



EDITORIAL

With AI, It Seems a Fact: Things Act Back

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Abstract

This editorial opens the Spring issue of the Journal of Business Anthropology. The issue consists of a collection of nine themed essays on artificial intelligence (AI) and business anthropology, edited by Matt Artz and Adam Gamwell, who have also written an introduction to the collection. In this editorial, we do not, therefore, summarize each essay and the insights of the collection, as we would usually do. For such a summary, please read the introduction by Artz and Gamwell. Instead, we offer a few thoughts on one of the core themes that runs through all the essays and, more generally, seems to be a defining feature of AI: namely, that AI appears to have finally made it an indisputable fact that things act back, being responsive in and through their relations and interactions with humans – an issue that has been explored and discussed extensively among anthropologists and other social and human scientists in the recent decades.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, Human-nonhuman entanglement, Animate and acting things, Two-way relatedness.

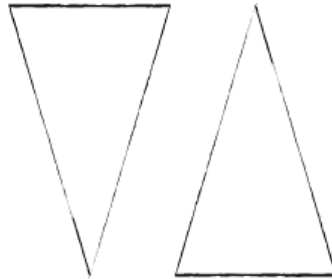
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OBJECTS GROW EYES AND STARE BACK

Back in 1996, the art historian James Elkins published a book on the nature of seeing, intriguingly entitled *The Object Stares Back*.¹ The book begins by highlighting the common assumption that seeing is “just looking”; that is, we open our eyes, light comes in, and we see the world. Thus, seeing is generally perceived as a passive, unthinking act, which moreover builds on the idea that the observer and the object constitute two separate entities. The observer, in other words, looks at the object as if from a detached position (1996: 17-19).

For Elkins, however, all of this is a lie. To reduce the nature of seeing to a formula with a looking subject and a seen object is far too simple (1996: 35). Elkins argues that there is no fixed observer, no fixed object, and no such thing as just looking. Rather, the observer and the object are deeply entangled in the sense that the observer’s gaze shoots out towards the object from which light travels back to the observer, altering both the object and the observer in the process (1996: 43). Seeing, then, is essentially a reciprocal process: When I look at someone, this someone looks back at me, and I watch how the person

¹ Much of what follows has previously been published in Vangkilde 2012 (see also Vangkilde 2015, 2017, 2018).

responds to me so as to gain an updated sense of myself. Elkins contends that, as I see, I also see myself being seen, which is to say that I see myself from the point of view of the person I am seeing (1996: 70-71).

While this argument may already seem sufficiently challenging to the common understanding of seeing as "just looking," Elkins' more radical point is that this reciprocal process is not confined to people but includes objects as well. In brief, objects grow eyes and stare back, as Elkins puts it:

Each object has a presence – a being and a face of its own – and if we take that seriously (not as a vague intuition but as a fact of vision), then the world is full of eyes. Seeing is being seen, and the world is so crowded with things that see and stare that we can stand to be aware of only a tiny fraction of them: more would overwhelm us (1996: 12).

In other words, Elkins argues that vision ought not to be reduced to a straightforward act by a looking subject as seeing is not merely something that we do but also something that happens to us (1996: 35). When we look at an object, it looks back, as it were, and we understand something about the object but, importantly, also about ourselves. Looking at a book, for instance, may give us information about the book while, at the same time, also reminding us of the particular point in time when we were interested in that book (1996: 74). In this sense, Elkins' thought-provoking argument is that to see is also to be seen. Vision, then, "becomes a kind of cat's cradle of crossing lines of sight" (1996: 70), making us all entangled, or interwoven, with what we see.

SOME THINGS ARE ALIVE AND ACTING

One of the key contributions of Elkins' book is the invitation to think about – and acknowledge – things as active participants in humans' engagement with them and, as such, in the world's ongoing generation. An implication of the argument, as Elkins emphasizes, is that instead of saying that humans do the looking, we might just as well say that objects are all trying to catch our eyes, their gleams and glints being a sort of hook that snares us. Using shopping as an example, Elkins elaborates how some things almost seem to tie us to them by little wires:

The threads that tie us to objects are invisibly fine, and normally we scarcely notice their little tugs and pulls. But the webs of vision are there nonetheless. All those familiar gestures of shoppers – bending forward for a closer look and then straightening up, raising the eyebrows, tilting the head to one side, stepping back to think, shifting weight from one foot to the other, crossing the arms, sighing, scratching the head – those are signs that they are already caught in the web (1996:19).

Again, we see how Elkins seeks to turn our common assumption upside down, arguing that things catch our eyes just as much as our eyes capture things. As such, things play an active part in our engagement with them.

This line of thinking will likely resonate with readers of ethnographic literature, which abounds with intriguing accounts of things that act. Consider stones, for instance. As Tim Ingold (2000: 97) recounts, drawing on A. Irving Hallowell's (2002 [1960]) classic work among the Ojibwa, stones have been experienced as following a human around a tent, responding to a question, or opening their mouths. Nurit Bird-David (1999) likewise describes how a man from the Nayaka, a hunter-gatherer community of South India, relates that his sister-in-law was one day sitting under a tree when suddenly a stone jumped into her lap. The man points at the stone because it was exactly this stone and not just any stone that had proved it was able to jump (1999: 74).

Admittedly, such ethnographic accounts may seem strange and radical – and be surprising to most ethnographers. Hallowell was no exception. Being puzzled by the fact that, in Ojibwa language, a stone is grammatically classified as an animate and not an inanimate noun, Hallowell asked an old man if *all* stones lying around them are alive. The old man pondered over the question for some time before he replied: “No! But *some* are” (Hallowell in Ingold 2000: 96). What are we to make of such a statement? How are we to understand and explain that *some* things may act back at us, somehow being alive and responding in our relationships with them?

Ingold (2000) proposes an answer. For people in the West, he argues, it is customary to conceive of life as a qualifying attribute of objects; that is, a property that only some entities and not others are believed to possess, irrespective of their involvement in various relations (2000: 96). Other people, such as the Ojibwa and the Nayaka, however, see it differently. For them, life is not a property that entities may or may not possess *a priori* to their engage-

ment in broader fields of relations. Rather, it is the other way around. Things are perceived to be alive *as* and *when* people engage in and maintain relationships with them (see also Bird-David 1999: 73). The qualities of life, in other words, are revealed not as *a priori* properties but after-the-fact, so to speak. Or, life is viewed as a property not of entities as such, but of specific fields of relations (Ingold 2000: 96-98). This means that all entities – human and non-human – are perceived as *potentially* animate, acting and responding in reciprocal engagements.

THINGS, NOT LEAST AI, ACT BACK

Now, what has all of this to do with this issue of the *JBA* and its collection of themed essays on artificial intelligence (AI)? It should be clear from the above that the intricate relations and engagements between humans and nonhumans, not least things of various kinds, have been a central object of interest within anthropology and the broader social and human sciences in recent decades. While we have only touched upon a few selected studies and discussions here, a range of influential scholarly currents have engaged deeply with questions concerning the constitutive relations between humans and nonhumans, from actor-network theory and new materialist approaches to science and technology studies and broader inquiries into how objects, technologies, and material forms participate in the constitution of social life. Indeed, these questions unsurprisingly are thoroughly embedded in the histories of developments of different forms of AI from automata to large language models (Suchman 2007; VandenBroek, Artz, and Koycheva 2026).

With the increasing spread and profound influence of current forms of AI, it seems to us that the active participation of things in their entanglements with humans – the two acting on, and responding to, each other in a kind of cat's cradle of crossing lines, to paraphrase Elkins – is more evident than ever. Engaging with AI is by no means a one-way relatedness in which humans simply approach and employ AI as a passive tool. Rather, the engagement – as several of the essays in this issue demonstrate – constitutes a two-way relatedness in which humans and AI act on, respond to, and reshape one another. Or, as Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Matt Artz (2026) aptly put it in their essay, “both human and system shape and are shaped by each encounter” (2026: 107). It remains an open question whether this represents an essentially

new form of responsiveness or, perhaps, simply makes more immediate and visible what several anthropologists have long argued about the responsive and mutually constitutive relations between humans and nonhumans. Whatever the answer, AI compels us once again to explore and rethink the relations through which humans and nonhumans come to shape one another.

In their introduction to the themed essays, Artz and Gamwell (2026) ask whether “contemporary AI represent[s] a fundamental shift for business anthropology – or not?” (2026: 9). The nine essays do not offer a conclusive answer to this question, but open up a rich and timely conversation about it. The impact of AI on business, business anthropology, and anthropology in general is undoubtedly a matter of profound importance. At the same time, we invite readers to approach the essays with another, older anthropological question in mind: What does it mean to be human in a world where things increasingly act back?

Enjoy!

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