added).
 © Trustees of the British Museum

²⁴ Mason 2013, p. 13.

It evokes the words of Vernant, who comments on the religious sign:

Mais en cherchant ainsi à jeter comme un pont vers le divin, il lui faut en même temps marquer le distance, accuser l'incommensurabilité entre la puissance sacrée et tout ce qui la manifeste, de façon nécessairement inadéquate, aux yeux des hommes.²⁵

Moreover, its pyramidion suggests inclining lines towards the ground, surrounding the obelisk with a pyramid-shaped space (though at a steeper gradient) that seems to envelop everything in its vicinity (fig. 2.1b). We are under its influence when we are close to it. Only when we step outside this space and create some distance can we see the entire obelisk.



We need to remove ourselves to see the object, and this makes it distant. Walter Benjamin states that “the essentially distant is the unapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image”. Mason adds that the distant, the unapproachable, can still be near.²⁶ We can approach it, but it is on a pedestal, and far too high to be touched by us (fig. 2.2). It is literally out of reach, and that instils it with even more of a ceremonial quality.

Fig 2.2. The unapproachable. Photo by author, 2011.

The object is also unapproachable in another way: it has only straight lines, which do not exist in nature. It looks alien. It is the antithesis of everything that is natural. The obelisk was probably given this shape on purpose. Especially due to its association with tombs and cemeteries in ancient Egypt it is entirely possible that the obelisk started out as the *kolossos* in ancient Greek mythology. Peter Mason describes the *kolossos* as an aniconic double that represents a deceased person: “It does not bear a likeness to the dead person, but in its coldness, fixity, immobility, opacity and solidity it is profoundly substantial. In fact, the very reality of the *kolossos* seems to be to exclude any form of similarity; it has to demonstrate its

²⁵ Seeking to project like a bridge towards the divine, at the same time it needs to mark the distance, to pinpoint the incommensurability between the holy power and everything that manifests it, in a necessarily inadequate manner, in the eyes of the people. Vernant 1971, p 78 (my translation).

²⁶ As quoted in Mason 2013, p. 120.

distance from the form of the living person.”²⁷ It reveals itself, in the words of Vernant, as belonging to an inaccessible elsewhere.²⁸ In Greece this aniconic form gave way to the *kouros*, an iconic statue of a youth, in the course of the 6th century BC.²⁹

This must be the reason why it cannot be anthropomorphised, even though human beings seem to have a tendency to see human characteristics in almost anything. If any object is given ‘eyes’ (Gell mentions several examples) or a more or less abstract (partial) human shape (as in Giacometti’s *Cube*) this makes people anthropomorphise them. That is why, according to the Anthropological Theory of Art, “in gross terms, it may be supposed that whatever type of action a person may perform *vis-à-vis* another person, may be performed also by a work of art [...]”³⁰ There is no indication in the literature that an obelisk, though considered an extension of the patron or artist, is ever regarded ‘almost as a person’. In other words, it incites no ‘living presence response’, in which viewers react to works of art as if they were living beings or persons that act upon the viewer.³¹ It simply cannot be instilled with personhood. Interestingly, obelisks are the only *colossi* discussed in Mason’s book that do not take a human form. The obelisk seems too alien to even allow anthropomorphising. Mason quotes Walter Benjamin as saying: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at a means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return”.³² In the case of an obelisk, this attempt is doomed to fail. It is what it is: a hermetic object.

2.2 Sixteenth-century knowledge of the history of the obelisk

The Lateran obelisk is in fact ancient. This distance in *time* is obviously a great part of its attraction. Even today, who would not be overawed by the knowledge that the obelisk is older than the Trojan War, and may have attended the events in the biblical book of *Exodus*? As this is not a quality that can be perceived by looking at it without any prior knowledge, we will now turn to the knowledge that was available in Sixtus’ time. Some knowledge of the obelisk’s use in ancient times was available, such as the fact that it had been dedicated to the Sun in ancient Egyptian times.

²⁷ Mason 2013, p. 168, on lectures he attended in Paris by by Jean-Pierre Vernant.

²⁸ Vernant 1971, p 70, translation by Mason, p 34: “n’étant pas d’ici, comme appartenant à un inaccessible ailleurs.”

²⁹ Mason 2013, p. 168.

³⁰ Gell 1998, p. 66.

³¹ See the VICI-project “Art, Agency, and Living Presence in Early Modern Italy” by C. van Eck. There are some art historical texts that make use of the ATA, but I have found them of limited use for my research. They are about portraits, and researched people’s reactions to them.

³² Mason 2013, p. 120.

In his book *De gli obelischi di Roma* Mercati collects and synthesizes all knowledge on obelisks that was available in his time. He believed the obelisk to have been created by Ramses II (r. 1318- 1252 according to Mercati), a Nineteenth Dynasty pharaoh. He discusses various classical authors' opinions about the age of the obelisk. Some authors place the destruction of Troy in the last year of Ramses' reign, which according to him is uncertain, and he himself tentatively places it in 1169 BC, "424 years before the construction of Rome". He tells us that the sixth pharaoh who had 'Ramses' in his name, whom we call Ramses II, started his reign in 1318 BC, "5 years after the death of Aod, who was the fourth governor of the people of Israel after Moses".³³

The obelisk is older, however (see section 1.1). In fact, the hieroglyphs on the obelisk tell us that it was created two centuries earlier during the Eighteenth Dynasty, by Pharaoh Thutmosis III (whose started ca. 1450 BC according to McEvedy, Wallis Budge has 1500 to 1447), and that the inscriptions were added by his grandson, Thutmosis IV.³⁴ But hieroglyphs could not be read in Sixtus' days, and this information was out of reach (fig. 2.3).



Figure 2.3 *Hieroglyphs on the Lateran Obelisk*. Alessandro Nessenzia, 2007 (Panoramio.com)

Though they could not be read in the sixteenth century, it was common 'knowledge' that hieroglyphs were an ancient, sacred language whose meaning would be immediately apparent to the initiate without the use of the language faculty, through an 'inspired process of

³³ Mercati 1589, pp. 148-149. McEvedy 2002, p. 46 places the Trojan War tentatively 'in the 1180s?' Today it is thought likely that the time of Rameses II (r. 1279-1213) is the period of the exodus narated in the bible: the pharao mentioned in the book of *Exodus* may be Rameses II. See for instance Malamat 1977, p. 42. "In all likelihood then, Rameses II should be regarded as the Pharao who oppressed the Israelites and during whose long reign they may have left Egypt" I would like to thank E. Verhoef for bringing this to my attention.

³⁴ Dates are based on the moon calendar and vary with various authors. See for instance McEvedy 2002, p. 40, Wallis Budge 1926, p. 124.

intellectual enlightenment', given by God to humanity. The history of this misconception has been described by Iversen, among others, in his book *The myth of Egypt and its hieroglyphs in European tradition*. The neo-platonic tendency for mystification and symbolic interpretation of hieroglyphs, based on the writings of Horapollo, would lead to the invention of the emblem and the impresa, which would culminate in the publication in 1593 of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*.³⁵

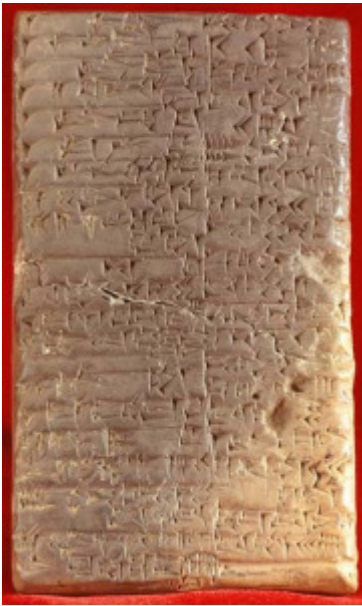


Figure 2.4. Cuneiform script tablet from the Kirkor Minassian collection in the Library of Congress, USA.

It is easy to understand how such notions may have come about. Imagining an obelisk covered in cuneiform script, for example, shows how the idea of a sacred, non-linguistic language whose meaning is immediately apparent would probably never have formed (fig. 2.4). It is the little recognisable pictures of people, snakes, birds and other signs on the obelisk that echo in the mind of the observer. For this reason I believe that the hieroglyphs, though they could not be interpreted in Sixtus' days, made the obelisk more, not less, accessible to the human mind. It remains important to understand that the hieroglyphs provide data on the object they are inscribed in, but constitute only an outside layer, a document that is not consequential for its shape or size.

2.3 Sixtus' own words

We will turn to Sixtus' history of the obelisk, as it was inscribed on the four faces of the base. The original Latin inscriptions are included in Appendix C.

2.3.1 The east face

The text on the east face of the base can be read by people who are looking west, in the direction of the Circus Maximus.

³⁵ See for in-depth explanation Iversen 1961, passim, or for a quick overview, see for example: James Hall, *A History of Ideas and Images in Italian Art*, London 1983, pp. 271-276.

It reads as follows:

Flavius Constantius Augustus, son of Constantine Augustus, gave this obelisk, removed from its original place by his father and for a long time left in Alexandria, then placed on a ship of astounding dimensions carrying 300 rowers³⁶ and, by the sea and the Tiber, transported to Rome with great efforts in order to be placed in the Circus Maximus, as a gift to the Roman Senate and People.^{37 38}

The mention of Constantine the Great and his son Constantius is only natural, because of their direct involvement with this obelisk. But there are other reasons why Sixtus mentions Constantine. Constantine is connected to the Lateran in more ways than one. First of all, Constantine was known as the first Christian Emperor. The basilica and the palace had long been associated with him, because he had supposedly donated them to Pope Sylvester around 335 CE in the *donatio constantini*. This was a document in which Emperor Constantine, the secular ruler, transferred authority over Rome and other parts of the empire to the pope. In the fifteenth century it had been proved to be a forgery, which Sixtus must have known, but the association of Constantine with the Lateran remained. Moreover, the obelisk was to be erected on the spot where the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius had been since the ninth century, before having been moved to the Capitol exactly 50 years earlier, in 1538. According to oral tradition this statue was the only imperial equestrian statue not to have been destroyed by Christians because it was believed to represent Emperor Constantine. This belief was probably the reason why it had been placed near the Lateran Cathedral in the first place.³⁹

The obelisk was a gift to the senate and the people of Rome. It was a time-honoured practice of the ancient Romans to parade loot from the newly added provinces through the streets of Rome, and to display them in public places. The obelisk was one of these, a gift to SPQR. Due to its size and weight, it was hardly paraded through the streets, but it was a real spectacle to see it moved to its spot in the Circus Maximus.

The transportation to Rome required technological superiority. Since we are concerned in this thesis with an anthropological theory that focuses on actions, it is interesting to see the nature of the *verbs* here, as they signify action. They almost all refer to the technology

³⁶ The reference to the rowers is taken from Ammianus XVII, 4.13. See Iversen 1968-1972, p 64, footnote 1.

³⁷ This information was known because it had been inscribed by order of Constantius in the previous base, which was created when the obelisk was placed in the centre of the spina of the Circus Maximus in 357. See Mercati 1589, D'Onofrio 1969.

³⁸ Translations by Iversen 1968-1972, pp. 63-64.

³⁹ The information in this paragraph has been taken from my student paper *Piranesi's Egyptian Obelisk. A close-up*, written for the course "Piranesi and Architectural History in Rome" at Leiden University.

required to bring the obelisk to Rome, except for the gift-giving: removing it, placing it on a large ship, transporting it with great difficulty by sea and river, and placing it in the circus. Also, there is mention of the astounding dimensions of the ship, and the great effort that the endeavour took.

2.3.2 The north face

The text on the north face of the obelisk's base can be read by people who are looking south, in the direction of the Episcopal Palace and the *Loggia delle Benedizioni*, both of which were constructed under the supervision of Domenico Fontana by order of Sixtus. The text shows many parallels with that on the east face. It reads as follows:

Sixtus V, Supreme Pontiff, excavated at great cost this obelisk, broken by the vicissitudes of time and deeply buried in the soil and slime of the Circus Maximus, transferred it to this place with great effort, and dedicated it to the most invincible cross, after it had been carefully restored to its original state. In the year 1588, the fourth year of his pontificate.

The text refers to Sixtus but not Fontana, and it is clear that Sixtus is honouring himself for a job well done. The engineer, Fontana, is not mentioned, as was standard practice in this time. The engineer was considered a hired hand by the person who paid for the entire enterprise. I will return to this topic in section 4.3.1.

It is implied that this obelisk is a gift to the Roman people, in parallel with its being a gift to SPQR in imperial Rome, for the simple reason that it was erected in Rome. The obelisk is explicitly dedicated to the Holy Cross, the instrument of Christ's suffering. To refrain from making the theology unnecessarily complicated, I will take Christ as the dedicatee.

The transportation to the Lateran required technological virtuosity and great expenses. In parallel with the east face, again almost all of the verbs refer to the required technology: excavating the obelisk from its deep location, transferring it with great effort, restoring and dedicating it. Sixtus moreover stresses the fact that the enterprise was undertaken at great cost.

2.3.3 The west face

The text on the west face of the base can be read by people who are looking east, in the direction of the Scala Santa. The *Scala Santa* building was newly constructed by Domenico Fontana, to form a *più devoto e più nobile* housing for what was supposed to be the very

staircase that Christ ascended when he was brought to Pontius Pilate.⁴⁰ The stairs lead to the new *Sancta Sanctorum*, Holy of Holies, the pope's private chapel. The text reads as follows:

Flavius Constantine the Great, Augustus, the protector and defender of the Christian faith, ordered this obelisk, which by an impure vow had been dedicated to the Sun by the Egyptian king, to be transported down the Nile to Alexandria, in order to decorate with this monument the new Rome, recently founded by him.

Constantine the Great is presented here as the protector and defender of the Christian faith. This must be a reference to the Edict of Milan. Clearly, it is important to Sixtus that he is a successor of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, who founded a second Rome, which was and is the eternal city.

The obelisk had been dedicated to the Sun by the Egyptian king. In Sixtus' time it was impossible to read hieroglyphs, and Sixtus had no knowledge of what is inscribed on it (see section 2.2), but it was thought that the obelisk was created by Ramses II.⁴¹ This historical error was not inscribed on the base, however, as 'the king' is not mentioned by name.

2.3.4 The south face

The text on the south face of the base can be read by people who are looking north, in the general direction of the Santa Maria Maggiore, where Sixtus was building his funerary chapel and had already had an obelisk erected on the Esquiline hill. This is one of two sides that are closest to the Baptistery. The text reads as follows:

Constantine, victor through the Cross and here baptised by S. Sylvester, propagated the glory of the Cross.

The text references Constantine's victory through the Holy Cross. Constantine was believed to have had a dream before his battle at the Milvian bridge in 312 AD, in which he saw the sign of the cross, saying: *In hoc signo vinces*. Sixtus had the obelisk brought to the Lateran, where the *Donatio Constantini* had taken place, and dedicated it to 'the most invincible cross', the instrument of Christ's suffering.

⁴⁰ Fontana 1590, p. 70r.

⁴¹ Mercati 1589, chapter 13, pp 141-151.

We also learn that Constantine's baptism was carried out by Sixtus' predecessor. Just before he died, Constantine was baptised at this very location in the Lateran Baptistery, by Saint Sylvester, Sixtus' predecessor to whom he had given the *donatio constantini*.

2.3.5 Conclusion

We learn from the extensive references to efforts, transport, and distance on the obelisk's base that it was very important to Sixtus that in the ancient past and in his own time there was great effort involved in transporting the obelisk, and that this was done at great cost. Its transportation is mentioned on three of the four faces of the base. These references are evidence of great pride in the ingenious mastering of the technology required for transporting and erecting the obelisk. For the early moderns, technological progress entailed matching the greatness achieved in imperial times. Unlike us modern people, whose concept of technological progress involves pushing for new and uncharted developments, people in Sixtus' time tried to recreate what had already been done. It is an attempt at a kind of resurrection that is scientific rather than religious in nature:⁴² Sixtus managed to recreate the technological achievements of the Romans. The early moderns used words such as *difficoltà*, *virtù* and *magnificenza* to represent mastery of the physical world, where we would use words such as inventive technology and ingenuity.⁴³ I shall use the latter words throughout this thesis.

Another recurring theme is the obelisk's sacred character. It was a major point for Sixtus that he had dedicated the obelisk to the Holy Cross, in other words: to Christ. Several verbs and epithets on three of the faces refer to its dedicatee, and one of these, the south face, is taken up completely with the obelisk's significance for Christianity. In his book Mercati speaks about the *maravigliosa grandezza de gli obelischi*, and their *magnificenza*.⁴⁴ He comments that the pagans honoured their false Gods with 'such *magnificenza*', and "in emulation of the pagans, [...] if the obelisks are moved and erected in front of the churches of Rome, the Christians will equal the pagans in terms of *magnificenza* of divine honour."⁴⁵ The intention seems to be the appropriation of the *magnificenza* of holy reverence for its own sake.

⁴² Quoted out of context from Clarke 1962, p. 127.

⁴³ For a discussion of the meanings of these and other terms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see for instance David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton 1981.

⁴⁴ Mercati, *De gli obelischi*, 347.

⁴⁵ *ibidem*, 348.

Mercati sees no need to elaborate on the nature of the obelisks' *magnificenza*, and this needs to be inferred by his readers. In an earlier chapter he describes the obelisks' destruction out of envy by the Goths, to whom they appeared miraculous on account of their elegant shape, which is moreover crafted from a single piece of stone. This must lend them *magnificenza*, and based on what follows, we can probably add their age, their size and the sheer power and technology involved.

Also, Mercati creates a time-lapse correspondence between the cross and the obelisk which explains its Christian nature: they both provide sustenance. He reasons as follows: obelisks were dedicated by the Egyptians to the sun, from which they thought they received everything they required for their corporeal life. The cross, the instrument of human redemption, gives the people all they need in their spiritual life. We are to conclude that it is therefore fitting that an obelisk should be crowned with the cross.⁴⁶

These findings suggest that both the technological ingenuity required for moving the obelisk and Sixtus' conquest of its sacred nature were the major aspects that Sixtus intended to convey. This is hardly surprising, because obelisks are, in Cipriani's words, "perfect symbols, in their geometric rigidity, of the life-giving force of the sun, and at the same time the highest expression of human technology".⁴⁷ This seems to be a universally recognised reception of the obelisks.

For these reasons I will consider the obelisk's technical ingenuity and its employment as a sacred object in the following chapters. But first I will introduce Gell's Anthropological Theory of Art.

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⁴⁶ Mercati 1589, p. 348.

⁴⁷ Cipriani 1993, p. 25. The classical equation of Christ and Sol falls outside the scope of this thesis, as Sixtus would not have subscribed to it. On the contrary, it was his intention to use the obelisks as symbols of the Christian conquest of pagan religions.

If it be stone, tell me how it was raised.
If there be many stones, tell me where they join.⁴⁸

A visitor marvelling at the Vatican obelisk, ca 1200

3 “How did this thing get to be here?”

3.1 Gell’s Anthropological Theory of Art in a nutshell

In the nineteen nineties the anthropologist Alfred Gell formulated an Anthropological Theory of Art (ATA). The objective of Gell’s ATA is to account for the agency, production and circulation of art objects. The theory is anthropological in nature, and concentrates on agency. Rather than carriers of a certain meaning that is to be discerned, and which we discussed in chapter 2, art objects function in the context of relationships. Gell intends to see how the art objects act on the relationships in which they are circulated.⁴⁹

Gell’s theory is rooted in the logic of Charles Sanders Peirce, especially in his concept of causal abduction. Ferdinand de Saussure famously defined a sign relation as consisting of a sign and its meaning (signifier and signified). Taking his cue from Peirce’s work on semiotics, Gell stipulates a triadic sign relation of sign, object, and interpretant (fig. 3.1). Gell is after all an anthropologist, and it is necessary for him to ask the question who is affected by the sign and interprets its meaning: the sign means something *to someone*.

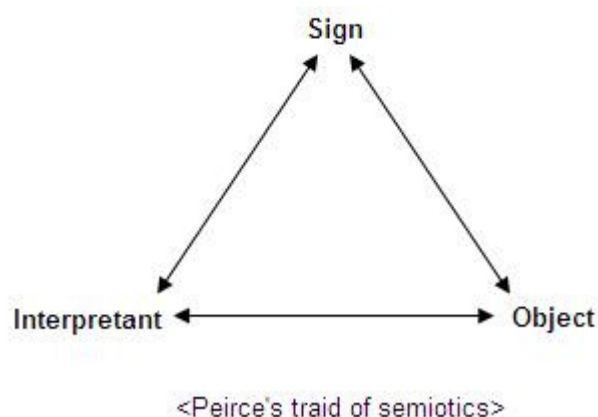


Figure 3.1. Peirce’s triad of semiotics.

Hua-Ling Linda Chang, University of Chicago

⁴⁸ Documented by Magister Gregorius (an English traveller ca 1200), Curran 2009, p 65.

⁴⁹ Gell 1998, p. 11.

Gell is interested in the *abductions* that a person can infer from an (art) object. Gell uses the Peircean concept of *abduction* to describe certain inferences that are weaker than logical deduction or induction, but follow the discovery of a more or less surprising fact, such as seeing an enormous ancient Egyptian obelisk standing in a Roman square. Abduction is a useful tool to limit the infinite number of logically fallacious theories about art. The concept is basically the validation of the human inclination to believe that if $p \rightarrow q$, the reverse is probably also valid: if $q \rightarrow p$. (If it rains the streets are wet, with its reverse: the streets are wet, so it has probably rained.) In logic this is a fallacy. But it is very much what people who have had no training in logic will automatically assume, provided it suffices to explain the result: it having rained is a sufficient explanation for wet streets. Since Gell's theory is about social networks and people's assumptions on seeing an object, abduction is a valid way of gauging people's reaction to it.

Gell's theory is concerned with the way in which a sign stands for its denoted object. Peirce's sign typology of *icon*, *index*, *symbol* classifies every sign according to how the sign denotes its object. An icon does so by a quality of its own, a likeness (such as the icon of a recycle bin on a computer desktop, which resembles a real-world bin); an index denotes the object by a factual connection to its object (such as a dinosaur footprint); and a symbol does so by a habit or rule that the interpretant knows (such as the Dutch word *maan* that refers to a celestial body) (see fig. 3.2).⁵⁰



Figure 3.2. Icon, index, and symbol

Gell considers the art object as an *index*, which indicates that he is interested in the manner in which factual connections are inferred from it. In his theory the index is the work of art that changes the social environment in which it is introduced. This is the reason why the index is absolutely fundamental to the theory. Without it, there is no disturbance in the social field,

⁵⁰ From Wikipedia, "Charles Sanders Peirce".

and there is nothing to study. The existing relationships are the reason why such an index is introduced, most probably with the express purpose of changing the social environment.

If (art) objects are a function of the context of certain relationships, these relationships need studying. How does the object function, and which factual connections can be inferred? The relationships are ties with people who are affected by it: the artist who has created it, the patron by whose order it was made, and any other recipients such as ‘the general public’. The prototype, the thing or person represented by the work of art is another affected party. The index connects all these people or things that play various roles in the social context. The index can be considered at once an extra limb of the patron or artist, while it is also the handle attached to another role.⁵¹ This is the whole point of the theory. Though it is an object, Gell treats the index almost as a person, ascribing it ‘partial personhood’, because it mediates intentionalities of people such as patrons and artists.

3.2 The scope of the investigation

The index is a ‘congealed residue of performance and agency in object form’.⁵² Application of the ATA requires defining specific moments in time, when the status of the art object under investigation can be specifically defined. It resembles taking photographs of various stages, and describing the relationships in each photograph. These descriptions are successive versions of the ‘art nexus’ (see for example table 4.2). The theory predicts that the relationships may change in each successive version of the art nexus.

The index is not only the object *per se*, but it demonstrates agency. It is a residue of a performance, because it instils in the spectator the question: ‘how did this thing get to be here?’⁵³ In other words, the technology involved in making the object constitutes a major part of the index itself. In the case of the Lateran obelisk this question might involve its creation, but also the act of transporting and erecting it. What, then, is the index in my research? It seems obvious that this is the obelisk. It came as a surprise, however, that I found it so difficult to pinpoint the roles of the artist and the prototype. I realised that these roles change not only with the moment in time, but also with the aspects of the obelisk that I was investigating.

Clearly, the object itself was not created by Sixtus or Fontana, but its presence at the Lateran is. And this obelisk is not only big, tall, and heavy; it is the biggest, tallest and

⁵¹ Gell 1998, p. 37.

⁵² Gell 1998, p. 68.

⁵³ Gell 1998, p. 67.

heaviest of all obelisks in existence. Superlatives count when it comes to captivity. Weighing approx. 440 metric tonnes, as Fontana calculates,⁵⁴ and standing 48 metres high including its base, it is a heavy, tall, practically immovable object. Once on Roman soil, the Romans applied their technical ingenuity to it. First the ancient Romans, then Sixtus' engineer. As such it is both 'self' and 'other', as it (or rather, its prototype) had already been in the days of the Roman emperors as well. The remarkable situation with this obelisk is that it is its own prototype from a different stage, as will be discussed in section 4.2.2.

Gell specifies the scope of his ATA as the social relations in the vicinity of objects which exert social agency. According to him, anthropology is concerned with the immediate context of social interactions and their personal dimensions. The fundamental timeframe under consideration in anthropology is the life cycle with its spatial correlate,⁵⁵ in other words: a person's lifetime in the place where s/he exists. As I am investigating the social network surrounding the Lateran obelisk as re-erected by Sixtus, this means that I must limit my research to the agents who were active in Sixtus' circle during his pontificate. The 'now' I will investigate, therefore, is the period in Sixtus' reign that pertains to his re-erection of the Lateran obelisk.

More specifically, the temporal scope of my investigation is the time of Sixtus' pontificate *after* the re-erection and rededication of the obelisk. This timeframe is consequential, because that is when the technology and religious significance must be inferred, as that is when one can wonder: 'how did this thing get to be here?'. The process of working with the obelisk can be regarded as a kind of performance art in the period in which the pieces of the obelisk were located, excavated, transported, repaired and rejoined, culminating in its re-erection in August 1588. What could be inferred from its transportation, for instance, as people watched when it was being done, is the intentional similarity with the Roman practice of parading war loot from the newly acquired provinces.⁵⁶ This is not an aspect which I will be investigating. The 'photograph', or version of the art nexus, which I will examine is the inferences that could be made once the obelisk was in its place. This is when the entire technological enterprise and the obelisk's Christianisation became 'congealed', and had to be inferred by those who did not witness them as they happened. That is the scope of my research.

⁵⁴ Fontana 1590, p 70v. The table in Fontana 1987-2, p. 37, equates a libra with 0.3312 kg. Wallis Budge provides 'about 460 tons'.

⁵⁵ Gell 1998, pp. 8-11.

⁵⁶ Mercati 1589, p. 347-348.

3.3 Defining the index

Consideration of only the short timeframe of Sixtus' reign has far-reaching consequences for my approach. Instead of an obelisk-based chronological review of events from its creation in Egypt in ca. 1450 BC, I now investigate the 'network of intentionalities' surrounding the obelisk during Sixtus' pontificate. Though common sense dictates that it were the ancient Egyptian stonemasons who created the obelisk, they are not to be considered the artists in my research. The artist in Sixtus' network of intentionalities is necessarily someone in his own lifetime. This also means that the creation of the obelisk falls outside the technological scope of my research, and I focus only on its excavation, transportation and re-erection – exactly, by the way, like the authors in Sixtus' time did. The contemporary (i.e., late sixteenth-century) literature about the obelisks keeps emphasizing the seemingly superhuman effort of transporting and re-erecting them. As a rule, their creation by the Egyptians is ignored, and when it is mentioned it is underplayed. It seems that the early modern Romans are relating the obelisks to themselves and are solely interested in what they and their Roman ancestors in the Empire did with them.

On the basis of the texts on the base as discussed in chapter 2, I consider the obelisk's most important aspects to be the perceived nature of the material Lateran obelisk (as discussed in chapter 2), the ingenuity required to transport, repair and erect it (chapter 4), and its obvious sacred quality (see chapter 5). The only constant relations are the roles of the recipients such as 'the general public in Rome', and the patron, Sixtus V, who is of course also a recipient. For the sake of analytical clarity, I have therefore chosen to treat these aspects in separate analyses, as if they were separate indices, though it should be obvious that they are intrinsic parts of one and the same 'super-index': the Lateran obelisk. In the remainder of this thesis, then, I wish to investigate the social agency pertaining to the technological aspects and the sacredness that are inferred from the obelisk.

I am investigating the agency of the index itself and of the roles in its (and therefore, Sixtus') social circle. The ATA also considers animacy and personhood. In section 2.1 I have already discussed the lack of animacy in obelisks, which seems a deliberate aspect of the aniconic *kolossos* as a predecessor of the iconic *kouros*. I will turn to the concept of personhood in the next chapter.

In his book, Gell cherry-picked his way through many different customs of various peoples around the world, to indicate as clearly as possible how the various roles in the theory work, and how the theory can be applied. I have chosen, however, to apply the entire theory to

my single object of research: the technological ingenuity and religious character of the Lateran obelisk as ‘a congealed residue of performance and agency in object form’.⁵⁷ Gell’s theory is a welcome analytical tool for sifting through the various possible relations that exist in the social network in which the obelisk was re-erected, and it hopefully shows us their intentions. At the very least it will provide structure for a consistent analysis of the obelisk’s social context, as I will demonstrate in the next chapters.

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⁵⁷ Gell 1998, p. 68.

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law

4 Gravity. The ATA applied to the technical ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk

This chapter will apply the Anthropological Theory of Art to the technical ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk. As was discussed in chapter 2, the obelisk's quintessential otherness stems first of all from its appearance: its form and the hieroglyphs that cover it. This appearance, and indeed, the obelisk's very existence, is also directly related to the technologically advanced status of the ancient Egyptians who created it, but I will not consider the timeframe of its creation. My scope is the obelisk's existence at the Lateran, which inspired abductions regarding the technological ingenuity required to defy gravity.

4.1 The index

The central agent in the ATA is the object that it takes as its starting point, which changes the social environment that is being studied. I explained in section 3.3 that I will discuss two aspects of the obelisk as separate sub-indices. Doing so will bring analytical clarity. The sub-indices are its technical ingenuity and its sacredness. The latter will be discussed in chapter 5; this chapter focuses on the social aspects of the obelisk that are to do with ingenuity. The aspect of the obelisk that I will investigate in this chapter is therefore the technological ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk. It should remain absolutely clear from the start that these are intrinsic aspects of one and the same material super-index: the obelisk in its entirety.

Rather than early modern concepts of mastery of the physical world such as *difficultà*, *virtù* and *magnificenza*, which the modern reader will find difficult to relate to, I will use the modern term *ingenuity* throughout this chapter (see section 2.3.5.). By this term I mean the knowledge and know-how required to achieve the obelisk's re-erection: the building blocks that constitute this mastery of the physical world. Once the obelisk was in place, it could be spontaneously inferred that actions such as transporting, repairing, and re-erecting the obelisk must have preceded its existence there (see section 2.1). This is why the obelisk's presence at the Lateran square had (and has) an *intrinsic* quality of ingenuity. It spoke of control over the environment, and made people wonder about such ingenuity, which bordered on the magical.

4.2 Identifying the roles in the index milieu

As I have stated in section 3.3, I am making creative use of the ATA by treating the technical ingenuity that can be inferred from the Lateran obelisk as a separate index. My reason for doing so is that I found that different people take up the roles in the ATA when different aspects of the super-index are considered.

For technical ingenuity I have identified the following roles:

Index	The ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk
Artist	Domenico Fontana
Prototype	The ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians)
Recipients	Patron: Sixtus
	The passive spectator in Rome

Table 4.1 The players in the Art Nexus

I have taken the table that Gell uses, which he calls the ‘Art Nexus’ (table 4.2), and filled it in with the roles that pertain to the Lateran obelisk in Sixtus’ time (table 4.3). I have translated the formulaic expressions used by Gell into sentences that refer to these roles. The sentences have been indicated in the text of this chapter in **blue font**, the underlying expressions are available in Appendix A. I have also formulated some new relations, which are indicated in **green font**. Also, I have numbered the various relations. The numbers between round brackets in the text correspond with the numbers between round brackets in tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 and in Appendix A.

All roles revolve around the index. Without the index, there is no social environment surrounding it. I will first identify the roles in the obelisk’s social environment, and discuss their relationship with the index. I will call these the ‘simplex relations’: relations between the index and one other role. These simplex relationships are indicated in the green blocks in tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4.

AGENT					
	Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient	
P A T I E N T	A r t i s t	(8) Artist as a source of creative art Artist as a witness to an act of creation	(1b) Material inherently dictates to the artist the form it assumes	(7b) The prototype controls the artist's action; the appearance of the prototype is imitated by the artist.	(6a) The recipient (as a patron) is the cause of the artist's action
	I n d e x	(1a) Material stuff shaped by the artist's agency and intention	(5) Index as a cause of itself: 'self-made' Index as a 'made thing'	(2b) The prototype dictates the form taken by the index	(3a) The recipient is the cause of the origination and form taken by the index
	P r o t o t y p e	(7a) The appearance of the prototype is dictated by the artist. Imaginative art	(2a) Image or actions of the prototype are controlled by means of the index = a locus of power over the prototype	(10) Prototype as a cause of the index Prototype affected by the index	(9a) The recipient has power over the prototype. Vult sorcery
	R e c i p i e n t	(6b) The recipient's response is dictated by the artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. The recipient is captivated.	(3b) The index is a source of power over the recipient. The recipient as a spectator submits to the index.	(9b) The prototype has power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient. Idolatry.	(4) Recipient as a patron Recipient as a spectator

Table 4.2 The Art Nexus. Generic table showing the various roles in an index's social environment in agent and patient positions

AGENT					
	1587 AD	Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient
P A T I E N T	A r t i s t	(8) Domenico Fontana as a source of creative art Fontana as a witness to an act of creation	(1b) The obelisk inherently dictates to Fontana the form which the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk assumes	(7b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) controls Fontana's action The appearance of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is imitated by Fontana.	(6a) Sixtus V as a patron is the cause of Fontana's action
	I n d e x	(1a) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is shaped by Fontana's agency and intention	(5) Transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk as a cause of itself: 'self-made' Transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk as a 'made thing'	(2b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) dictates the form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk	(3a) Sixtus V as a patron is the cause of the origination and form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk
	P r o t o t y p e	(7a) The appearance of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is dictated by Fontana. Imaginative art	(2a) Image or actions of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) are controlled by means of the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk. The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is a locus of power over the ingenuity of the Ancient Romans	(10) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) as a cause of the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is affected by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk	(9a) Sixtus V as a patron has power over ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians). Volt sorcery
	R e c i p i e n t	(6b) Sixtus V's response as a patron is dictated by the Fontana's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. Pope Sixtus V as a patron is captivated.	(3b) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over Sixtus V as a patron Sixtus V as a patron submits to the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk.	(9b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) has power over Sixtus V as a patron. The image of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is used to control actions of Sixtus.	(4) Sixtus as a patron sees his own agency in the obelisk; Sixtus is impressed with his own agency.

Table 4.3 The Art Nexus for the ingenuity required in transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk in 1588. Table showing the people fulfilling the roles in agent and patient positions, **with only the patron in the recipient slot**. For a table that also includes the people of Rome in that slot, see table 4.4.

4.2.1 The index's artist and its patron

According to the ATA, the artist of the technological *tour de force* of transportation and re-erection must be someone in Sixtus' network (see chapter 3). This artist must be the engineer Domenico Fontana, whose technological knowledge and know-how made the obelisks' resurrection possible (see fig. 4.1). [The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is a congealed trace of Fontana's creative performance \(1a\)](#), even though he is only a partial answer to the question: "how did this thing get to be here?" This question is the surprise reaction that induces Gell to call the object under study an *index* rather than a symbol or an icon. The concept 'index' indicates that he is interested in the manner in which factual connections are inferred from it, which in turn allows artefacts to exert agency (see section 3.1). Another direct answer to the same question is that the patronage of [Sixtus caused the origination of the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk \(3a\)](#). He is the man who gave the order to have the Lateran obelisk excavated from the Circus Maximus, and who had it transported, repaired and erected in its spot near the Lateran church. This is 'how this thing got to be here'. This also means that those who come into contact with the obelisk must necessarily recognise the technical ingenuity of Fontana and Sixtus. The index can therefore be seen as an extension of the patron and the artist.

The theory states that the reverse relation might also exist, in which the ingenuity is the agent, and artist [Fontana responds as a patient to the inherent agency of the ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk \(1b\)](#). In my view this is not really the case, though Fontana responded to the *material* obelisk and to the patron's challenge to move it. In that sense the artist is probably always also a patient to the index. He is also a patient in the closely related self-reciprocal relation in which the artist is both an agent and a patient: [Fontana as a source of creative ingenuity is at the same time a witness to his act of creation \(8\)](#). According to the ATA, this relation always applies, because the artist cannot always know precisely how things turn out.

The truth of this statement is clear when one considers Michelangelo's refusal to transport the Vatican obelisk, the first to be moved in early modern times, for fear that it would break.⁵⁸ This fear would have been especially suited for the obelisk under consideration: the obelisk itself is 34 metres tall (47 including its base), and Fontana

⁵⁸ Curran 2009, p. 106.

calculates that it weighs 438,157 kilograms.⁵⁹ Patron Sixtus too must have responded as a patient: he must have been very impressed by the technological capabilities required for the end result: the obelisk in the square (3b). Moreover, the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is also a source of power over Sixtus V as a patron because it would have been harmful for his status if the object had been broken during transport or re-erection.

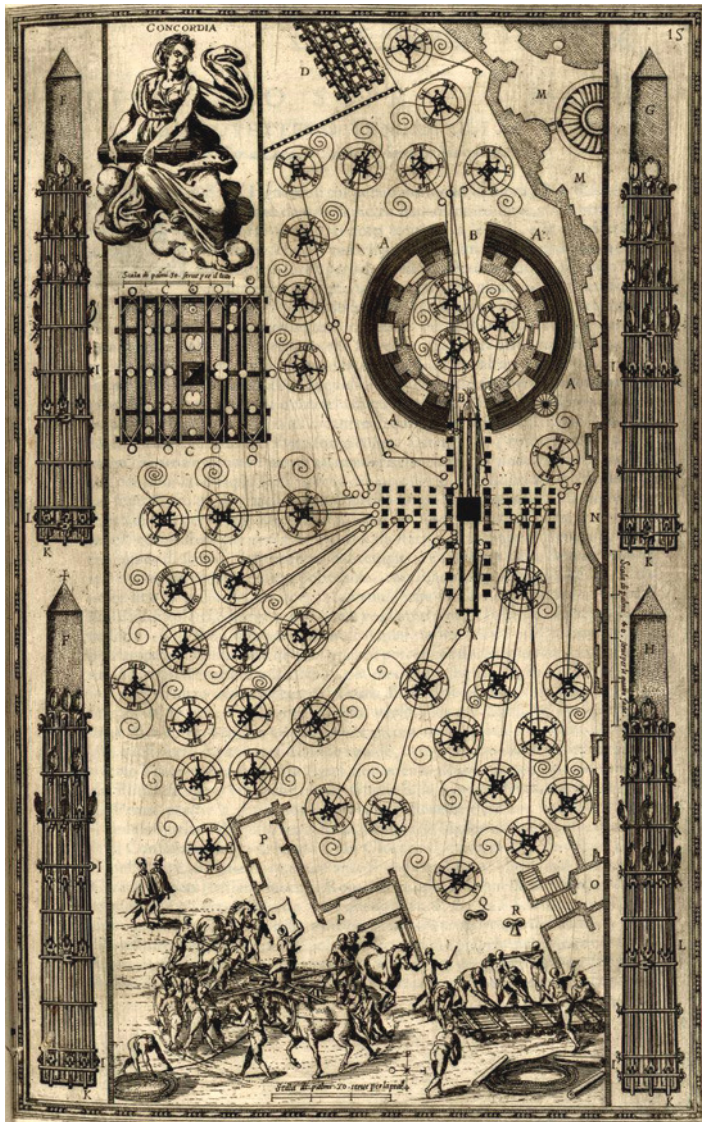


Figure 4.1. Intricate system of capstans with ropes powered by men and horses, used in lowering the Vatican obelisk from its previous position, Fontana 1590, p. 15r.

4.2.2 The index's prototype

Sixtus responded to the existence of the material obelisk *per se* in the Circus Maximus with an immediate intention to excavate, move and re-erect it. But the index that we are concerned with is not the *material* index, but the ingenuity that is involuntarily inferred from its final

⁵⁹ The volume of the obelisk is calculated at 15,383 cubic palmi. At a specific weight of 86 libre per palmo, this adds up to 1,322,938 libre. See Fontana 1590, p. 70v. The table in Fontana 1987-2, p. 37, equates a libra with 0.3312 kg. Wallis Budge 1926, p.143, has 'about 460 tons'.

state: its existence in the Lateran Square. It is probable that Sixtus inferred from the obelisk's existence in the Circus Maximus that it was technologically possible to move and re-erect it, and that brings us to the prototype of the ingenuity for the obelisk.

Generally in the ATA the prototype for a portrait is the sitter, whose likeness is transferred to the canvas. For the Lateran obelisk *as a material object* we are faced with a rather unique situation: its prototype is the large obelisk at the spina in the Circus Maximus. In other words: its prototype is the same material object, but 1230 years earlier, in a different context. It follows that the (abducted) ingenuity required to re-erect the Lateran obelisk must have as its prototype the (abducted) ingenuity required for the re-erection of this same obelisk in the distant past. One might infer an agent/patient relation here, in that [the ingenuity of the ancient Romans dictated the form taken by the ingenuity used for the transportation of the Lateran obelisk \(2b\)](#). This relation is very difficult to assess, because according to Gell the prototype is never a direct agent with intentions. It is a secondary agent, though: the artist can attain his goal only if he submits to the prototype.⁶⁰ This is easy to understand: a painter can only paint the likeness of a sitter if he submits to it. Likewise, Fontana can only recreate the success of the obelisk's erection in the Circus Maximus if he submits to it in one way or another.

Immediately it becomes apparent that any intentional relation discussed by me will require an agent, such as the artist or the patron. So statement (2b) triggers the question: dictated it to whom? There is plenty of evidence that the history of the obelisk dictated what happened to it in the sixteenth century. Not only can this be inferred from the parallel texts on the east and north faces of its base, but Michele Mercati even emphasizes that patron [Sixtus intended to recreate the power and the glory of the ancient Roman emperors \(9a\)](#). The transport of the obelisks as 'spoils of idolatry' through the streets of Rome, and their placement in front of the principal churches of Rome imitates the actions of the ancient Romans, whose custom it was 'to put up the most conspicuous spoils of war in the squares and public places in the city, in order to make the public remember their illustrious acts, and also to remember their glory for posterity'.⁶¹ He hastens to add that Sixtus does so not for his own glory, but for the glory of God. We must conclude that [the ingenuity of the ancient Romans \(and Egyptians\) exercises social power over Sixtus as a patron \(9b\)](#). This is certainly true, because Sixtus' status as a pope has been elevated by having recreated (and therefore mastered) the ingenuity of the ancient Romans. One has to keep in mind that his direct

⁶⁰ Gell 1998, p. 36.

⁶¹ Mercati 1589, p. 247.

predecessor, Gregory XIII, did not think it was possible to move the Vatican obelisk in his own time. This precludes any thought of excavating and re-erecting the giant obelisk in the Circus Maximus, even if he had known of its existence.

But artist Fontana did not imitate the ancient Romans' ingenuity, in other words: *the ingenuity of the ancient Romans did not control Fontana's actions (7b)*. He and Mercati write about the manner 'of the ancients' of erecting obelisks, then about 'the new way of erecting the obelisks', emphasizing that Fontana's method of erecting the obelisk is different from that of the ancient Romans.⁶² Fontana shows that he knew *how the ingenuity of the ancient Romans worked (7a)* but chose to use a different, presumably better method. The fact that the obelisk is in the Lateran Square gave the obelisk an additional layer of historical events that subsumed the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) under Fontana's skills *(7a)*, as well as under Sixtus' patronage *(9a)*. In that sense the ingenuity used for the Lateran obelisk is *a locus of power over the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (2a)*.

4.2.3 The recipients of the index

4.2.3.1 A flaw in the theory

Gell uses the term 'recipient' as an umbrella term for different categories of recipients. Apart from the patron, the term 'recipient' also denotes the passive spectator. The two are very different classes of recipients. The patron role as discussed above is very different from that of the passive spectator. This becomes apparent in the following self-reciprocal relation: *Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impresses Sixtus as a patron (4)*. This is a possible relation, and it is probably true that Sixtus was greatly impressed with his own agency vis-à-vis the obelisk. After all, as Gell states: "Unless the patron is visibly and/or privately impressed by the index of which s/he is a patron, the very act of patronage is a failure."⁶³ The texts on the base and the book by Mercati confirm this pride in the achievement.

The following statement is also true, but is not self-reciprocal: *(4) Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impresses the spectators in Rome*. To be self-reciprocal, it should read: *(4) The agency of the spectators in Rome is indexed in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impresses the spectators in Rome (4)*. It is hardly probable that the spectators saw themselves as agents here, which is why *(4)* fails, as well as *(3a): the spectators in Rome are*

⁶² Fontana 1590, pp. 16r – 17r, Mercati 1589, p. 352.

⁶³ Gell 1998, p. 48.

the cause of the origination and form taken by the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk.

There is one possibility in which they may see themselves as agents, which I will discuss in section 4.2.3.2.

Gell acknowledges that ‘one might be tempted to deny that it was really a single category at all’, and goes on to discuss the differentiation, but fails to successfully defend why we should think of them as one category. He states: “The very essence of successful performance of the patron role necessitates a show of reverence towards the products of patronage. It follows that patronage has, intrinsically, a phase in which the patron/agent is a patient.”⁶⁴ Sixtus is also a passive spectator, of course, like everyone else in Rome, such as its inhabitants and pilgrims and other travellers. The ATA requires a different table for each different stage, but this differentiation does not solve the problem. Even in the stage when he as a patient has to await the result of the re-erection, Sixtus cannot be regarded as a *primus inter pares* among the spectators. There is never a stage in which he is not the patron. We are concerned with social relations, and the other spectators in Rome would never have regarded him as one of them under these specific circumstances. They knew that Sixtus V as a patron was ‘the cause of the origination and form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk’ (as we saw in section 4.2.1), and that, moreover, the technological enterprise would have reflected negatively on him if the object had been broken. Common sense dictates that Sixtus can in no way be equated with other recipients: he is the prime mover of the technological expedition.

There is corroborating evidence that Sixtus himself considered these roles as different. Fontana writes that there was a real chance that the transportation and re-erection of the first obelisk, that at the Vatican, would fail, as Michelangelo had feared. Though he was the patron of the prestigious enterprise, the pope was not present during the transportation of the Vatican obelisk.⁶⁵ If the attempt should fail, he would be less associated with the failure than if he was visibly there during the catastrophe. After the successful event, he was proud to be seen as its patron. These facts must mean that he in no way considered himself a passive spectator of the (risky) performance itself, but was willing to be seen as its patron once the performance was completed. In other words: he was content to be seen as the successful patron in the abduction from the successful finished product. He was a person in Rome, and therefore necessarily a spectator after the fact, and he must have been impressed as a spectator, as well as proud as a patron, but these are very different roles indeed.

⁶⁴ Gell 1998, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁵ Fontana 1590, p. 33r.

I believe this equation of the roles of patron first and subsequent passive spectator is a serious flaw in the theory. Gell has created a system in which there are ‘four basic terms’,⁶⁶ but in my opinion there should be five. The only reason I can think of why the patron and the spectator are comprised by Gell in the same category of ‘recipient’ is that each are parties who are affected by the sign, and interpret its meaning. They are both interpretants, i.e., the third part of the triadic relation of sign, object, and interpretant.⁶⁷ Also, I believe Gell may have wanted to stop at four terms because he did not want there to be any number of terms that should really all be comprised in the category of spectator. It is certainly my view that we should stop at five. In chapter 5 I will introduce another type of recipient, who will however be comprised in the category of passive spectator nonetheless.

There may be many types of spectator, but among them there is one prime mover, the patron, and s/he deserves a category by her/himself, as I have indicated in table 4.4. In that table I have amended the Art Nexus to reflect the categorically different roles of patron and passive spectator. The creation of an additional column and row for the passive spectator indicates that there are additional agent/patient relations between patron and passive spectator. Some of these relationships may fail to apply, but they need to be considered. The fact that the spectators are called ‘passive’ does not mean they have no agency, much like the (necessarily passive) Lateran obelisk is a locus of power over the ingenuity of the ancient Romans, as we have seen in section 4.2.2.

⁶⁶ Gell 1998, p 28.

⁶⁷ The sign means something *to someone*, see section 3.1.

AGENT						
P A T I E N T	1587 AD	Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient: Patron	Recipient: Passive
	A r t i s t	(8) Domenico Fontana as a source of creative art Fontana as a witness to an act of creation	(1b) The obelisk inherently dictates to Fontana the form which the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk assumes	(7b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) controls Fontana's action	(6a) Sixtus V as a patron is the cause of Fontana's action	(11a) The spectators in Rome are the cause of Fontana's action
	I n d e x	(1a) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is shaped by Fontana's agency and intention	(5) Transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk as a cause of itself: 'self-made' The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own making	(2b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) dictates the form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk	(3a) Sixtus V as a patron is the cause of the origination and form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk	(12a) The spectators in Rome are the cause of the origination and form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk
	P r o t o t y p e	(7a) The appearance of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is dictated by Fontana. Imaginative art	(2a) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is a locus of power over the ingenuity of the Ancient Romans	(10) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) as a cause of the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk	(9a) Sixtus V as a patron has power over ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians). Volt sorcery	(13a) The spectators in Rome have power over ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians).
	R e c e i v e r	(6b) Sixtus V's response as a patron is dictated by Fontana's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. Pope Sixtus V as a patron is captivated.	(3b) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over Sixtus V as a patron Sixtus V as a patron submits to the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk.	(9b) Ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) has power over Sixtus V as a patron.	(4) Sixtus as a patron sees his own agency in the obelisk; he is impressed with his own agency.	(14a) The spectators in Rome cause Sixtus to be impressed with their agency.
	P a s s i v e	(11b) The spectators in Rome are captivated by Fontana's skill, wit, magical powers, etc.	(12b) The transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over the spectators in Rome	(13b) The image of ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is used to control actions of the spectators in Rome.	(14b) The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is used by Sixtus as patron to exercise social power over spectators in Rome	(15) Spectators see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency.

Table 4.4 The Art Nexus for the ingenuity required in transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk in 1588. Table showing the people fulfilling the roles in agent and patient positions, with the patron and passive spectators regarded as separate categories of recipient.

4.2.3.2 The index's passive spectator

Let us return to the recipient-as-a-patient relation, with the spectator in Rome as the recipient: The spectator in Rome responded to the agency inherent in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk (12b in table 4.4). The people's captivation is well documented in Fontana's book.⁶⁸ We are concerned with the period after this 'performance art', but some of the enthusiasm must certainly have existed when people abducted this technological feat from the obelisk's presence in the square. Relationship (12a): The spectators in Rome are the cause of the origination and form taken by the transportation and erection of the Lateran obelisk, fails to apply. Lacking the necessary money and power, they have no agency. However, though the people in Rome are patients here, their captivation is a causal factor for Sixtus' rededication of the obelisk.

4.2.3.3 Introducing other types of recipient of the index

The theory raises a question of how to select and limit the roles surrounding an index. Fontana is the artist, as well as the author of a book on the subject. One might want to look at his role of author separately, considering him a recipient author. One might say these roles overlap, but if so, they do not overlap completely. Another author is courtier Mercati. He is not just any passive spectator, he is in the category 'author' together with Fontana. Moreover, he is the person who told Sixtus that this obelisk and the one later erected at the Piazza del Popolo were still in the Circus Maximus, which caused Sixtus to decide to excavate them (6a),⁶⁹ so he must have felt a strong connection with this particular obelisk, much like a patron (6a). Its transportation and erection must have been a great source of power over him (3b). Iversen tell us that Mercati's book became very popular, which means that as an author he had considerable power over the way in which the technological ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) was perceived by the recipients (9a).⁷⁰ We might even see him as an artist in this respect (7a instead of 9a), in that he dictates how the ingenuity of the ancient Romans is perceived by his contemporaries: he created the sense of wonder in the other recipients' minds (6b). In my opinion all of the above statements are true. From this discussion it becomes clear that one needs to decide to which category Mercati, for instance, belongs: to the category of recipient/patron, or to the category of recipient/passive spectator. This example also serves to show that the theory can be applied, but the roles under investigation need to be carefully

⁶⁸ Fontana 1590, p. 17r.

⁶⁹ D'Onofrio 1969-1, p. 160, Mercati 1589, p. 375.

⁷⁰ Iversen 1961, p. 85. Mercati is one of the very few contemporary authors who does consider the Egyptian origin of the obelisks and their hieroglyphs at length.

considered to produce new findings. Many differentiations are possible, and all are not equally relevant. The challenge is that one cannot know in advance which roles in which slots will lead to new insights.

I will not include the authors as a separate category in my discussion below. However, another category of recipient that I would like to add to the ATA is the dedicatee. It could be applied in the current chapter, but due to the limited space in this thesis it seems much more sensible to include it in my discussion in chapter 5, as in this case the dedicatee of the obelisk is of a religious nature.

In my opinion it is an oversight that Gell has failed to add to the category of ‘recipient’ the owner of a work of art, who may or may not be the same person as the patron. The owner may be a person or a group of people who receive a present financed by someone else, for example. In my view the (intended) owner as a class of recipient is important in any theory on western art. Admittedly, Gell concentrates on examples from non-western art in his book, but it is his intention that his theory be universally valid for all indexes that permit the abduction of agency.⁷¹ Because in my research the patron, i.e., Sixtus V, and the owner overlap for 100%, I shall not discuss the category of ‘owner’ any further.

We have now arrived at the following roles:

Index	The ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk
Artist	Domenico Fontana [+Mercati]
Prototype	The ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians)
Recipients	Patron: Sixtus
	The passive spectator in Rome
	[+Authors: Fontana and Mercati]
	[+Owner: Sixtus V]
	[+Dedicatee]

Table 4.5 The players in the Art Nexus

4.2.4 The index as its own agent and its own patient

To conclude the discussion of all possible relations between the index and another role (the green blocks in table 4.4), we arrive at the self-reciprocity of the index itself: [the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own](#)

⁷¹ Gell 1998, p. 15. It is easy to criticise any pioneer in a new line of thinking. In my view the theory has much to offer. Since Gell is not only a pioneer, but also passed away before he had completed his book.

making (5). Gell describes this relation as ‘the index as a cause of itself: ‘self-made’’. This self-reciprocal agency does not only fail to apply here, it is the exact opposite of what is important to Sixtus, Fontana and probably the passive spectator. It is essential to the social reception of the ingenuity surrounding the obelisk that it was moved with great difficulty. The reasons why are discussed in section 4.3.1.

4.3 The complex relations

All roles revolve around the index. Above I have discussed the simplex relations between index and artist (1a) and (1b) and between index and patron (3a) and (3b), index and prototype (2a) and (2b), as well as relations (7a) and (7b) and (9a) and (9b) in that section, because the prototype has no intentions of its own. I have also discussed the relations between the index and passive spectator (12a) and (12b), as well as self-reciprocal relations (4), (5), and (8). I will now turn to the complex relations through the index, where the index itself is implied but is not an end point (the blocks in the tables that are not green). These are the relationships that Gell calls “the ‘illegitimate’ expressions”. For Gell’s formulas to establish the roles in the environment, I again refer to Appendix A. For each formula, Gell is concerned only with its termination points, because the index is always implied.⁷² For instance, the relation between the artist and the patron (see section 4.3.1) is necessarily linked to the index: without the index, there would neither be an artist nor a patron of that index. Unlike Gell I have therefore chosen to mention the index explicitly as an intermediate in each of these relations. I find that it does more justice to the role of the index, and to the meaning of the relationship.

4.3.1 The relations between the artist and the patron: skill and captivation

We have seen in 4.2.1 that the obelisk represents the agency (and patiency) of both Sixtus and Fontana, and as such can be considered an extension of their personhood. Their interrelations (6a) and (6b) are pivotal in the art nexus, because this is where artist, index and patron meet.

Nobody in the sixteenth century would dispute that the success of re-erecting the obelisks was at least as much Sixtus’ as Fontana’s. It is telling that Sixtus does not even mention Fontana on the obelisk’s base. This is in line with the formula for the artist as an artisan, a hired hand, where the recipient *as a patron* is the cause of the artist’s action: *Sixtus as a patron is the cause of Fontana’s use of ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk (6a)*.

⁷² Gell 1998, p. 38.

Fontana's design was selected, but raising the obelisk was Sixtus' idea. The first obelisk, that at the Vatican, was to be moved as the outcome of a competition run by Sixtus.

What is it, then, about the ingenuity and 'great efforts' that is so important? The answer must be that only rulers can move obelisks, as only they have the necessary means (money, power, ingenuity) to do so. Anyone looking at the object in its final place knows that s/he could never have accomplished this feat, perhaps because of a lack of imagination, but certainly due to a lack of technological knowledge and know-how, skills, money, and the power to do so. Spectators are overwhelmed, and captivated that anyone should dare to think of performing this act, let alone do it (11b, 14b). It makes Fontana, and through him, Sixtus, seem something of a magician.

Sixtus' response as a patron is dictated by Fontana's technological skill in transporting and erecting the obelisk. The patron is captivated (6b). Gell considers the concept of *captivation through technological virtuosity* fundamental to the ATA: "Formal complexity and indeed the technical virtuosity exhibited in works of art is not incidental to the argument but absolutely central to it. It is crucial to the theory that the indexes display 'a certain cognitive indecipherability'."⁷³ The artistic success is also dependent on the captivation of the others in Rome: the passive spectator is captivated by Fontana's skill (11b). Moving and repairing such an object is a daunting prospect, something people cannot visualise doing themselves, because they would not know where to begin. They cannot formulate the necessary steps in their minds. This reminds us of Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law: Any sufficiently advanced ingenuity is indistinguishable from magic.⁷⁴

Applying the ATA, we understand that the index is an instance of distributed personhood, because it is clear to all relations who is in possession of these means. During Sixtus' pontificate, looking at the obelisk meant thinking of Sixtus and Fontana. The daring act of erecting the obelisk at the Lateran, and the cost and effort involved make people understand how much more powerful Sixtus is in every way. The success of the entire enterprise hinges on captivation: if it was not extremely difficult to do, it would not produce the required awe. In 4.2.2.1, I already quoted Gell as saying "Unless the patron is visibly and/or privately impressed by the index of which s/he is a patron, the very act of patronage is a failure." Whether the patron is impressed by the index is very much dependent on the skill of the artist; whether the artist can pull it off depends largely on the right patronage.

⁷³ Gell 1998, p. x.

⁷⁴ Clarke 1973.

4.3.2 Spectators and prototype

Gell wrote about the relations between recipient and prototype with a live person as the prototype in mind. Usually, this prototype would be the sitter for a portrait. Cases where the recipient uses the index to exert power over the prototype (13a) are instances of ‘volt sorcery’, in which for instance pain can be inflicted on the prototype by inflicting harm on the index (such as sticking pins in a wax doll to harm the person it represents).⁷⁵ I find, however, that it also works with abstract concepts, such as the technical ingenuity of the ancients. I tentatively conclude that the relation may work with the category of passive recipient (even though it makes more immediate sense with the patron, see section 4.2.2): *The spectator in Rome uses the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk to appropriate the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (13a)*. In the public’s mind, the ancient Romans’ ingenuity has been appropriated through the recent re-erection of the obelisk, even if a different technology was used.⁷⁶ The sixteenth-century Romans may collectively feel that they have outdone their ancient predecessors, in the same manner that Americans collectively feel that ‘they’ walked on the moon in 1969. This is a close cousin to (4): *The spectators in Rome see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency (15)*.

There is a special circumstance here in that the prototype for the Lateran obelisk is the same obelisk which in ancient times adorned the Circus Maximus. In other words: the Lateran obelisk represents itself as it was in 357 AD. It needs to be remembered that in Sixtus’ time technological progress meant recreating what the Romans had done in imperial times, as stated in section 2.2.5. The formula for the reverse relation, in which *the image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient (13b)*, is a tricky concept, because immediately the question arises: used by whom? Since the prototype is always a secondary agent that derives its agency from a primary agent, it has no intention of its own (see section 4.2.2). It makes more sense to include the primary agent if we apply this relation to the passive spectators. I have identified this primary agent as the patron: *The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is used by Sixtus as the patron to exercise social power over spectators in Rome (14b)*. According to Gell, the reception of a work of art occurs in the light of the possibility that the recipient could, technically, approach the same

⁷⁵ Gell 1998, p. 40.

⁷⁶ Fontana 1590, pp. 16r-17r.

task of art-making, him/herself.⁷⁷ Clearly this is not possible for any spectator. The erection of the obelisk establishes a firm inequality between the responsible agent and the spectators.⁷⁸

The patron has had the imagination, and has the money and the power to hire the technological skills to establish this gigantic obelisk in front of his church. If he can do this, is there anything he cannot do? This reminds us of Gell's example of the prow-boards of the Trobriand, which demoralise the opposition "because they cannot mentally encompass the process of its origination".⁷⁹ In the same vein, anyone who was not present during the obelisk's re-erection (and many who were) will find it impossible to understand how it was accomplished. The obelisk's existence in the Lateran Square confirms the gap in power and imagination between the people and their ruler. This is one of the primary goals of patronage, according to Gell: indexes are "devices for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed". The index is an end-product of action which functions as a 'distributed extension' of an agent, an extra limb.⁸⁰

4.3.3 The prototype as its own agent and patient

Only one relation is left to describe: The prototype as its own agent and patient. The examples given by Gell are all of prototypes who are people, but it also works very well with abstract concepts, probably because the prototype is never a primary agent with intentions. *The ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is affected by the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it, incorporates its agency (10).* This relation even works for all three indexes (the material obelisk *per se*, and its constituent aspects, i.e., Fontana's ingenuity and its Christian religion) and their prototypes (the obelisk *per se*, the ancient Romans' ingenuity and its dedication to the Sun), but the question remains: represents it to whom? We are working with a triadic Anthropological Theory of Art. The interpretant of this agency must be established. An obvious choice would be the spectator in Rome. We then arrive at: *The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk represents the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) to the spectator in Rome and so incorporates its agency (10).* In 4.3.2 I already discussed the early modern Romans' appropriation of the ancient Romans' ingenuity through the re-erection of the obelisk, even if the technology used was a different one (13a). And since we are concerned only with the termination points of these relations (see

⁷⁷ Gell 1998, pp. 68-69.

⁷⁸ Gell 1998, p. 71.

⁷⁹ Gell 1998, p. 71.

⁸⁰ Gell 1998, p ix.

section 4.3),⁸¹ that is exactly where we arrive at again: the relation between the spectators and the prototype (13a) and (13b) (see section 4.3.2). This fits in perfectly with the fact that the prototype in the ATA is never a primary agent who initiates actions on his/her own behalf.

4.4 Conclusion

4.4.1 The information gained by application of the ATA

My first research question concerned the usefulness of the information provided by the theory on the social context in which the obelisk functioned. I defined usefulness as finding an explanation for Sixtus' continued re-erection of obelisks after the first two. I intended to explore what it is about obelisks that makes them so successful for Sixtus. Gell's theory is all about actions rather than meaning, and it has allowed me to investigate the ways in which the roles and the obelisk are part of the same social construct. The validity of the ATA's "halo effect of technical difficulty" for the obelisk had been recognised before I even applied the theory to it, but it has been confirmed that this is a major issue. It has made me aware that the power and technology to overcome gravity are of intrinsic and major importance in any such endeavour, establishing an insurmountable inequality between those in power and other people.

Before my use of the ATA it was less clear to me that the captivation of the passive spectators is a major issue, probably because I was mostly concerned with Sixtus' intentions with the obelisk, seeing only the relation between the patron and the index. I had considered the relation between the index and the artist, but only because it is well documented. However, I had not considered these relations as agent/patient relations, thinking only of agent relations of patron and artist. Thinking in terms of people and objects as simultaneously being agents and patients ensures a better understanding of the dynamics involved in the creation of an art work. An object such as an obelisk is usually thought of as a patient, because it is acted upon. The ATA makes it clear that it has aspects that do act, and that it can be a locus of power.

Another relation that I had not considered but that has become emphasised as a major issue is that of the prototype. Though a prototype is never a primary agent with volition of its own, it can be extremely important, and is often the object's *raison d'être*, as a sitter is for a portrait, for instance. It also turns out to be very important for Sixtus. I will return to this topic in chapter 6.

⁸¹ Gell 1998, p. 38.

4.4.2 Consistent application of the ATA

My second research question is whether the ATA can be applied consistently to a single art object in an art historical study in a relevant way. This entire chapter is proof that it is possible to apply the entire ATA consistently to a single aspect of an obelisk. This approach has provided many insights into how the obelisk functioned in the social environment in which it was erected. For this reason alone the application of the theory has been demonstrated to be relevant in this type of research.

*

For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory.
The Lord's Prayer

5 Glory. The ATA applied to the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk

This chapter will zoom in on the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk. In chapter 4 I have shown how the ATA can be applied consistently to the technical ingenuity that is intrinsic in the Lateran obelisk's existence in the Lateran Square. I have shown how it works, and that it works. I have indicated that I will treat the Christian aspect that can be inferred from the Lateran obelisk as a separate index from the required ingenuity. As I have indicated in chapter 4, my reason for doing so is that it will bring analytical clarity. I found that different people take up the roles in the ATA when different aspects of the index are examined. It should remain clear that these are aspects of one and the same material super-index: the obelisk in its entirety.

5.1 The index

In this chapter I take as the index the obelisk's inferred Christian quality. I discussed some of the obelisk's sacredness in chapter 2. Moreover, we have contemporary sources confirming its newly acquired Christian quality, which clearly shows in the texts on the obelisk's base, as well as in Mercati's book.

5.2 Identifying the roles in the index milieu

I have identified all the roles for sacredness in table 5.1:

Index	The Christian quality of the obelisk in the Lateran Square
Artist	Sixtus
Prototype	The pagan quality of the obelisk in the Circus Maximus in imperial times
Recipients	Patron: Sixtus
	The passive spectator in Rome
	+Dedicatee: Christ (the Holy Cross)

Table 5.1 The players in the Art Nexus

As in chapter 4, I will take the extended Art Nexus (table 5.2) as my point of reference. Gell's expressions are available in Appendix B, and they are translated into sentences in the table:

		AGENT				
1587 AD		Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient: Patron	Recipient: Spectator
P A T I E N T	A r t i s t	(8) Sixtus as a source of creative art Sixtus as a witness to an act of creation	(1b) The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk inherently dictates to Sixtus as an artist the form it assumes	(7b) The obelisk's pagan religion controls the actions of Sixtus as an artist; the appearance of the obelisk's pagan religion is imitated by the Sixtus as an artist.	(6a) Sixtus as a patron is the cause of the action of Sixtus as an artist	(11a) The spectators in Rome are the cause of Sixtus' action
	I n d e x	(1a) The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a congealed 'trace' of the artist's creative performance.	(5) The sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own making.	(2b) The obelisk's pagan religion dictates the form taken by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk	(3a) Sixtus as a recipient is the cause of the origination and form taken by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk	(12a) The spectators in Rome are the cause of the origination and form taken by the sacredness of the Lateran obelisk
	P r o t o y p e	(7a) The appearance of the obelisk's pagan religion is dictated by Sixtus as an artist. Imaginative art	(2a) Image or actions of the obelisk's pagan religion are controlled by means of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk = a locus of power over the obelisk's pagan religion	(10) The prototype of an index can be a patient with respect to the index which, by representing him or her, incorporates his or her agency.	(9a) Sixtus as a recipient has power over the obelisk's pagan religion	(13a) The spectators in Rome have power over the sacredness of the Lateran obelisk
	R e c e i p i e n t	(6b) The appearance of the obelisk's sacredness is dictated by Sixtus as an artist. Imaginative art	(3b) The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over Sixtus as a patron . Sixtus as a spectator submits to the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk	(9b) The obelisk's pagan religion has power over Sixtus as a recipient. The image of the obelisk's pagan religion is used to control actions of Sixtus as a recipient. Idolatry.	(4) Sixtus as a patron sees his own agency in the obelisk; he is impressed with his own agency.	(14a) The spectators in Rome cause Sixtus to be impressed with their agency.
	R S e p t i c e p t i a n o r	(11b) The spectators in Rome are captivated by Sixtus' skill, wit, magical powers, etc.	(12b) The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over the spectators in Rome.	(13b) The image of the pagan quality of the Lateran obelisk is used to control actions of the spectators in Rome.	(14b) The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is used by Sixtus as a patron to exercise social power over spectators in Rome.	(15) The spectators in Rome see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency.

Table 5.2 The Art Nexus for the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk in 1588. Table showing the people fulfilling the roles in agent and patient positions, with the patron and passive spectators regarded as separate categories of recipient.

5.2.1 The index's artist and patron

According to the ATA, the artist of the sacredness of the obelisk must be someone in Sixtus' social network. In this case the artist is not Fontana, as he has no role of any religious significance. The artist of the religious dedication of this and the other obelisks re-erected during his pontificate must therefore be Sixtus V himself: he conceived the plan to erect the obelisks in front of the principal churches in Rome: *the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a congealed trace of Sixtus' creative performance (1a)*. Mentioning only himself on the base, and asking Mercati to write a book on obelisks, Sixtus ensures that his own creative role will go down in history. Though Mercati states that Sixtus has done so only for the glory of God, Sixtus' self-aggrandising propaganda makes statement (1a) so obviously true that it needs no discussion.⁸²

It is equally obvious that the patron in my investigation is also Pope Sixtus V: *Sixtus as a patron is the cause of the origination of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (3a)*. He gave the order to have the obelisk placed at the Lateran Square, exorcised and rededicated. These are different roles that are played by the same agent, who is 'the reason why this thing got to be here'. If the index can be seen as an extension of the patron and the artist, it is an extension of Sixtus alone.

Sixtus as the artist also responded as a patient to the inherent agency of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (1b). Mercati indicates that Sixtus planned the deployment of the obelisks to strengthen the cause of Christianity: "now that the instruments of false religion are converted to instruments for the true and holy religion", and Cipriani analyses Sixtus' behaviour as a strong bid for an omnipotent and everlasting victory for his church, setting it apart from the Reformation as the true inheritor of the neo-platonic Egyptian proto-Christian mysticism.⁸³ A renewed interest in Platonism in this period allowed people 'to distinguish matter and ideas, to define the difference between appearance and significance, in fact, to realize and interpret the symbolic qualities of things became the ultimate ambition of philosophy and thought'.⁸⁴ In Sixtus' time it was known that the obelisk used to be a pagan object, once dedicated to the sun. Its pagan character is also evidenced in the hieroglyphs in which it is covered, which could not be read in Sixtus' time, but were taken to convey divine

⁸² North face of the base, see section 2.3.2, Meercati 1589, p. 347.

⁸³ Cipriani 1993, Chapter 1, especially pp. 74-75. Meercati 1589, p. 347.

⁸⁴ Iversen 1961 p 64.

knowledge to the initiated, providing direct insights into Gods plan without the use of language (see chapter 2).⁸⁵

It seems dangerous to me, from the perspective of the Church, that people thought they might have direct insights into the divine truth of all things without the mediation of a priest. This is not to say they necessarily had pagan intentions. Iversen asserts that to the early humanists Christ was the eventual revelation of the divine truth, and pre-Christian revelations were ultimately going in the direction of the eternal truth that is Christianity. This is corroborated by Mercati, according to whom the Egyptians had already invented a hieroglyph for the Cross.⁸⁶

The obelisk's pagan appearance suggested to Sixtus that it would make an especially suitable 'banner' to support the holy cross on top, to show that paganism has been conquered by the Christian faith.⁸⁷ It is also true that [the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a source of power over Sixtus as a patron \(3b\)](#). The evidence shows that Sixtus was very content with the Christian power emanating from the obelisk:

“& hora drizzati la terza volta in honore del vero Iddio, non si haurebbono più a ruinare. Le due ruine loro passate (come instrumenti dell'Idolatria) resultauano à gloria del vero Iddio, la qual gloria in questo nouo erettione, non solo si conserua intiera, ma ancora si accresce [...] per conuertire i medesimi instrumenti all'uso della vera & santa religione”⁸⁸

[Sixtus as a source of creative planning was at the same time a witness to his act of creation \(8\)](#). I concur that this relation exists, but other than proving self-reciprocity (and filling in a gap in the table) this is not a useful concept for this aspect of the obelisk. But we have evidence that he thought his own patronage had turned out well, i.e., that [patron Sixtus' agency was indexed in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impressed him as a patron \(4\)](#). Mercati's book and the texts on the obelisk's base suggest that he was impressed with how it had turned out.

⁸⁵ Iversen 1961, Chapter 2, especially pp. 41-46.

⁸⁶ Iversen 1961, p. 61. Mercati 1589, p. 349.

⁸⁷ Mercati 1589, pp. 348-349.

⁸⁸ Mercati 1589, p. 347: “And now that they are erected for the third time in honour of the true God, they will not need to be ruined again. Their past ruin as instruments of idolatry now results in the glory of the true God. And this glory is not only fully preserved by this new erection, but is even larger [...] in converting the instruments of false religion to the use of the true and holy religion.” (my translation).

5.2.2 The index's prototype

The *material* Lateran obelisk's prototype is the same material object in the Circus Maximus, but 1230 years earlier, when the ancient Romans rededicated it to their own sun god. It follows that the abducted Christian significance of this obelisk must have as its prototype the pagan sacredness of the ancient Roman obelisk. Immediately we are aware of an important relation in the entire enterprise: (2a) *The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk exercises power over the obelisk's paganism*. This is the essence of its placement at the Lateran: it had to be given 'some pious use'.⁸⁹ The message of the rededicated obelisk is that its paganism has been conquered by Christianity. But did the exorcism and rededication turn the obelisk into a Christian object? It was still is a pagan object covered in an unintelligible script that was exorcised and given an ornament of the Cross. In other words: the obelisk itself had not become holy and was not given a function in Christian rituals; it was an exorcised banner for the Holy Cross on top. And yet, it was not just a column with a cross on top, it was a re-used pagan object.

Since the ATA states that the prototype is never a direct agent with intentions, let us look at the intentions of its patron/artist towards the prototype. *Sixtus uses the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk to conquer paganism (9a, 7a)*. This is the outcome that Sixtus intended:

“fu dato ordine di Sua Santità, & fatto apparecchio per la nuoua erettione de gli Obelischi; infin'al qual anno [i.e., 1585] l'idolatria, & la falsa superstitione de gli homini si poteua vantare, di esser stata honorata con maggior magnificenza, & con maggior splendidezza d'opere che non fu mai la vera & santa religione”⁹⁰

The obelisks were paraded through Rome as 'spoils of idolatry', and placed in front of its principal churches. The message is clear: paganism has been conquered. What is Sixtus' role here? Is he the patron (9a) or the artist (7a)? These are very difficult to separate. What is clear is that *the appearance of the obelisk's pagan religion is imitated by the artist (7b)*. The prototype as a secondary agent acts on Sixtus, who can attain his goal only if he submits to the prototype:⁹¹ it was Sixtus' express intention that the obelisk would be a symbol of

⁸⁹ Mercati 1589, p. 348.

⁹⁰ Mercati 1589, p. 346: “The order was given by His Holiness, & a device was made for the new erection of the Obelisks, to the end that in this year [i.e., 1585], idolatry, & the false superstition of the people could be raised, so that the true and holy religion would be honoured with greater magnificenza, and with greater splendid works, than ever before.”

⁹¹ Gell 1998, p. 36.

paganism conquered. For this to work it was of course necessary that its pagan sacredness shone through, but that it was crowned with the cross, and was rededicated.

The obelisk's paganism must also have exercised power over Sixtus as a patron (9b), because it instigated a desire in Sixtus to Christianise it by exorcising it. Sixtus was a religious hardliner who meant to suppress the increasingly popular 'rediscovered' Egyptian religion. This may be the reason why he wanted to re-erect and rededicate obelisks, which by now were symbols of two pagan religions. Galesino even wrote that Sixtus could not bear the thought that the Vatican obelisk, a pagan idol, in its old spot was in such proximity to the church.⁹²

As far as Sixtus is concerned, the image of the obelisk's pagan religion is controlled by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk. It is a locus of power over the obelisk's pagan religion (2a). The question is how this was received by the recipients, which we shall discuss in 5.2.3.1. The reverse relation: the obelisk's pagan religion dictates the form taken by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (2b), is true only insofar Sixtus felt that he needed to rededicate an already sacred object. Had the object been a huge Greek vase instead of an obelisk, for instance, he probably would not have felt the need to Christianise it. What is more, given his lack of interest in ancient monuments, he would probably have broken the vase and re-used it as building material for his urban construction projects.

5.2.3. The recipients of the index

5.2.3.1 The passive spectator

As in chapter 4, I have given the passive spectators in Rome a category of their own. These are the Roman population, pilgrims, and other travellers. They did not cause the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (12a), but they are a patient, since they are the individuals "whose acquiescence is secured by Sixtus".⁹³ Mercati expresses Sixtus' intention that the spectator in Rome responds to the agency inherent in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (12b). The spectators are (part of) the reason why he rededicated the obelisk. It is worthwhile to quote here the better part of an entire paragraph from Mercati's chapter on the re-erection of the obelisks:

"così gli Obelischi, come spoglie dell'idolatria, dalla religione trionfante posti innanzi alle Chiese principali di Roma, muouessero molti à buon zelo, & gli accendessero alla deuotione,

⁹² Curran et al. 2009, pp. 147-149.

⁹³ See Gell 1998, p. viii.

dimostrando i detti Obelischi la potenza del vero Iddio, per la quale l'humilità della religione Christiana si sia innalzata sopra tanta grandezza, & potenza del mondo: rappresentando insieme in quanto errore, & in quanto caligine fossero immersi gli gentili, i quali honorauano con tanta magnificenza i loro falso Dii: & ad emulatione di eßi muouessero i Christiani alla reverenza che si debbe portare al vero Iddio.”⁹⁴

The text takes an advance on future results: the Christians are so moved by the Christian obelisk that they revere Christ. Indeed, when the obelisk was exorcised and consecrated on 10 August 1588, indulgences were granted to those who passed it with reverence.⁹⁵ I conclude that though they are patients here, the people in Rome are a major causal factor for Sixtus' rededication of the obelisk.

5.2.3.2 Other categories of recipients of the index

The quoted paragraph also demonstrates that we need to consider a third category of recipient, and that is the dedicatee: Christ. I discussed in chapter 4 my reasons for including the category of *owner* of a work of art, and why I disregard it in this thesis due to the overlap with Sixtus' role as a patron. The *dedicatee*, however, is an essential category, but a special one in this case, because is 'the Holy Cross', a sign that stands for the suffering of Christ. Though we cannot presume to know the thoughts or reactions of Christ, we may infer from Sixtus' actions that he meant to involve Christ as an agent and as a patient.

Due to the perceived passive nature of Christ I have chosen to place Christ in the category of passive spectator (12a) rather than patron (3a). Again, this does not mean he is not an agent. Mercati even purports that [God had a hand in the Christian quality of the obelisks \(12a\)](#), in that every obelisk was eminently placed nearest the church where they were erected: “... according to the places in which they found themselves convenient for transportation to the nearest churches, is deemed so miraculous, that it may clearly seem disposed by God.” The Lateran obelisk, the largest ever made, was closest to the Lateran, the ‘first and principal church in the world’, through the disposition of God.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Mercati 1589, pp. 347-348. “And so the obelisks, as the spoils of idolatry, placed by the triumphant religion in front of the principal churches of Rome, might move many to good zeal and inspire them to devotion, these obelisks demonstrating the power of the true God. Through this power the humbleness of the Christian religion be exalted over such grandeur and power of the world. Together they represent in what error and in what fogginess the pagans were immersed, who honoured their false Gods with such magnificence, and in emulation of them moved the Christians to the reverence which ought to be shown for the true God. (my translation)”

⁹⁵ Fontana 1590, p. 71r.

⁹⁶ Mercati 1589, p. 351.

Moreover, another intended result of the re-erection and rededication is that **Christ responds to the agency inherent in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk (12b)**. Christ is meant (by Sixtus) to be pleased and impressed. This is more likely than it seems: there are many examples of people who try to placate their gods by offerings and gifts.

5.2.4 The index as its own agent and its own patient

To conclude the discussion of all possible relations between the index and another role (the green blocks in table 5.2), we arrive at the self-reciprocity of the index itself, which Gell describes as the index as a cause of itself: ‘self-made’; the index as a ‘made thing’: **the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own making (5)**. It is an agent in the act of its own making insofar as it is an already pagan object that is turned into a Christian object, but that is relation (2a). Its intrinsic sacred quality was discussed in chapter 2, where I quoted Vernant as saying that the obelisk projects like a bridge towards the divine. Sixtus did not create its sacred nature; it was already there. Sixtus rededicated it and Christianised it, and is the artist in that respect (1a), but **the obelisk is an intrinsically sacred object (5)**.

We have now arrived at the following relations:

Index	The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk
Artist	Sixtus
Prototype	The obelisk’s pagan religion
Recipients	Patron: Sixtus
	The passive spectator in Rome
	+Dedicatee: Christ (the Holy Cross)
	[+Authors: Fontana and Mercati]
	[+Owner: Sixtus V]

Table 5.3 The players in the Art Nexus

5.3 The complex relations

All roles revolve around the index. Above we have discussed the simplex relations between index and artist (1a) and (1b), index and prototype (2a) and (2b), index and patron (3a) and (3b), and index and passive spectator (12a) and (12b), as well as self-reciprocal relations (4)

and (8). I have also discussed relations (7a) and (7b) and (9a) and (9b) in the section on the prototype, because the prototype itself does not have intentions.

I will now turn to the complex relations through the index, where the index itself is implied but is not an end point (the blocks in the tables that are not green). As in chapter 4, I will mention the index explicitly as an intermediate in each of these relations.

5.3.1 The relations between the artist and the patron

Relations (6a) and (6b) apply vacuously, because these roles intersect in the person of Sixtus, and are difficult to separate (see 5.2.2).

5.3.2 The prototype as its own agent and patient

The examples of this relation given by Gell are all of prototypes who are people, but I established in chapter 4 that it also works very well with abstract concepts for all three indexes (the material obelisk *per se*, Fontana's technology and its Christian religion) and their prototypes (the obelisk *per se*, the ancient Romans' technology and its dedication to the Sun). *The obelisk's paganism is a patient with respect to the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it, incorporates its agency* (10). Crowning the obelisk with a cross, Sixtus, the primary agent, intended to show the world that paganism had been conquered by Christianity. This message was underlined by the rituals performed for each obelisk: it was exorcised during a mass, and indulgences were given to those who passed the obelisk with reverence on that day.

The message of these rituals was clear to the people of Rome. After all, we are working with a triadic Anthropological Theory of Art, and the interpretant of this agency must be established. An obvious choice would be the spectator in Rome. We then arrive at: *The obelisk's paganism is a patient with respect to the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it to the spectators in Rome, incorporates its agency* (10). And since we are concerned only with the termination points of these relations (see section 4.3),⁹⁷ that is exactly where we arrive at again: the relation between the spectators and the prototype (13a and 13b) (see the next section, 5.3.3).

5.3.3 Spectators and prototype

We have established two types of spectator: the passive spectator in Rome, and the dedicatee. For my purposes it is unfortunate that the dedicatee is "the instrument of Christ's suffering",

⁹⁷ Gell 1998, p. 38.

the cross, which I have substituted with 'Christ' in this thesis. After all, it is difficult to pronounce certainties about the agency and patiency of Christ in Heaven. But I still contend that the dedicatee is an important spectator, separate from the others.

These spectators provide us with the following relations: *The spectators in Rome have power over the sacredness of the Lateran obelisk (13a)*. This relation fails. One would say the same for the other recipient, i.e., the dedicatee, but due to the specific nature of God, it is true that *Christ as the dedicatee appropriates the sacredness of the Lateran obelisk (13a)* [as seen through the eyes of others]. The reverse relation would be that *the obelisk's paganism is used by Sixtus as the patron to control actions of Christ as the dedicatee (13b)*. As with (12b), the intended result is that Christ be impressed and pleased. *The obelisk's paganism is used also [by Sixtus as patron] to control actions of the spectator in Rome (13b)*. As a conquered pagan object, it will direct the people to the true religion.

5.3.4 Spectators and Patron

In chapter 4 I listed my reasons to create a category of patron set apart from the spectators. This allows me to better gauge the relationship between the patron and the spectators. First, it should be clear by now that *the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is used by Sixtus as a patron to exercise social power over spectators in Rome (14b)*. In section 5.2.3.1, I already discussed the indulgences that were granted by Sixtus to those who passed the obelisk with reverence. Sixtus could do this because he was the pope, the supreme authority on such matters on earth. If we turn to the reverse relation, in which the spectators are the agent: *the spectators in Rome cause Sixtus to be impressed with their agency (14a)*, we see that this relation fails. This failure clarifies the gap in power between the patron and the spectators, keeping them firmly in their place in the network of intentionalities in which they find themselves.

For the dedicatee the situation is hypothetical, because he is Christ, who is really the supreme authority on all religious matters. But it is an interesting avenue to explore tentatively, because he is a factor in Sixtus' actions: *Christ as the dedicatee causes Sixtus to be impressed with Christ's agency (14a)*. I have no way of knowing whether this statement holds. One may be confident, however, that the reverse statement holds: *Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk, which impresses Christ (14b)*. At least, this is the result intended by Sixtus. The interesting situation is that as the pope, Sixtus is the highest authority on whether or not Christ is impressed, and we can therefore guess as to what his answer on this matter would be.

5.3.5 Spectators

The last relations to be described are those in relationship (15). There may be more than one kind of passive spectator in this category. For each type of passive spectator, this category consists of a self-reciprocal relation. If there is more than one type, there are non-self-reciprocal relations as well.

I will first describe the self-reciprocal relation that is always present in (15), in which the recipient/spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses him/herself: *The spectators in Rome see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency (15)*. In chapter 4 I used the example of the sixteenth-century Romans, who might collectively feel that they had outdone their imperial predecessors, in the same manner that Americans collectively feel that 'they' walked on the moon. I do not see this relation for the obelisk's sacred quality, unless they felt that they had collectively overcome paganism, which is possible. Another presence in this category makes for another self-reciprocal relation: *Christ sees his own agency in the obelisk; he is impressed with his own agency (15)*. Due to the unique nature of Christ, this will have to remain open for debate.

Because we have more than one recipient, we have non-self-reciprocal relations as well, in which *the agency of the spectator in Rome is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses Christ (15)*. I feel confident in saying that this relation fails, as the spectator lacks the power to be an agent. The reverse: *the agency of Christ is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the spectator in Rome (15)*, may very well have been perceived by the spectators to be true. Whether these non-self-reciprocal relations succeed or fail is dependent on the recipient's power. Christ has (perceived) power, the spectator has none. Here again, we see that the difference in power determines the outcome, and re-affirms an established hierarchy.

5.4 Conclusion

5.4.1 The information gained by application of the ATA

My first research question concerned the usefulness of the information provided by the theory on the social context in which the obelisk functioned. I defined usefulness as finding an explanation for Sixtus' continued re-erection of obelisks after the first two. The information produced in this chapter is of a radically different nature than that in chapter 4, and has produced additional insights.

I discovered that whether or not the index is self-made is not an essential quality for its successfulness, but depends on the context. In chapter 4 it was concluded that it was essential to the social reception of the ingenuity surrounding the obelisk that it was moved with great difficulty; the opposite of the ‘self-made’ index. But the situation is reversed with its sacred character. Sixtus rededicated it and Christianised it, but as I already argued in chapter 2, the obelisk is an intrinsically sacred object. This means that here too the importance of the prototype is great, as it was found to be in the previous chapter. It seems certain that Sixtus felt that he needed to rededicate an already sacred object. For him, the obelisk’s new Christian quality is a locus of power over the obelisk’s old pagan religion. This may be a partial answer to my first research question. Moreover, this chapter has made me realise that Sixtus’ actions indicate that he meant to involve Christ as an agent as well as a patient.

Again, as in chapter 4, it turns out that the people in Rome are a major causal factor for Sixtus’ rededication of the obelisk, even though they are patients.

One of the most important conclusions must be that whether non-self-reciprocal expressions succeed or fail to apply in agent and patient positions is dependent on the recipient’s power. Their difference in power determines the outcome, and re-affirms an established hierarchy.

5.4.2 Consistent application of the ATA

This entire chapter, like chapter 4, is proof that it is possible to apply the entire ATA consistently to a single aspect of an obelisk.

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Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

6 The significance of the prototype

In the previous two chapters I concluded that the prototype can be extremely important, and is often the reason for the object's existence, as in the case of a portrait, which is a representation of the prototype: the sitter. I have shown that the Lateran obelisk can be regarded as a representation of its previous existence in the Circus Maximus. We saw in chapter 5 that Sixtus saw the need to rededicate an already sacred object. But why did he excavate it in the first place?

6.1 Lines of succession

Through my discussion in chapters 4 and 5 it has become clear that Sixtus' knowledge of the Roman imperial history of the obelisk (i.e., of the obelisk's prototype) may have dictated its fate in the sixteenth century.

Sixtus knew that the obelisks that were hidden in the soil of the Circus Maximus had once belonged to Augustus and Constantine, two emperors that history looked back on very favourably. The parallel texts on the east and north faces of the base of the Lateran obelisk confirm this importance for Sixtus, and Mercati even writes that Sixtus intended to recreate the lost power and the glory of the ancient Roman emperors.⁹⁸ It is all about the appropriation of technical ingenuity (and glory) that had been lost, which had now been given back to the people, greatly enhancing Sixtus' status as a pope. Sixtus' emulation of these emperors indicates that the patron also has a prototype, i.e., his predecessor in the time of the obelisk's first erection in Rome. This prototype is really Constantius, but in the texts on the base Sixtus prefers to emphasize that it is Constantius' father, Constantine the Great.

Sixtus invests in the link with Constantine, who is himself a symbol of paganism conquered. Constantine is mentioned on three of the faces of the base. He was baptised at the Lateran by Sixtus' predecessor, and so became the first Christian emperor. Sixtus brought Constantine's obelisk to Constantine's church, statue, baptistery and palace. Sixtus as a secular and spiritual ruler is suggesting that he is a successor of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, as well as his predecessor Pope Sylvester, who had been made a saint.

⁹⁸ Mercati 1589, p. 347.

From the mention of these predecessors it follows that is important for Sixtus to create lines of succession, however artificial.

6.1.1 A new application of the ATA

In the previous chapters, I applied the ATA to abstract notions, which were however aspects of a tangible object that I considered a super-index, i.e., the Lateran obelisk. Now I will take as the index a person rather than an object. It may seem incongruous to apply the ATA to an abstract category such as ‘the status of pope’, taking a person rather than an object as its super-index. In Gell’s book, the index is usually an object, not a person. But there are exceptions. He argues that there is no theoretical significance to the distinction between modes of artistic action that are mediated via artefacts, and those that involve performance.⁹⁹

According to Gell, an art object is “whatever is inserted into the ‘slot’ provided for art objects” in his theoretical system. If in his theory “objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents”, there can be no strong objection to taking the reverse approach, that people can have the same social agency as objects.¹⁰⁰ Gell: “There are instances in which the index may actually be a person. A case in point is possession by the deity,” describing young girls who were worshipped as the goddess Durga. Though possession by a deity does not apply to Sixtus, I will take his status as a pope as an aspect of the super-index ‘Sixtus as a person’. Some may argue that this stretches the theory beyond its intention, but it does provide some valuable insights.

If Sixtus has a prototype that is important to him it is time to shift our focus from the obelisk to Sixtus. What did it bring Sixtus to claim an illustrious predecessor? His own social status had been decidedly low.¹⁰¹ He did not come from one of the usual families from which popes were selected.¹⁰² By changing Rome’s administrative structure and embarking upon his urban building programme, Sixtus ensured that he became more than a footnote in the city’s history. Moreover, he had many engravings and frescos produced to commemorate his achievements (see for example fig. 1.2). And of course he asked Mercati to write his book on obelisks. It seems that Sixtus is creating himself as an artefact intended to exercise agency. We find, then, that Pope Sixtus as an index has artists (his parents, Fontana, Mercati), a patron

⁹⁹ Gell 1998, p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ Gell 1998, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Sixtus’ father had been a gardner. As a child, ‘Sixtus’ had made a career in the church, was created a Cardinal, and became an inquisitor in Venice. Supported by Ferdinando De’ Medici he was elected pope, but he broke his promises to De’ Medici as soon as he was elected.

¹⁰² See for example D’Onofrio 1969-1, pp. 111-114.

(Ferdinando De' Medici supported his election as pope) and many, many prototypes. After all, every pope was his predecessor.

By excavating the obelisk from the dirt in the Circus Maximus, Sixtus establishes a direct connection with Constantius, reworked into Constantine, as well as Pope Sylvester. That is the function of this obelisk: it is not just a pious banner for the Holy Cross, it is the point where Sixtus and Emperor Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, intersect. Constantine had the obelisk removed from its position in Karnak, and after his death his son Constantius had it erected in Rome. Sixtus is the first pope to actively engage with it, and he managed to have it re-erected. The re-erection of this obelisk turned Constantine and his son into Sixtus' prototypes, and therefore Sixtus is Constantine's and Constantius' *only direct successor*.

6.2 Evaluation

The shift of focus from the social context of the obelisk to the social context of its patron (which overlap but do not coincide) provides additional insight into the reasons for the obelisk's existence in the Lateran Square. It is possible that I might have arrived at this conclusion without the use of the ATA. But I found that the theory is a useful tool that guides one's thoughts and helps the user consider all the possible relations s/he wants to include in the research. Also, importantly, it helps to take one's mind off any postulated 'meaning' of the obelisk. The obelisk's meaning cannot be 'out there', it must have meant something *to someone*. That is a major advantage of Gell's theory: it looks at a disturbance in the social milieu, questioning the environment in which it came into being.

Gell provides examples in which the index may actually be a person. My application of the theory to the Lateran obelisk as the index has induced me to apply it to Sixtus as an index, which in turn has made me realise that he was turning himself into a work of art of some sort. Though this may be an anachronistic view of such matters, it is not a far-fetched conclusion: works of art are made to last. Sixtus had no offspring, and for this reason he needed to take care of his own remembrance after his death. Future generations are therefore another class of passive spectator, and should be added to the context of his biographical 'life project'.¹⁰³ There are many examples of succession portrait series, including several series of popes, but Sixtus tried to establish another series, with obelisks, not portraits, that linked him

¹⁰³ See section 3.1.

directly to Saint Peter (Vatican), Emperor Augustus (Esquiline), Emperor Constantine (Lateran), and Emperor Augustus again (Piazza del Popolo).¹⁰⁴

It seems, then, that the fact that our new index's prototype is Emperor Constantine constitutes a powerful incentive for Sixtus, explaining why he had the obelisk excavated, transported, repaired and re-erected at the Lateran Square.

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¹⁰⁴ For Sixtus' use of the Esquiline obelisk to appropriate Augustus as his predecessor, see Van Arethals 2014.

You'd be amazed how much research you can get done when you have no life whatsoever.

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*

7 Conclusion

Rather than writing an antiquarian text that summarises the literature on the Lateran obelisk, I decided to use this thesis to apply Gell's Anthropological Theory of Art to the obelisk. I intended to find out whether the ATA could show me how the object functioned in its social context, and could provide an answer to the question of why Sixtus re-erected two more obelisks after the first two.

My research questions concerned two different levels of information:

1. Does the application of the ATA provide useful information on the social context in which the object functioned, in that this social context may explain why Sixtus continued re-erecting obelisks after the first two?
2. Can the ATA be applied consistently to a single art object in an art historical study and produce new and meaningful insights?

These seemed useful research questions to me, because Gell does not apply his theory consistently to a single object. It was unclear to me whether the enterprise would produce meaningful results.

7.1 The obelisk's *raison d'être*

The ATA has been a great tool to consistently investigate the social circle in which the obelisk was erected. It makes it clear that spectators, even in their patient position, can be a locus of power. Captivation of the passive spectators in Rome must have been a major issue for Sixtus. Through this concept of captivation the ATA has made me realise the importance of technical ingenuity. Its importance is described in Gell's book, but applying the theory to the erection of the obelisk has made it clear to me that overcoming gravity is an intrinsic part of any such monument, and emphasises the insurmountable inequality between those in power and others, re-affirming the established hierarchy. This is a powerful tool for any ruler, and it certainly was for Sixtus. The obelisk became an extension of his person.

The ATA predicts that the index not only becomes an extension, but also assumes animacy and partial personhood, in that the people in the various roles assign this personhood

to the index. In Gell's words: "The whole point of the art nexus is that the index is considered an extension of the patron/artist, and is regarded almost as a person." Mercati's book tells us that it was indeed considered an extension of Sixtus, but there is no indication in the literature nor any other reason to assume that it was regarded almost as a person. This seems to be a deliberate idiosyncratic property of obelisks. I have argued in chapter 2 that the obelisk lacks animacy, and so it came as no surprise that I found in chapter 4 that it also lacks personhood.

The ATA's inclusion of the role of prototype in the art nexus proves very useful as an explanation. We saw in the previous chapters that the prototype is of major importance in both my applications of the art nexus. First, it seems certain that Sixtus felt that he needed to rededicate an already sacred object. For him, the obelisk's new Christian quality held power over the obelisk's old pagan religion, and this was very important to him. But this may not have been sufficient motive to have the obelisk excavated.

Stretching the theory, I turned to Sixtus and reshaped him into an index. His prototype is Constantius, reworked by Sixtus into Constantine in the text on the obelisk's base. This turns the Lateran obelisk into the point where Sixtus and Emperor Constantine the Great intersect. Using the ATA, I arrived at the conclusion that Sixtus is creating an exclusive line of succession with that first Christian emperor as his (and his son's) only successor. This is the reason why he had the obelisk excavated and re-erected at the Lateran Square.

7.2 The ATA applied to a single art object

My second research question can also be answered in the positive. I have demonstrated in chapters 4 and 5 that the entire theory can be applied to a single object, even if that made it necessary to temporarily divide the index into various aspects to accommodate for various obvious abductions that could be made. This realisation was a breakthrough in my research. The ATA gave me an analytical tool to separate the various roles involved in the 'production' of the obelisk, and the various, probably simultaneous, abductions that people may have made from the obelisk.

I found it was necessary to consider aspects of the obelisk and temporarily separate them from the material obelisk itself, because the ATA requires the researcher to be very specific as to what it is that one is researching. I decided then to make creative use of the ATA, and treat the Lateran obelisk's technological ingenuity and its sacred aspect as separate indices, always understanding these as constituent parts of the super-index, i.e., the obelisk. I

have found this application of the theory very useful, because it has helped me understand how to tackle the various seeming contradictions and the complex relations.

I found it problematic that the passive spectator and the patron were comprised by Gell into a single category, though in different stages of the obelisk's re-erection. The reason why Gell grouped them together must be that each are parties who are affected by the sign, and interpret its meaning. They are both interpretants, i.e., the third part of the triadic relation of sign, object, and interpretant. But I found it much more useful to separate these categories, as I have found that the patron is the prime mover, and his intentions certainly have the passive spectator in mind. By placing the patron and the passive spectator in the single category of recipient, the ATA seems to predict that there is no difference between the relation of patron to passive spectators and the self-reciprocal relation of recipient.

I wished to describe the hierarchical relation between the patron and the passive spectator within Gell's framework, because the facts support that this distinction is relevant. I have therefore extended the table to make this distinction within the category of recipient. Also, I have observed that other relations for the recipient category can be subsumed under one of these categories, in the role of either patron (Mercati) or dedicatee (Christ). This provides further validation for distinguishing between patron and passive spectator.

This addition is not an invitation to extend the table indefinitely. Such extensions are justified only if they are supported by empirical observation, as in this case study. Objective validation for such extensions is required, in order to prevent the addition of unlimited subcategories that do not contribute to any further understanding.

This approach may not provide clear answers in all cases. With respect to the role of dedicatee I also found that it differs from that of the passive spectator. The self-reciprocal relations confirm this distinction. However, I discern no relevant difference between these two subcategories of recipient in their relation to other categories, and have therefore placed them in the same category of passive spectator. I can only suggest that empirical observation is the guiding criterion for this categorisation.

7.3 Consequences for the application of the theory

The wealth of information that becomes available when we reshape the patron of the index into a new index has far-reaching consequences for the application of the ATA in general. It stands to reason that we will know even more if we examine other roles in the original Art Nexus, such as the life of the artist who created the index. We could, and perhaps should,

reshape Fontana into an index. And if we consider Mercati's contribution, we should definitely include him. As an author he shaped the way in which the obelisk was perceived by the recipients. Where does it end? Even with the obelisk as the index, some of my examples in section 4.2.3.3. demonstrated that the roles that are considered in the ATA need to be selected with great care. I wrote: "Many differentiations are possible, and all are not equally relevant." I believe, then, that the ATA is an exceptionally useful tool that can gain a researcher many insights, but that it is crucial to select not only the right roles in a social context, but even to select the correct social context itself.

As it seems impossible to define what is important on beforehand, application of the ATA necessarily seems to be an iterative process, in which the focus (i.e., the index) may change several times, and in which each of the stages provides additional insights and must be reapplied to the original index. This iteration is not necessarily a disadvantage. Every researcher starts out with limited knowledge, and learns things in the course of her/his research.

The ATA is not a recipe that can be applied in the full expectation of great results. There is no methodological guarantee for success. It provides a structured approach that induces the researcher to investigate all relations from an agent and patient point of view. Thinking in terms of people and objects in agent/patient relations ensures a better understanding of the dynamics involved in the creation of an art work. Which people and objects play the roles defined in the art nexus, and which may be reshaped into useful indexes in themselves, must become clear during the investigation.

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Appendix A The formal expressions for technical ingenuity

The roles and relationships in this Appendix are derived from Table 4.3, the Art Nexus for the ingenuity used for transporting and erecting the Lateran obelisk. The table shows the people fulfilling the roles in agent and patient positions. The numbers for the relations in the table correspond with the numbers in this appendix and with the numbers indicated in the running text in chapter 4.

In this Appendix I have indicated for each relationship:

- **(number from Art Nexus) The formula for the relationship according to Gell**
- **A one-line sentence ‘translating’ the formula, taken from Gell’s book.**
Applied:
 - The formula, with roles substituted with the name or concept associated with the Lateran obelisk.
 - **A one-line sentence with the name or concept filled in.**

Dramatis Personae:

Index	The ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk
Artist	Domenico Fontana
Prototype	The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and ancient Egyptians)
Recipients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patron: Sixtus• Spectators in Rome

A.1 The simplex relationships

(1a) Artist A --> Index P

The index is a congealed ‘trace’ of the artist’s creative performance.

Applied:

Fontana A --> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk P

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is a congealed trace of Fontana’s creative performance.

(1b) Index A --> Artist P

The artist responds as a patient to the inherent agency of the index

Applied:

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A --> Fontana P

Fontana responds as a patient to the inherent agency of the ingenuity involved in transporting and re-erecting the Lateran obelisk

(2a) Index A --> Prototype P

The index behaves as an agent with respect to its prototype

Applied:

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A --> the appropriation of the ingenuity

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk behaves as an agent with respect to appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and ancient Egyptians.

(2b) Prototype A --> Index P

The prototype dictates the form taken by the index

Applied:

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans A --> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk P

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans dictates the form taken by the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk.

(3a) Recipient A --> Index P

The recipient as a patron/spectator is the cause of the origination and form taken by the index

Applied:

Patron/owner: Sixtus A --> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk P

Sixtus as a patron is the cause of the form taken by the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk

(12a) Recipient A --> Index P

The spectators in Rome A --> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk P

The spectators in Rome are the cause of the origination and form taken by the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk

(3b) Index A --> Recipient P

The recipient responds to the agency inherent in the index.

Applied:

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A --> Patron/owner: Sixtus V P

Sixtus as a patron responds to the agency inherent in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk.

(12b) Index A --> Recipient P

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A --> The spectators in Rome P

The spectators in Rome respond to the agency inherent in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk.

A.2 The complex relationships

In his book Gell only indicates the end points in the formulas, because they are the various roles in his theory. However, because they all revolve around the index, I have chosen to mention the index explicitly as an intermediate in each of these relations. I find that it does more justice to the role of the index, and to the meaning of the relationship.

(4) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

A self-reciprocal relation. The patron's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the patron.

Applied:

[[Patron: Sixtus A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> Patron: Sixtus P

Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impresses Sixtus as a patron.

For the non-self-reciprocal relations between recipient/patron and recipient/spectator, see (14a and 14 b).

(5) Index A --> Index P

A self-reciprocal relation. The index is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of making.

The index as a cause of itself: 'self-made'; the index as a 'made thing'.

Applied:

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A --> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk P

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own making.

(6a) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The recipient as a patron is the cause of the artist's action

Applied:

[[Patron: Sixtus A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> Fontana P

Sixtus as a patron is the cause of Fontana's use of ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk

(11a) [[Recipient/spectator A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

[[Passive spectator A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> Fontana P

not applicable: not a patron

(6b) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The recipient's response is dictated by the artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. The recipient is captivated.

Applied:

[[Fontana A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> patron/owner: Sixtus

Sixtus' response (as a patron) is dictated by Domenico Fontana's technological skill, etc. The patron is captivated.

(11b) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/spectator P

[[Fontana A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> spectators: people in Rome P

The response of the people in Rome is dictated by Domenico Fontana's technological skill, etc. The spectators are captivated.

(7a) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The appearance of the prototype is dictated by the artist

Applied:

[[Fontana A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans P

The appearance of the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk is dictated by Fontana.

(7b) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The appearance of the prototype is imitated by the artist

Applied:

[[The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> Fontana P

The appearance of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans is imitated by Fontana.

(8) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

A self-reciprocal relation. The artist as a source of creative art is at the same time a witness to an act of creation.

Applied:

[[Fontana A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> Fontana P

Fontana as a source of creative ingenuity is at the same time a witness to his act of creation.

(9a) [[Recipient A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The recipient uses the index to exert power over the prototype. This is the ‘volt sorcery’ formula.

Applied:

[[patron/owner: Sixtus A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans P

Sixtus as a patron uses the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk to appropriate the ingenuity of the ancient Romans.

(13a) [[Recipient A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

[[spectators: Sixtus, people in Rome A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans P

The spectators in Rome use the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk to appropriate the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and Egyptians.

(9b) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Recipient P

The prototype exercises social power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient.

Since the prototype is always a secondary agent that derives its agency from a primary agent, it has no intention of its own. For a better understanding we therefore have to include the primary agent, whom I have identified as the patron: Sixtus V.

The prototype exercises social power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used by the patron to control actions of the recipient.

Applied:

[[the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> patron/owner: Sixtus P

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and ancient Egyptians exercises social power over Sixtus as a patron.

(13b) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Recipient P

[[the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> spectators: Sixtus V, people in Rome P

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and ancient Egyptians is used [by Sixtus as patron] to exercise social power over spectators in Rome.

(10) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

A self-reciprocal relation. The prototype of an index can be a patient with respect to the index which, by representing him or her, incorporates his or her agency. ATA: The prototype as a cause of the index; the prototype affected by the index.

Applied:

[[the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans P

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and Egyptians is a patient with respect to the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it, incorporates its agency.

This is a triadic Anthropological Theory of Art. The recipient of this agency must be established. An obvious choice would be the spectators in Rome. We then arrive at:

The ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk represents the ingenuity of the ancient Romans and Egyptians to the spectators in Rome and incorporates its agency.

We are concerned with the end points, and this construction leads us back to (13a) and (13b), the relation between the prototype and the recipient.

A.3 Newly formulated relations

The introduction of two categories of recipient forces me to consider additional relations between these categories:

(14a) [[Recipient/passive spectator A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The passive spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the patron.

Applied:

[[the spectators in Rome A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> patron/owner: Sixtus P

The spectators in Rome cause Sixtus to be impressed with their agency.

(14b) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/passive spectator P

The patron's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the passive spectator.

Applied:

[[patron/owner: Sixtus] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> [the spectators in Rome P

The appropriation of the ingenuity of the ancient Romans (and Egyptians) is used by Sixtus as the patron to exercise social power over spectators in Rome.

(15) [[Recipient A] -> Index A] --> Recipient P

A self-reciprocal relation. The recipient/spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the recipient/spectator.

Applied:

[[the spectators in Rome A] -> the ingenuity surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the spectators in Rome P

A self-reciprocal relation. The spectators in Rome see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency.

Appendix B The formal expressions for sacredness

The roles and relationships in this Appendix are derived from Table 5.2, The Art Nexus for the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk. The table shows the people fulfilling the roles in agent and patient positions. The numbers for the relations in the table correspond with the numbers in this appendix and with the numbers indicated in the running text in Chapter 5.

I have indicated for each relationship:

- (number from Art Nexus) The formula for the relationship according to Gell
- A one-line sentence ‘translating’ the formula, taken from Gell’s book.

Applied to the obelisk:

- A one-line sentence with the name or concept filled in.

Dramatis Personae:

Index	The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk
Artist	Sixtus V
Prototype	The pagan quality of the obelisk in the Circus Maximus in imperial times
Recipients	Patron: Sixtus V Spectators in Rome +Dedicatee: the Christian God (the Holy Cross)

B.1 The simplex relationships

(1a) Artist A --> Index P

The index is a congealed ‘trace’ of the artist’s creative performance.

Applied:

The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is a congealed ‘trace’ of the artist’s creative performance.

(1b) Index A --> Artist P

The artist responds as a patient to the inherent agency of the index

Applied:

Sixtus as the artist also responded as a patient to the inherent agency of the sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk

(2a) Index A --> Prototype P

The index behaves as an agent with respect to its prototype

Applied:

The Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk behaves as an agent with respect to paganism.

(2b) Prototype A --> Index P

The prototype dictates the form taken by the index

Applied:

The obelisk’s paganism dictates the form taken by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(3a) Recipient A --> Index P

The recipient as a patron/spectator is the cause of the origination and form taken by the index

Applied:

Sixtus as a patron is the cause of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(12a) Recipient A --> Index P

The spectators in Rome are the cause of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(12a) Recipient A --> Index P

God as the dedicatee is the cause of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(3b) Index A --> Recipient P

The recipient responds to the agency inherent in the index.

Applied:

Sixtus as a patron responds to the agency inherent in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(12b) Index A --> Recipient P

The recipient responds to the agency inherent in the index.

Applied:

The spectators in Rome respond to the agency inherent in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(12b) Index A --> Recipient P

The recipient responds to the agency inherent in the index.

Applied:

God responds to the agency inherent in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

B.2 The complex relationships

In his book Gell only indicates the end points in the formulas, because they are the various roles in his theory. However, because they all revolve around the index, I have chosen to mention the index explicitly as an intermediate in each of these relations.

(4) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

A self-reciprocal relation. The patron's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the patron.

Applied:

b1) Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk, which profoundly impresses Sixtus as a patron.

For the non-self-reciprocal relations between recipient/patron and recipient/spectator and recipient/dedicatee, see (14a and 14 b).

(5) Index A --> Index P

A self-reciprocal relation. The index is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of making. The index as a cause of itself: 'self-made'; the index as a 'made thing'.

Applied:

The sacred quality of the Lateran obelisk is a made thing that is also an agent in the act of its own making.

(6a) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The recipient as a patron is the cause of the artist's action.

Applied:

Sixtus (as a patron) is the cause of Sixtus' use (as an artist) of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(11a) [[Recipient/spectator A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The recipient as a spectator is the cause of the artist's action.

Applied:

The spectators in Rome are the cause of Sixtus' action.

(11a) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The recipient as a dedicatee is the cause of the artist's action.

Applied:

The dedicatee is the cause of Sixtus' action.

(6b) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The recipient's response is dictated by the artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. The recipient is captivated.

Applied:

Sixtus' response as a patron is dictated by Sixtus' (artistic) power expressed by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk. The patron is captivated.

(11b) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/spectator P

The recipient's response is dictated by the artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. The recipient is captivated.

Applied:

The response of the people in Rome is dictated by Sixtus' (artistic) power expressed by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk. The spectators are captivated.

(11b) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Recipient P

The recipient's response is dictated by the artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. The recipient is captivated.

Applied:

Christ's response is dictated by Sixtus' (artistic) power expressed by the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk. Christ is captivated.

(7a) 3.9.1 [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The appearance of the prototype is dictated by the artist.

Applied:

The appearance of the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk is dictated by Sixtus as the artist.

(7b) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The appearance of the prototype is imitated by the artist.

Applied:

The appearance of the obelisk's pagan religion is imitated by Sixtus as the artist.

(8) [[Artist A] -> Index A] --> Artist P

The artist as a source of creative art is at the same time a witness to an act of creation. ('How can a man make such a thing? It is a fearful thing that I can do.')

Applied:

Sixtus as a source of creative planning is at the same time a witness to his act of creation.

(9a) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The recipient uses the index to exert power over the prototype.

Applied:

Sixtus as a patron uses the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk to conquer paganism.
Sixtus uses the Christian quality of the obelisk to conquer paganism.

(13a) [[Recipient/spectator A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The recipient uses the index to exert power over the prototype.

Applied:

The spectators in Rome have power over the pagan quality of the Lateran obelisk

(13a) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The recipient uses the index to exert power over the prototype.

Applied:

Christ as the dedicatee has power over the pagan quality of the Lateran obelisk.

(9b) [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The prototype exercises social power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient.

Applied:

The obelisk's paganism exercises social power over Sixtus as a patron.

(13b) [[Recipient/spectator A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The prototype exercises social power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient.

Immediately the question arises: used by whom? By the patron: Sixtus V.

Applied:

The obelisk's paganism is used [by Sixtus as patron] to control actions of the spectator in Rome.

(13b) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The prototype exercises social power over the recipient. The image of the prototype is used to control actions of the recipient.

Immediately the question arises: used by whom? By the patron: Sixtus V.

Applied:

The obelisk's paganism is used [by Sixtus as patron] to control actions of Christ as the dedicatee.

(10) 3.13 [[Prototype A] -> Index A] --> Prototype P

The prototype of an index can be a patient with respect to the index which, by representing him or her, incorporates his or her agency.

Applied:

The obelisk's paganism is a patient with respect to the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it, incorporates its agency.

The recipient of this agency must be established:

The obelisk's paganism is a patient with respect to the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk which, by representing it, incorporates its agency (10)

B.3 Newly formulated relations

The introduction of two categories of recipient forces me to consider additional relations between these categories:

(14a) [[Recipient/passive spectator A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The passive spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the patron.

Applied:

The spectators in Rome cause Sixtus to be impressed with their agency.

(Another 14a) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/patron P

The dedicatee's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the patron.

Applied:

Christ as the dedicatee causes Sixtus to be impressed with Christ's agency.

(14b) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/passive spectator P

The patron's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the passive spectator.

Applied:

[[patron/owner: Sixtus] -> the technology surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> [the spectators in Rome P

Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk, which impresses the spectators in Rome.

(Another 14b) [[Recipient/patron A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/dedicatee P

The patron's agency is indexed in the index, which impresses the passive spectator.

Applied:

[[patron/owner: Sixtus] -> the technology surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> [the spectators in Rome P

Patron Sixtus' agency is indexed in the Christian quality of the Lateran obelisk, which impresses Christ.

Category 15

For each type of passive spectator, this category consists of a self-reciprocal relations. If there are more than one type, there are non-self-reciprocal relations as well.

Selfreciprocal relations between both types of recipient in 15:

(15) [[Recipient/passive spectator A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/passive spectator P

A self-reciprocal relation. The recipient/spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the recipient/spectator.

Applied:

[[the spectators in Rome A] -> the technology surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the spectators in Rome P

The spectators in Rome see their own agency in the obelisk; they are impressed with their own agency.

(Another 15) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/dedicatee P

A self-reciprocal relation. The recipient/dedicatee's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the recipient/dedicatee.

Applied:

[[the spectators in Rome A] -> the technology surrounding the Lateran obelisk A] --> the spectators in Rome P

Christ sees his own agency in the obelisk; he is impressed with his own agency.

Non-selfreciprocal relations between both types of recipient in 15:

(15) [[Recipient/passive spectator A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/dedicatee P

The recipient/spectator's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the recipient/dedicatee.

Applied:

The agency of the spectator in Rome is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses Christ.

(15) [[Recipient/dedicatee A] -> Index A] --> Recipient/passive spectator P

The recipient/dedicatee's agency is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the recipient/spectator.

Applied:

The agency of Christ is indexed in the index, which profoundly impresses the spectator in Rome.

Appendix C The Latin inscriptions on the base

Sixtus V's texts on the base of the Lateran obelisk¹⁰⁵

East face

FL. CONSTANTIUS AUG. / CONSTANTINI AUG. F. / OELISCUM A PATRE / LOCO SUO MOTUM /
DIUQUE ALEXANDRIAE / IACENTEM / TRECENTORUM REMIGUM / IMPOSITUM NAVI /
MIRANDAE VASTITATIS / PER MARE TIBERIMQUE / MAGNIS MOLIBUS / ROMAM CONVECTUM /
IN CIRCO MAX. / PONENDUM / S.P.Q.R.D.D.

North face

SIXTUS V. PONT. MAX. / OBELISCUM HUNC / SPECIE EXIMIA / TEMPORUM CALAMITATE /
FRACTUM CIRCI MAX. / RUINIS HUMO LIMOQ / ALTE DEMERSUM MULTA / IMPENSA EXTRAXIT
/ HUNC IN LOCUM MAGNO / LABORE TRANSTULIT / FORMAEQ PRISTINAE / ACCURATE
RESTITUTUM / CRUCI INVICTISSIMAE / DICAVIT / A.M.D.L.XXXVIII PONT. IIII

South face

CONSTANTINUS / PER CRUCEM / VICTOR / A S. SILVESTRO HIC / BAPTIZATUS / CRUCIS
GLORIAM / PROPAGAVIT

West face

FL. CONSTANTINUS / MAXIMUS AUG. / CHRISTIANAE FIDEI / VINDEXT ET ASSERTOR /
OBELISCUM / AB AEGYPTIO REGE / IMPURO VOTO / SOLI DEDICATUM / SEDIB AVULSUM SUIS
/ PER NILUM TRANSFERRI / ALEXANDRIAM IUSSIT / UT NOVAM ROMAM / AB SE TUNC
CONDITAM / EO DECORARET / MONUMENTO

¹⁰⁵ Fontana 1590, pp. 73v-74 r.

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- 1.2 Ambrogio Brambilla, *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*. Bust portrait of Sixtus V surrounded by 28 scenes depicting buildings either completed or restored or newly erected by him, as well as other scenes related to his life, 1589. © Trustees of the British Museum, BM 1947,0319.26.16
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