Art History and Its Theories

Signs in Painting

Mieke Bal

Since I am not an art historian in the sense of belonging to that profession through specific training and institutional affiliation, it is not easy for me to address the question of the impact of theories on art history. But I am a professional, even institutional, theorist, and interested in visual culture, including art. I engage with, and contribute to the development of, "theory"—as a discursive field resulting in a plurality of "theories" in areas such as feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, and cultural analysis. I do have connections, exchanges, wonderful friendships within art history, as well as Ph.D. students working on art. I am also quite regularly attacked for my work on art, often "in the name of" an undisputable set of dogmas at the core of art history.[1] I will address the question of art history and its theories from that double perspective.

I would first like to explain what I do with art and why I feel that it is valuable, without considering if and how it "fits" in art history. Then I want to speculate about the reasons why there is, as far as I can see, an enormous discrepancy between the impact of theories in the pedagogical practice of art history—teaching, students' readings, and the subsequent writing of dissertations—which is considerable, and the lack of it in the institution—departmental organization, faculty appointments, curricula, CAA meetings. Or I should say, the time lag in the institutional organization, for the impact of the one on the other cannot be avoided in the long run.[2] My hypothesis is that the discrepancy has to do with a confusion between paradigm and discipline, and that resistance to theory is a paradigmatic position disguised as disciplinary allegiance. Thus, my own position becomes clearer as well: as a theorist, primarily semiotic, I do belong to, or participate in, the paradigm to which many art historians also belong, a paradigm that adherents to the alternative paradigm, which has a firm hold on art history as an institution, do not recognize as valid, if indeed they can "see" it at all.

Let me return to the controversy surrounding the article I published with Norman Bryson in this journal, and again take semiotics as an example of the theories that art history has engaged with over the past few years.[3] Limiting the definition of a semiotic approach to art to the basic tenets that we described in the *Art Bulletin* article, let me revisit Charles S. Peirce's definition of the sign offered there, dividing it up into programmatic aspects:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.
> (1) It addresses somebody, that is,
> (2) creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign,
> (3) or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign.
> (4) The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but
> (5) in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.[4]

This definition entails a program for the study of objects, including works of art. Please note that any semiotic study of art is limited to the degree to which and the manner, the moment, and conditions in which an object such as a work of art *functions as a sign*. All the rest of it I happily leave to "traditional art history."[5]

(1) The idea that a sign *addresses* somebody is not just a call for reception-oriented analysis. It also specifies the sign as an *event*, one that takes place each time an image is processed by a viewer. An emblematic example of such a "sign-event" was, for me, the moment that Arthur Wheelock in a workshop at the National Gallery suddenly "unveiled" Rembrandt's painting *The Suicide of Lucretia* for me, and I saw—really and truly—Lucretia's earring swing to the oblique position that it still occupies today.[6] This is *not* a call for subjectivism, however: the relation between objectivism and subjectivism is not a simple binary opposition. It requires taking the subjective nature of seeing or "reading" images into account: as an objective fact, that is. It entails the need to do something quite difficult: simultaneously to analyze the object and the reading, the relation between the two (e.g., on what grounds does a subject read it that way?), and the anchoring of the one in the other and the reverse. Thus, this insistence on address also necessitates reflection on process, which, again, is not just subjective; taking place within subjects, process is an objective fact that process happens in certain ways that can be theorized, for example, as (2) "creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign." In other words, what the subject "takes home" from the sign-event is not the object as it is but some mental image that arguably "corresponds" to it. There is a rational—if you wish, objective—argument to be made for the interpretation of an oblique earring as a sign of "movement," even if many people will either not see the oblique earring or, seeing it, find it banal, irrelevant, or farfetched to make a fuss about it. The equivalence posited here is further qualified when Peirce adds (3) "or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign." The notion "more developed" must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that the reader's response is "superior" to the sign, but that it is a further step in the social process of meaning-making. This is often a step in *specification*, due to the convergence of image and viewer. That is why the social identity or "belonging" of a viewer matters, and also why this position, although subject-based, is not subjectivist in any

simple sense. The process can be "caught," analyzed, at any given moment, and the particular interpretant proposed by the interpreter is tainted by the latter's social position. So far, the definition mainly concerns what semiotics calls the "pragmatic" dimension of sign-events.

Next, Peirce seems to state the obvious when he writes: "(4) The sign stands for something, its *object*." This entails the *semantic* dimension. But do place the emphasis where it belongs, not on "object" but on the verb; note that "to stand for" implies the elusiveness, the fundamental *absence* of the object itself. Hence, semantic analysis, the analysis of meaning, concerns neither the "presence" of the object, the meaning, its certainty and fixity, an illusion so pointedly criticized by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, nor its arbitrariness and limitless dissemination.[7] If meaning were present the sign could not function as such, for it could not "stand for" it; but if meaning were totally dispersed the sign couldn't stand *for it*.

The way out of this aporia is offered in the final element of the definition: "It stands for that object, not in all respects, but (5) in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen." The ground referred to is often understood as what other semioticians call the code. This is a kind of rule which subjects apply to connect the sign to a possible meaning. Such rules of correlation are neither subjective nor universal, but of all aspects of semiotic events they are perhaps the most objective. Rules can only function if all members of a group adhere to them. Without such rules, the subject would be psychotic, unable to communicate. On the other hand, rules can change, as slowly but surely as languages change over time. Moreover, such grounds or codes connect not only one sign to one meaning, but also entire categories of signs to classes of meanings, and signs to other signs. This is the domain where, for semiotics, semantics and syntax merge.

Peirce's further elaboration of signs specifies how this works. His definition of icon, index, and symbol is in fact a definition of three different grounds.[8] It is important to note that more often than not all three grounds collaborate, but which one predominates varies. This is true of visual as well as verbal texts. The predominance accorded to any one ground, in other words, the ground that is primarily activated in a particular sign-event is contingent upon the priorities given by the sign users. The author or artist is one sign user, the viewer another. This is, then, an area where semiotics and art history get closer, without overlapping: semiotics would "translate" the art historian's insistence on iconographic conventions, for example, as an attribution by the scholar of a preference or priority of symbolicity to the artist. Iconography's insistence on recognition points in that direction. Incidentally, what many art historians call specifically iconic is such a mixture with a predominance of symbolicity, not iconicity in the semiotic sense. *Iconic is not visual.* This is one place, also, where we can speak of a difference between methodological "rules," not absence of rules: semiotics would examine the contribution of each of these grounds to the production of meaning, and the attribution thereof to each subject. It would even require that examination; art history would, I presume, privilege the ground of symbolicity by putting as much weight as possible on convention. This difference is one of paradigm to the extent that such differences come across as opposition, and whatever it is the other paradigm does, comes across as irrelevant. Here is a case, then, where each discipline follows its own rules, but where the rules of the one are part of the object of analysis of the other. In effect, what we see here is a transition from one possible position for semiotics to another, or from one relationship between art history and semiotics to another: from the comfortable situation where simply an alternative approach to the same object exists, on the side—and possibly out of sight—of art history, to the more unsettling situation where semiotics encompasses art history. In other words, there are two slightly different methodologies of interpretation, capable of peaceful coexistence, as well as a form of "encompassing," and even critical engagement with, the one by the other.

This, I speculate, is one of the reasons why a certain art-historical establishment—fortunately, by no means all—is weary of such novelties, easily dismissed as trendy, incidental, or even dangerous. There is something unpleasant, perhaps even threatening, in the notion that one's colleagues are studying, not just one's object, but one's own intellectual behavior. Instead of eagerly listening and feeling encouraged to deepen one's understanding of one's own methodology and manner of interpretation, it is more reassuring to get rid of that "theory police." Unfortunately, this defensiveness encourages the opposite: an "art-history police," which jealously guards the old ways and fends off the new.

Like semiotics, other theoretical approaches, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonial criticism, and deconstruction, to name only the most obvious, entail not merely a different approach to the same object but also reflection on the damaging effects, such as exclusions, of dogmatic standard approaches. This is a problem that divides the discipline internally while also affecting much more than art history alone. What we are looking at is, I think, a question of what philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has described as a difference in paradigms: the body of theories, philosophical starting points, values, and key examples that characterize

1. Most recently in James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, *Traits*, Contours, *Orli*, and *Splendores:* Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," *Critical Inquiry*, XXI, no. 4, 1995, 822–60; my response, "Semiotic Elements in Academic Practices," is forthcoming in the same journal, Spring 1996.

2. Obviously, the very discussion in which this paper takes part suggests that the institution—the *Art Bulletin* is a very institutional publication—is coming around fast.

3. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin*, LXXIII, no. 2, 1991, 174–208.

4. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in Robert E. Innis, ed., *Semiotics: An Anthology*, Bloomington, Ind., 1985, 5.

5. Much as I dislike this expression, which easily sounds derogatory, I want to distinguish between art historians who reflect on issues of meaning production and those who consider it wrong to do so because not historical.

6. See Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, New York, 1991, 60–92.

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, 1976.

8. Quoted in Bal and Bryson (as in n. 3), 189.

and to a certain extent fix the domain and mode of operation of a group of scholars.[9] One of the typical consequences of differences between paradigms is a difference in emphasis of what is deemed important, informative, futile, or banal: what is accepted as "normal practice" versus what is rejected as inadmissible. One example is "tampering with the image," which from the semiotic point of view is a way of making a point visually, and for the art historian is an outrageous abuse of a work that ought to be left alone.[10] On the other hand, alleging iconographic precedents, from a semiotic point of view, often amounts to ignoring or denying the specificity of a particular image in favor of recognizing what is common. Paradoxically, a dogmatic, iconographic art history can be blind to the visual specificity of an image, whereas a semiotic view, not hung up on the historical dimension, may be able to do more justice to both the visual and the historical aspects of that image.

How do we know that we are facing paradigm difference? One question that helps to determine whether disagreement is due to paradigm differences is the question of relevance. For example, while art historians, like other historians, take for granted the relevance of the reconstructions of past practices and meanings that they seek to uncover, semioticians, like other scholars more interested in system, might say, "but why?" or "so what?" and find the results banal. Conversely, art historians might find reflection on the conditions of meaning-making according to the grounds on which the attribution of meaning takes place to be irrelevant, for in their view, historically unspecific.

Paradigms can also be detected by their dogmas. One dogma, for example, is that, as I was recently told in a discussion, "an interpretation should be checked against what Panofsky has called the 'history of types,' the pictorial tradition of representing a certain story in a recognizable way."[11] The verb "should be" refers to a regulation, the name of the authority is mentioned, and the dogma of recognition is not submitted for discussion but stated as law. In terms of the alternative paradigm—which studies art from the double vantage point of the present cultural context and the production of meaning, that is, which encompasses semiotics—such a principle is not dogmatic, not beyond questioning; recognition is precisely one of the theoretical themes that semioticians reflect upon, not to reject it but to frame it more clearly and establish relations between recognition as a ground for meaning-making and other such grounds. The other paradigm, in short, does not feel committed to obeying the "art-history police."

Paradigms are both narrower and wider than disciplines. It is possible to have a paradigm split into so-called schools within one discipline. Thus, in the Netherlands the discipline of literary studies is totally split into two paradigms, described, by the one that initiated the split, as "empiricists versus hermeneuticists," and by the other, which considers itself a victim of that split, as "those amateur sociologists who only count words or book buyers and those who have something really interesting to say about literature itself." Clearly, this is a difference of paradigm, not of discipline; the split divides the discipline itself.

To talk about paradigms rather than to treat two such diverging fields as if they were unified has a number of advantages. It helps not only to see why we fail to understand one another, but also why some art historians get along with some semioticians and others do not.

Now, it is quite normal, historically speaking, that whenever an established discipline experiences the emergence or growth within its midst of an alternative paradigm, the more conservative crowd, which is happy enough with the status quo, will become defensive. Yet it is of crucial importance for the health, even the survival, of a discipline ultimately to let innovations—which may appear as alienations—have a serious chance against the danger of stultification. Such tensions are moments when paradigms are disguised as disciplines, whose structurally established positions are easier to defend than something as "vague" and vulnerable, as discussable, as a paradigm. Thus, instead of acknowledging the innovative approach that their more adventurous colleagues propose, and at least engaging in a debate, disciplinarians on the defensive will consider such colleagues to be alien invaders of their turf.

Paradigmatic allegiance explains blindness and dogmatism, and it has a positive effect in that it protects and facilitates the everyday business of routine research. But explanation is hardly justification. Such allegiance easily becomes a brick wall against innovation, a wall behind which one feels justified in turning a deaf ear to what others have to say. According to Kuhn, paradigms *need* to be revolutionized after a while; hence the title of his book *(The Structure of Scientific Revolutions)*. One way to enable that indispensable process is to go forward by allowing the "aliens" to come up with their seemingly outrageous ideas, taking them seriously, and reading their writings carefully.

Paradigms become seriously dangerous, hampering intellectual development, when they coincide with disciplines, for the boundaries of a discipline are based on the conventions and history of something as mundane and incidental as an academic organization, and we all know it. Boundaries and self-definitions are not "natural," and any serious proposal to reconsider and redefine them ought to be addressed. Being established is no protection. Cultural objects are not the exclusive property of a discipline or institution. Nor is a discussion by definition an attempt to replace, overturn, destroy. That is why I want to situate my work within art history as much as outside it, after all: inside the discipline as a place for the study of images; outside the paradigm in which the discipline has been sitting for a long time. Art history is the only "official" place within the academy where

9. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962; and idem, "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice," in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, eds., *Critical Theory since 1965*, Tallahassee, Fla., 1986, 383–93.

10. I did such tampering in *Reading "Rembrandt"* (as in n. 6), 203, and, worse, at the CAA meeting in 1988 when I had enhanced a line in a Rembrandt drawing to show a hidden sign—an icon, in this case.

11. This was suggested by Reindert Falkenburg at a session of the course "Current Trends in the Study of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," Amsterdam Summer University, Aug. 18, 1995.

images are studied, so if I wish to study them I must also be inside.

In the United States there is clearly more flexibility within art history and between paradigms than, for example, in the Netherlands. In addition to the reasons I have advanced so far—defense against being "objectified" by the other and blindness to the other paradigm—a third reason may explain the discrepancy between institutional and pedagogical impact. Students are interested in new developments, and they see, read, and often buy new books. Their eagerness is not always matched by their departments. There, the old faculty remains in place, but more decisively, so does the old structure on the basis of which its members were hired. With the decrease in job opportunities the defensiveness inside disciplines becomes fiercer. Paradoxically, it is the smaller departments that do better in endorsing new theories than the larger ones. Large departments have a faculty line for each period, often with additional lines for the non-European geographical areas. When a line opens up, the gap needs to be filled, and the new faculty member is hired primarily on the basis of the old slot. In contrast, small departments, unable anyway to cover everything that tradition wants covered, have to be more inventive. Scholars who, although specialized in one area, are also able to teach methodology and theory courses come in handy: students receive general and specific training even if, when their area is highly specialized, they might find specific specialized training elsewhere, often even with faculty of other departments or institutions. For smaller departments this has always been the normal situation.[12]

The impact of theories, however, should not be dependent upon such contingent factors as faculty size. Even large, traditional departments could reconsider the structure of their curriculum and radically redesign the package offered to students, the tasks assigned to each faculty member. It is not a matter of giving up the crafts and skills that traditional art history prides itself on. Those skills may be acquired differently. They may also be used differently. Just as in textual criticism and philology, connoisseurship and archival work would be much more useful, much better exploited, if the questionings that come from theoretical thinking were brought to bear on their results. Universities, especially at the level of graduate education and scholarly research, are, after all, the free places for intellectual inquiry, and should be thus employed.

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12. This flexible organization has made the program of visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester particularly successful.

Whose Formalism?

Yve-Alain Bois

Having recently been called a "crypto-formalist," a "new kind of Greenberg, one with hindsight," and a "nihilistic formalist," I feel it my duty, at this juncture of our discipline, to address the issue of formalism—of its uses and abuses.[1] I shall first take my cue from these various pronouncements on my work, for all appear to be based on a similar notion of formalism, never actually defined but whose standard seems to be, in this part of the world, the art criticism of Clement Greenberg. For the first author, I am a Greenberger who does not dare say his name (yet does "business as usual"); for the second, I am just short of a criminal (dishonestly repeating Greenberg's "mistakes" while I had all the tools at my disposal to avoid doing so); for the third, who does not share such a distaste for Greenberg, I deliberately perverted the enterprise of formalism by tainting it with ideology. The first purports to have courageously brought me out of the closet (while I never denied my debts toward formalism, though not so much that of Greenberg as that of Aloïs Riegl, Russian formalism, and Structuralism); the second misestimates his adversary (Greenberg *had* hindsights, even if, more often than not, I feel compelled to challenge them); the third, if I understand him correctly, believes that one can discuss works of art formally, without having any claims on their signification. All agree that this is precisely what Greenberg wanted to do. The first adds that it is what I do myself while I should know better; the second that it is what I do while I know better; the third, that it is what I should do.

Since it seems obvious that I'll have once again to try to free "formalism" from the life-insured mortgage Greenberg has been granted on its very premises,[2] I'll first take his work as an example in order to assert that, notwithstanding what he had to say on the matter (he and several Bloomsbury writers such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell who shared such a silly dream), it is impossible to keep meaning at bay. Then I'll use his work to show that if "formalist criticism" currently has a bad name, it may be because it was not practiced well enough. This will lead me to respond to the charge that formalism equals a- or antihistory (a charge common since the days of Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov and carried to the present: it is the main argument of the "business-as-usual" critic quoted above). All along, I shall try to define the tasks of the type of formalism I have in mind with regard to the practice of its most vociferous enemies.

A word on these enemies, in passing: although they come from different factions, they share an idealist conception of meaning as an a priori construct existing before its embodiment in a form. They all speak, as Roland Barthes would say, "in the name of the Cause." Their idealist conception of meaning combines with an idealist conception of form (as

1. Patricia Leighten, "Cubist Anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-as-Usual in New York," *Oxford Art Journal*, XVII, no. 2, 1994, 91; Joseph Kosuth, "Eye's Limits: Seeing and Reading Ad Reinhardt," *Art and Design*, no. 34, 1994, 47; and Jed Perl, "Absolutely Mondrian," *New Republic*, July 31, 1995, 29.

2. See "Resisting Blackmail," in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, xviiff.

existing prior to its embodiment in matter) in order to insure the apotheosis of the concept of image—an apotheosis whose current symptom is the rise of what is called Visual Studies. It is not by chance that the image was precisely what abstract art struggled against, or that it has been the main target of the Russian formalists in their literary criticism, or that Riegl's groundwork concerned essentially nonmimetic decorative arts, for in the absence of the image one is, or *should be,* forced to abandon the idealist concept of meaning I just mentioned. The enemies of formalism usually keep away from abstract art for that very reason—but when they occasionally approach it, it is most often in a desperate attempt to retrieve the absent image (business as usual) and thus to negate the historical specificity of abstraction.

Let me first grant Greenberg the benefit of the doubt: I am not so sure that provocation on his part did not play a major role in his ostensible lack of interest in meaning (I sometimes even wonder, in the darkest of scenarios, if such a provocation was not mounted as a screen to mask the deliberate bias of his interpretation). Whatever the case, Greenberg's own work provides ample arguments for the demonstration that, contrary to his claim, one is never a pure eye—that even one's most formal descriptions are always predicated upon a judgment and that the stake of this judgment is always, knowingly or not, meaning. And it is my contention that the reverse is also true: it is impossible to lay any claim to meaning without specifically (and I would say initially) speaking of form.

Though it has not yet received the response it deserves, it so happens that the first seriously anti-Greenbergian account of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings has been offered by Rosalind Krauss in the last chapter of her most recent book, *The Optical Unconscious.*[3] (Tim Clark's impressive 1990 essay on Pollock paradoxically still depended upon Greenberg's formal reading and did not challenge it,[4] though that is not true of his most recent text, discussed below; as for Harold Rosenberg's bathos on the one hand and the heap of Jungian non-sense poured over Pollock on the other, I'd say that, excluding any consideration of formal issues, these texts epitomize the idealist conception of meaning to such an extent that their hoarse anti-Greenbergianism cannot be considered as serious.) Taking her lesson from the responses of Cy Twombly, Robert Morris, and Andy Warhol to Pollock's work, Krauss shows how those artists chose to underline in it the very aspects that Greenberg had decided to ignore: the fact that the drips were made on the floor, for example (that is, down to earth and away from the vertical plane of imaginary projection), and that in abandoning the brush Pollock had severed the bodily link between gesture and touch (that is, had said farewell, so to speak, to the autographic brushstroke that had marked the birth of the modernist tradition beginning with Impressionism). In short, as soon as Greenberg had firmly set his previously fluctuating interpretation in place (in the early fifties), he provided us with a sublimatory reading of Pollock's drip paintings, one that disregarded the artist's procedures and edited out anything too dangerously close to a scatological smearing of matter (no mention, for example, of the "heterogeneity of trash," to borrow Krauss's expression, that Pollock had "dumped" onto the surface of *Full Fathom Five*—nails, buttons, tacks, keys, coins, cigarettes, matches . . .). To be sure Greenberg had excuses—he had to deal with the Hollywoodian theatralization of "angst" by Rosenberg and company, and he obviously thought that portraying Pollock as Olympian would do the trick—but what I want to underscore here is the fact that the quintessential "formalist" critic had to blind himself to several important *formal* aspects of Pollock's art (arguably the most important ones) in order to maintain his fiction that the drip paintings were pure optical "mirages."

It would be too long a process to discuss here the gradual transformation of Greenberg's take on Pollock—which resulted in a drastic revision of his earlier appreciation of the art of the painter, a revision that can be linked to the evolution of Greenberg's political views (tilting increasingly toward the Right) as well as to various biographical events.[5] Suffice it to say that Greenberg's formal descriptions of Pollock, though far more compelling and useful, were no less semantically charged than the cheap existentialist or Jungian copy that filled the columns of art journals for more than a quarter of a century. Greenberg would have denied that he was talking meaning, but he was: he was proposing an idealist interpretation of Pollock's art as transcendence, as an uplifting voyage away from the material world (the "Byzantine parallel," and so forth). And this implied the idealist conception of form alluded to above—to characterize it briefly, an Aristotelian one, where form is an a priori UFO that lands on raw matter, rescues it from its dark inertness, and transports it to the sunny realm of ideas.

Now comes the second lien to be placed on Greenberg's mortgage on formalism: if in order to elaborate his sublimatory interpretation of Pollock's work, Greenberg had to ignore some of its most startling formal features, it means that, notwithstanding his reputation, he was not such a great "formalist" after all—that one could do much better, and that it does no harm to try. Indeed, for all his talk about the medium as what defines the specificity of each art, Greenberg never seems to have thought about the issue when confronted with a work of art (his indifference to the actual stuff of which any work of art is made grew over the years). Almost any time he tried to use his descriptive skills on this score, he made a gross mistake. It seems odd today that so

3. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

4. T. J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964,* ed. Serge Guilbaut, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, 172–243.

5. See François-Marc Gagnon, "The Work and Its Grip," in *Jackson Pollock: Questions,* Montreal, 1979, 16–43; and John O'Brian, "Introduction," in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism:* III. *Affirmation and Refusals, 1950–1956,* ed. J. O'Brian, Chicago, 1993, xv–xxxiii. See also Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt,* exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991, 11–33; and my intervention at the Greenberg symposium held in the Centre Pompidou in Paris in May 1993, "Les Amendements de Greenberg," *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne,* nos. 45–46, Fall–Winter 1993, 52–60.

6. Barnett Newman, "Letter to Clement Greenberg" (Aug. 9, 1955), in *Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neill, New York, 1990, 203.

7. Clement Greenberg, " 'American-Type' Painting" (1958), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays,* Boston, 1961, 225. For the original 1955 version, see the reprint in Greenberg (as in n. 5), 232.

few people noticed. Painters did—for example, Barnett Newman, who was furious when in 1955 the critic alluded to his canvases as "soaked" or "dyed," implying, as Newman notes, that "the surface is as if stained by dyelike color" ("You know that my paint quality is heavy, solid, direct, the opposite of a stain").[6] But Greenberg could not care less: he did not correct his mistake in the revised version of the text in question, " 'American-Type' Painting," when it appeared a few years later in *Art and Culture* (he only replaced "soaks" by "seems to soak").[7]

What he did omit from this text in its second version, however, is relevant to my purpose. As Clark has recently noted, the whole passage on Clyfford Still is given "heavy surgery."[8] In the earlier version, which contained an elaborate attempt at defining the term "buckeye," Still's courting of bad taste was praised as having shown "abstract painting a way out of its own academicism." In the *Art and Culture* text, "The word *kitsch* gives way to 'one more depressed area of art,' where surely 'depressed' is exactly the wrong word,"[9] and "the 'buckeye' of the *Partisan Review* text is abandoned in favor of 'demotic-Impressionist' or 'open-air painting in autumnal colors.' " This aspect of Still's art that Greenberg had perceived in 1955 but repressed in 1958, Clark calls "vulgarity," and his essay extends the hold of this mode onto the whole of Abstract Expressionism.

There is no doubt in my mind that the vulgarity hypothesis reshuffles the cards (it helps me understand why, for example, I have never been able to stomach Hans Hofmann or Adolph Gottlieb). Clark's short description of Hofmann's surfaces rings much truer to me than the bombastic claims Greenberg used to make in order to avoid discussing their crassness (remember: "you could learn more about Matisse's color from Hofmann than from Matisse himself,"[10] or "no one has digested Cubism more thoroughly than Hofmann, and perhaps no one has better conveyed its gist to others").[11] In short, Clark is a much better formalist than Greenberg when he needs to be, and the reason is simply that he has more respect for form—for the range of issues it addresses even at the most detailed level of its nuts and bolts. For Greenberg, form gradually became morphology; for Clark, and formalism at its best, it is a generative structure.

I am not certain however, that Clark's extraordinary foray into the meanings of vulgarity—its link to the petty-bourgeois class formation—and its particular tenor in the production of Abstract Expressionism holds for Pollock (Clark himself exonerates Newman). In fact, Clark's essay provides a brilliant confirmation of something I have been thinking for quite a while without being able to articulate it: that Pollock (and Newman, but I'll keep to Pollock here) might not have much in common with the school he is ultimately identified with. Although Pollock shared a whole range of beliefs with his Abstract Expressionist colleagues (all of what Michael Leja has called the "Modern Man discourse,")[12] the serious attack of his drip paintings against the autographic "expressive" brushstroke and against the notion of composition (through the allover) makes it hard, if not impossible, to see them as tokens of petty-bourgeois individualism (and it is individualism, particularly the brash individualism of the Modern Man, that lies at the core of Clark's definition of vulgarity). In severing the indexical link between the bodily gesture and the pictorial mark and in letting such nonsubjective forces as gravity and fluidity be the main agents in his pictorial process, in undermining the type of order that had prevailed in painting since the days of Alberti (composition), Pollock, consciously or not, assaulted the very individualism that his peers were celebrating, and he did so in painting, that is, with the best tools he had at his diposal. (The "consciously or not" is important here, since in his numerous statements Pollock was as brash and "individualistic" as the rest of the gang—but the extent to which these statements were "ventriloquized" is subject to discussion.)[13] Whatever the case, it may be because he felt that his single-handed onslaught on the individualist tradition he came from was too daunting a task that Pollock picked up his brush again and abandoned both horizontality and allover-ness in his black-and-white canvases of 1951.

Yet Pollock's pre-1951 art is not devoid of a certain kind of vulgarity, though this may not be the right term if we are to accept Clark's use of it (and I don't see why we should not). As I have noted above, following Krauss, Greenberg never gave a thought to the actual process of dripping (the "severing" and the horizontality), and he was far more embarrassed by the allover than is usually believed.[14] Given his will, more and more marked over the years—especially after he had declared that by 1952 Pollock had "lost his stuff"—to reinscribe Pollock into a tradition of Old Masters, it comes as no surprise that he gradually toned down his own dislike for Pollock's strident clashes of saturated color—clashes that bring to mind Odilon Redon's "psychedelic" pastel hues more than the austerity of Analytic Cubism. Greenberg even managed to rewrite his initial distaste for the obdurate materiality of Pollock's silver paint into a jubilant appreciation of its miragelike opticality. But my claim is that Pollock's "vulgar" color (silver paint; unharmonizable, shrieking color chords; etc.), which Greenberg at first hated and then sublimated, was also part of the painter's strategy against individualism—against the *cogito ergo sum* and its idealistic pretense to subjective unity.

Such a claim is consistent with the strategy that Twombly, Morris, and Warhol read in Pollock's work and that Krauss has analyzed in great detail: an antihumanist, antisublimatory strategy of debasement that has been coined by Georges

8. T. J. Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *October*, no. 69, Summer 1994, 42.

9. Clark's sentence continues (ibid.): "Kitsch is manic. Above all it is rigid with the exaltation of *art*. It believes in art the way artists are supposed to—to the point where the cult of art becomes a new Philistinism. That is the aspect of kitsch which Still gets horribly right."

10. Clement Greenberg, "New York Painting Only Yesterday" (*Art News*, Summer 1957), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: IV. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O' Brian, Chicago, 1993, 21.

11. Clement Greenberg, "Hans Hofmann: Grand Old Rebel" (*Art News*, Jan. 1959), in Greenberg (as in n. 10), 70.

12. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, New Haven, 1993, passim.

13. I borrow the notion of a ventriloquized Pollock from Krauss (as in n. 3), 322.

14. This is one of the most precious lessons we owe to Gagnon's meticulous step-by-step reading of Greenberg's texts on Pollock (as in n. 5).

Bataille as that of the *informe* (formless, formlessness), and conceived by him as a radical attack on the dualist oppositions that are at stake in Western metaphysics (including the opposition between form and meaning).[15] But most important here, because it will bring about my last argument against Greenberg's mortgage on formalism, such a claim conveys a historical point. Indeed, this *informe* quality of Pollock's color is most manifest in his *latest* works, those following the very black-and-white paintings of 1951 whose stained effect would be sorted out by Greenberg, in retrospect, as anticipating Helen Frankenthaler's and Morris Louis's illusionistic opticality. In some of these latest works (and this makes the sharpest contrast with the calligraphic brushwork of the black-and-white paintings), Pollock returns to the dripping and the pouring with a vengeance. Not only are the peculiar hues he chose to mismatch more strident than ever, but their mode of encounter on the canvas is also strikingly directed against any possibility of optical mixing. I am thinking of *Convergence,* with its kitsch, Paul Jenkins-like bleeding of the primary colors in the white pools, or of *Blue Poles,* with its similarly "disgusting" bleeding of silver and industrial Donald Judd-like orange. Is it impossible to imagine that in these works—in which Pollock explores a new color chart and advocates a material, tactile mode of pigment relationship that he had until then used very discreetly[16]—the painter is at last sticking his tongue out at the omnipresent, kingmaking Greenberg, who has recently failed to support him and who is on the verge of championing Louis as his (Pollock's) true heir? Until now these last works have elicited only embarassed comments (if not pure myth):[17] they were not readable according to the book (and the only book worth reading about them was Greenberg's). But it is not because the book was formalist: it is because it was not attentive enough to form. Failing to notice that Pollock was attempting something *formally* new in these late works, one could not but fail to ask *why* and at which juncture he would have had to do so; one could not but fail to be a historian.

Thus, I would certainly agree that Greenberg's criticism, which sees art as evolving in a continuous present, is militantly ahistorical, but such is not the case with the work of Riegl, with that of the Russian formalist school of criticism or, say, with Barthes's. And it is certainly *because* I am interested in the historical signification of works of art (what I would call their conditions of possibility—what makes any work of art possible at any given time) that I confer a preeminent importance on close formal analyses in my own work: missing the detail, one misses the whole—and the whole is not, if one speaks of Picasso's Cubist papiers collés, for example, this artist's highly improbable interest in the Balkan War, but the much more complex issue of the status of signification in a world where the illusions of unity condoned by the episteme of representation are being dismantled. Failing to address the interrogation raised by Picasso's papiers collés on the very nature of the sign and its function of communication, and wanting to make of them the equivalent of nineteenth-century history paintings, are sure ways of remaining blind to their historical specificity.

I have no bigger qualm about the enemies of formalism than their casual dismissal of the formal singularity of the artworks they wish to analyze. This dismissal produces, more often than not in the name of difference, a generic discourse that for all its grand claims leaves us ignorant and deskilled as to what to look for in any work of art and as to how to determine the questions it raises in particular. Dotting the i's in observing the way in which Pollock's paint bleeds might look trivial—but in the end it might reveal as much, if not more, about the history, context, ideological constraints, and so on, of postwar American painting than any analysis of its market and institutions.

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15. The quickest way to underline the antihumanism of the *informe* strategy is to cite the definition of Man given in the "dictionary" published in Bataille's journal *Documents.* This definition, published anonymously, is a quote (almost certainly chosen by Bataille) from the very official *Journal des Débats,* a government publication reporting on the sessions of the French Congress (the "quote" could also possibly be apocryphal, I have not checked): "A famous British chemist, Dr. Charles Henry Maye, tried to determine exactly what man is made of and what is man's chemical worth. Here are the results of his scholarly research. The amount of fat found in the body of an average human being would be enough to make seven pieces of soap. There is enough iron to make an average nail, enough sugar to sweeten a cup of coffee. The phosphorus would yield 2,200 matches; the magnesium would be enough to take a photograph. There is also some potassium and sulfur, but the amount is too small to be of any use. Those various materials, at the current rate, would be valued at around 25 francs"; "L'Homme," *Documents,* no. 4, 1929, 215, translation mine.

16. Color sometimes bleeds in the classic drip paintings, particularly the great canvases of 1950, but the effect of this tactile mode of chromatic encounter is always attenuated: the bleeding is either tonal (a light beige, say, bleeds into white, a dark brown into black) or affects only hues that are close on the color spectrum (a dark beige bleeds into a light brown).

17. Such as the ridiculous story, implicit in an article by Stanley P. Friedman based on an interview with Tony Smith, that has Newman helping Pollock out with the placement of the "poles" in *Blue Poles.* I presume that it is the noun *poles* much more than their referent in the painting that elicited such a fantasy, for the "poles" of *Blue Poles* are not vertical and, unlike Newman's zips, they do not run from top to bottom. Furthermore, they are not entirely painted with a brush but are (at least partially) imprints of a two-by-four dipped in blue paint: this mode of indexical tracing, new in Pollock (with the exception of the imprint of his hands), is a further indication that he might have tried "something new" in his later works, and that this might have to be seen as an explicit criticism of Abstract Expressionism. As often, a true event seems to have been the starting point for the *Blue Poles* story: according to Thomas B. Hess (who reported this to Friedman who, in turn, distorted and amplified the information), Newman stated that during a visit he made to Pollock's studio in the company of Tony Smith, the painter had demonstrated to them, on the canvas that would later become *Blue Poles,* how he could force paint from a tube in a single squeeze, letting them try the technique as well. Contrary to the authors of the catalogue raisonné of Pollock's oeuvre, Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, who categorically deny such an account, Michael Lloyd and Michael Desmond conclude, in their recent and excellent technical study of the painting, that it is supported by material evidence. See Michael Lloyd and Michael Desmond, *European and American Paintings and Sculptures, 1870–1970, in the Australian National Gallery,* Canberra, 1992, 236–45.

The Crisis of "Art History"

Irving Lavin

Theory in My Time

When I entered graduate school in the history of art at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York in the early 1950s, theory was the farthest thing from my mind. In fact, for me and for many of my cohorts, theory was a rather suspect concept, tainted as it was by theories of race (which classified human beings hierarchically) and theories of quality (which classified works of art hierarchically). We read the classic works of the founding fathers, especially Aloïs Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin (always on our own, never as part of courses). But no one sought to follow them in their quest for the foundations of the discipline—an enterprise that in any case seemed uninspiring compared with the joy and excitement of working with the "objects." Moreover, theoretical structures risked limiting the range and depth of individual creativity, or even collective creativity in the case of regional or period styles.

The crisis of my generation was not of theory, but of values. We were embarked on a mission of redemption, to discover, or recover, domains of art that our much admired predecessors, focused elsewhere, had neglected, undervalued, or misinterpreted. This salvific exploration took essentially two distinct but often interconnected directions, one formal, the other intellectual. The formal revolution was devoted to rescuing artists and styles found guilty of vacuity or ineptitude by the mainstream of art-historical tradition. The most egregiously aggrieved victims stood at opposite ends of the cultural scale. On the one hand, there was the epigonic sophistication of Mannerism, and its later, even more despised ossification Maniera, which famously found no place in Wölfflin's theory of perceptual modes. Impassioned reclamations were made by the first postwar American scholars trained by the German immigrants, especially Walter Friedlaender and Richard Krautheimer: Sydney Freedberg on Parmigianino, Frederick Hartt on Giulio Romano, John Coolidge on Vignola, Craig Smyth on Bronzino. The qualities of ambiguity, anxiety, and crisis (such were the terms of understanding that permeated these reevaluations), following hard upon the noble equilibrium of the High Renaissance, had personal resonance for the members of that generation, many of whom had experienced the war firsthand. Another province to be conquered was late antiquity, the period whose very name, like Mannerism, expressed the idea of decadence and deficient originality. It came to be realized that the crude, disjointed, sometimes patently archaizing and aggressively simplified "late antique" style represented not an unconscious disintegration but a deliberate rejection of classical ideals, an act of volition that played a seminal role in the genesis of a new spirituality in which medieval art took root. The immediate source of inspiration was Ernst Kitzinger, also a refugee scholar, whose little handbook for the British Museum—the very title of which, *Early Medieval Art*, emphasized the creative legacy of the period—became a primer for me and others of my age who followed this path.[1]

This zealous rediscovery of disaffected aspects of the past had the earmarks of a religious crusade; there was even an element of political consensus—never articulated, to be sure—since, consciously or not, the plight of Mannerism and late antiquity was somehow analogous to that of the victims of Fascism. Remember, too, that those were the heady days of Abstract Expressionism and the exaltation of primitive art, which seemed equally defiant of attitudes that sought to limit, rather than expand, the freedom of the psyche. The point was to appreciate the self-sufficiency, validity, and meaningfulness of these aberrant stylistic phenomena.

Meaning, in fact, links the formal to the conceptual revolution of my contemporaries, which might otherwise seem antithetical. Our other mission was the discovery that works of art have meaning beyond their purely formal significance as expressions of visual culture. The *cri de guerre* was iconography, the study of the subject matter of works of art that revealed their intellectual content, on a par with and often involving works of literature, philosophy, theology, and other modes of thought more commonly associated with such content. The belief that artists could speak their minds as well as their hearts with their hands transformed art history from an effete exercise in connoisseurship and appreciation into a rigorous and challenging history of ideas with a distinctive methodology that Erwin Panofsky raised to the level of a humanistic discipline in its own right—above all through his uncanny ability to "explain" the content of works of art by reference to a wide variety of evidence from other fields. Art was thus no longer viewed as a *rara avis* aloft in the rarefied atmosphere of elitist aesthetics but as an integral part of our cultural heritage, accessible to anyone with the requisite imagination, intelligence, and persistence. The study of visual images thus became an intellectual endeavor comparable to fields in which words were the medium.

The success of these pioneering efforts can be gauged by the enormous influence they had on other disciplines—evident most dramatically in the widespread co-optation of art-historical concepts and terminology. Wölfflinian perceptual categories may be tracked from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and the formal analysis of body markings by Claude Lévi-Strauss to the elaboration of Mannerism and Baroque in everything from politics to mathematics. Aby Warburg's "pathos formulas" found their verbal counterparts in Ernst Robert Curtius's "topoi," and the iconographical "method" became a fundamental tool for the study of textual imagery, indirectly through the historical analysis of themes and directly through the explosion of interest in emblematics inaugurated by the literary historian Mario Praz. Over routes such as these, art history became the leading, and most rapidly expanding, humanistic discipline in America.[2]

Most of the mental furniture of the early postwar American scholars was inherited from the psycho-formalistic approach of Riegl and Wölfflin, as adapted by connoisseurs such as Bernard Berenson and Richard Offner, and the iconographi-

1. Ernst Kitzinger, *Early Medieval Art, with Illustrations from the British Museum Collection* (1940), Bloomington, Ind./London, 1964.

2. For aspects of the diffusion of art history in other fields, see I. Lavin, ed., *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)*, Princeton, N.J., 1995.

cal approach formulated by Warburg and developed in this country by Panofsky. Be it noted that an important factor in the dissemination of these traditions was the extraordinarily fruitful pedagogical technique of our teachers—those miraculously translated Elijahs bringing the good word from the Old World to the New—which reflected the standards of what would now be called "positivistic" *Kunstwissenschaft*. Panofsky would hand over to every member of his seminars a specific new idea or discovery of his own, just waiting for the enterprising graduate student to work up into an article. Krautheimer was famous for encouraging monographic dissertations on single monuments, which virtually guaranteed the able neophyte a valuable, and publishable, contribution.

The first crack in this edifice of liberal, democratic enlightenment, as I recall, appeared in a convocation speech by James Ackerman, one of the most brilliant and "concerned" members of that group, at a College Art Association meeting in 1958, in which the notion (not yet the word) "relevance" was introduced in our discipline.[3] Essentially, Ackerman argued that art history, particularly in America, was becoming a hyperspecialized and increasingly fragmented pursuit of "facts" and value-free "objectivity." We had ceased to think seriously and conscientiously about the presuppositions and goals of our endeavors, and he called for a return to the spirit of critical inquiry that had inspired the pioneers of the field. In doing so, however, Ackerman took what now seems like an inevitable turn that gave theory a radically new cast. He linked the boom in specialization and the bust in speculation to a failure to communicate with the general public. In the absence of theory, art history had become myopic and introspective, divorced from the real conditions of our time. Ackerman's paper struck a responsive chord in the younger students then emerging, for whom liberal democracy was becoming identified with hypocritical and exploitative commercialism, and many of the *critical* ideas we now associate with "theory" were engendered then. During the 1960s the association between theory and public communication was taken a portentous step further, barely adumbrated in Ackerman's paper, by equating communication with social responsibility generally, and so in the name of theory the art historian ceased aspiring to be a disinterested interpreter of the past, and became an active participant in the effort to reform society by challenging its values and ameliorating its ills. The scholarly discipline was informed by an explicitly moral purpose.

A major reorientation has thus taken place. When I started out, theory still had its classic sense of an abstract structure in which individual phenomena might be accorded a reasonably explicable place, and within the parameters of which an evolutionary process might be discerned without value judgments or any other form of tendentious manipulation. Theory now has a very different meaning, of which tendentiousness has become, unabashedly, the very trademark. The revision has been progressive, passing through a sometimes bewildering series of more or less interrelated ideologies, from Marxism to multiculturalism. Marxism had prewar roots, but many of those who espoused Marxism in the twenties and thirties (most notably, in our field, Meyer Schapiro) became disenchanted when confronted by the brutally repressive realities of Stalinism and dictatorship by the proletariat. The later neo-Marxists ignored, rationalized, or sublimated these contradictions, producing, instead, an art history that chronicled, explicitly or implicitly, the brutally exploitative realities of capitalist culture, culminating in that Evil Empire of the West, the great citadel of consumerist vulgarity, the United States of America. The subsequent flood of interpretive "strategies" (to co-opt a usage normally applied to the artist, but now increasingly to the historian as well)—structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, symbolic anthropology, patronage, rhetoric (which includes not only the devices the artist employs on behalf of his work, but also those he deploys on behalf of himself), collective social history *(mentalités)*, microhistory, new historicism, cultural studies, critical theory, reception theory, feminism, queer studies, multiculturalism—has enriched the field beyond measure. Besides attesting to the intellectual and social ferment of our time, each development has broadened the perspective from which works of art may be viewed with profit (rarely with pleasure), revealing unsuspected facets of meaning and value. Not only has the discipline been greatly expanded; it has also in turn become accessible to scholars throughout the humanities—historians, philosphers, anthropologists, sociologists, literary historians, musicologists—for whom art has now become to an unprecedented degree an integral part, if not the main subject, of their study. But these acquisitions have have not been made without cost. One counterproductive effect, ironically, has been attendant upon the emergence of theory itself as a field of specialization, with vocabulary and syntax often quite inaccessible even to professionals, never mind the general public with whom Ackerman was so preoccupied.

Devisualization/Hypercontextualization

Disparate as were the individual approaches of the pioneers who built the conceptual framework of art history, they shared a common purpose. They were intent upon establishing the autonomy of visual experience, the basic premises from which the nature of works of art could be grasped in purely formal terms. They were by no means unaware or unheedful of other factors that condition artistic creation, but other factors are not unique to art history, whose autonomy as a discipline ultimately rests on its capacity to comprehend works of visual art on sight, as it were.[4] The focus of theory has since been inverted to the point that two of its original mainstays, the analysis and history of style as such, and connoisseurship (localization, dating, and attribution), have all but disappeared from the art historian's ken. Attention has shifted almost entirely to the circumstances

3. James S. Ackerman, "On American Scholarship in the Arts," *College Art Journal*, XVII, 1958, 357–62.

4. It is often overlooked that for Panofsky, also, style remained of fundamental importance: in his canonical introduction to *Studies in Iconology*, New York/Evanston, Ill., 1962, 3–31, he places style at the *primary* or *natural* level of the interpretation of the work of art, in that style (expressive form) is the means though which we recognize the meaning of motifs. See I. Lavin, ed., *Erwin Panofsky: Three Essays on Style*, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1995, 3–14.

under which art is created—social, economic, political, and psychological factors are the suspects usually rounded up—so that the visual taxonomy of art has become a lost art. Perhaps inevitably, art history has itself been subjected to the same process with the fetishization of "interdisciplinary approaches" that have effectively reversed its position of leadership in the humanities. The interest and value of art-historical studies are now determined almost in direct relation to the methods and terminology they display that have been appropriated from elsewhere.

Instrumentalization

A concomitant of the devisualization/hypercontextualization process has been the tendency to regard the work of art primarily as a response to the external circumstances of its creation, and finally as an effort to manipulate them. The artist is no longer thought of as expressing himself but as representing (read promoting) himself, and the art historian has become a kind of voyeur who "sees" the reality behind the façade. The work of art becomes an instrument designed to achieve success and power for the patron (buyer) or the artist, or both. The attitude has its proximate derivation in aspects of symbolic anthropology, in which artifacts (including social practices, also called rituals) are endowed with the affective aura of fetishes to effect a willing acceptance of a given social order. The motivation for this view is fundamentally political, and the key to the strategy is the notion of "empowerment," which thereby acquires a fetishistic aura of its own. The whole mechanism can be ratcheted up, or down, a notch and applied to the historian himself, so that now the agenda of the metahistorian is concealed beneath his own self-representation as an "authentic" voyeur of his colleagues, past and sometimes present. Reality vanishes in a concentric sequence of colorful but ultimately empty Russian dolls. In view of all these developments it might be said with some justice, I think, that the present crisis of art history is that it is no longer itself. Art history has lost its identity.

A Natural Science of the Spirit

How the field will survive these assaults on its integrity remains to be seen, but it surely must, and on the chance it might be helpful I conclude by repeating here the principles of a sort of professional credo of my own. They are excerpted from a rumination, much aware of Ackerman's, written in response to an invitation from Lucy Freeman Sandler, then president of CAA, to address the convocation at the annual meeting in 1983.[5] The credo consists of five tenets—I call them assumptions because I doubt whether in the long run any of them is demonstrably valid or invalid—underlying my conception of art history, which I defined as a "natural science of the spirit."[6] *Assumption 1:* Anything manmade is a work of art, even the lowliest and most purely functional object. Man, indeed, might be defined as the art-making animal, and the fact that we choose to regard only some manmade things as works of art is a matter of conditioning. Our conventions in this respect are themselves, in a manner of speaking, works of art. *Assumption 2:* Everything in a work of art was intended by its creator to be there. A work of art represents a series of choices and is therefore a totally deliberate thing—no matter how unpremeditated it may seem, and even when "accidents" are built into it deliberately. We can never be sure that the artist did not know what he was doing or that he wanted to do something other than what he did—even when he declares himself dissatisfied with his creation. *Assumption 3:* Every work of art is a self-contained whole. It includes within itself everything necessary for its own decipherment. Information gathered from outside the work may be useful, but it is not essential to the decipherment. On the other hand, outside information (which includes information from or about the artist himself) is essential if we want to explain how the work came to have its particular form and meaning. *Assumption 4:* Every work of art is an absolute statement. It conveys as much as possible with as little as possible. The work of art is one hundred percent efficient, and to paraphrase Leon Battista Alberti's classic definition of Beauty, nothing could be added, taken away, or altered without changing its message. Alberti was referring simply to the relationship among the parts, whereas I mean to include the very substance of the work itself. *Assumption 5:* Every work of art is a unique statement. It says something that has never been said before and will never be said again, by the artist himself or anyone else. Copies or imitations, insofar as they are recognizable as such, are no exception, since no man can quite suppress his individuality, no matter how hard he may try. Conversely, no matter how original he is, the artist to some extent reflects the work of others, and it is purely a matter of convention that we tend to evaluate works of art by the degree of difference from their models.

The chief virtue of these assumptions is that they help to assure each human creation its due. What it is due may be defined as the discovery of the reciprocity it embodies between expressive form and content. I do not pretend that my own work has ever met the criteria implicit in any of my assumptions. Yet they are much more to me than philosophical abstractions. They represent the obscure but persistent demons that prod me to think about a work in the first place. And, once the process begins, they are intellectual pangs of conscience that lead me to mistrust distinctions between conscious and unconscious creativity, between mechanical and conceptual function, between the artist's goal and his achievement. Finally, they are what drive me from the work itself into archives, libraries, and classrooms, in search of illumination.

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5. I. Lavin, "The Art of Art History: A Professional Allegory," *Artnews*, LXXXII, 1983, 96–101; the five "assumptions" were first promulgated at a symposium on the methods of art history organized by John Walsh at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969.

6. I adapted the phrase from that used by a mathematician colleague, Armand Borel, in an essay titled "Mathematics: Art and Science," *Mathematical Intelligencer*, V, 1983, 9–17, emphasizing the analogies between the work of the mathematician and that of the creative artist. With reference to the "reality" of mathematical concepts, Borel defined his discipline as a "natural science of the intellect."

Theory, Ideology, Politics: Art History and Its Myths

Griselda Pollock

> To reread as a woman is at least to imagine the lady's place; to imagine when reading the place of a woman's body; to read reminded that her identity is also re-membered *[sic]* in stories of the body.—Nancy K. Miller[1]

> Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women far more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.—Adrienne Rich[2]

I. Being Childish about Artists

In her study of Freud's aesthetics, Sarah Kofman tracked Freud's apparently contradictory statements about what psychoanalysis has to offer the study of art. As a mere layman and scientist compared to the connoisseur who has a specialist knowledge of art and aesthetics, Freud appeared to play down his own contribution to an understanding of art. Kofman revealed these disclaimers to be ironic and concluded:

> But at the end of the text, as in "The Uncanny," the "connoisseurs" are reduced to glib talkers caught up in subjective opinions, elevating their own fantasies about works of art to the status of knowledge, yet unable to solve the riddle of the text in question. Freud's plea to them for lenient criticism should thus be interpreted ironically. What Freud means is that the art "connoisseur" criticizes without knowing what he is talking about, for he is talking about himself; only the psychoanalyst can disclose the "historical truth," if not the "material" truth of what he says.[3]

Psychoanalytically inspired analysis, therefore, of the discourse of connoisseurs—read art historians—identifies the fantasies and desires that are invested in art and artists. Freud also had suggested that the "public's real interest in art lies not in art itself, but in the image it has of the artist as a 'great man,' " even though this fact is often repressed.[4] To unravel the riddle of a text is consequently to do violence to the idealized image of the artist as genius—to commit some kind of "murder"—hence the resistance, not merely to psychoanalytic work on art in general, but to any kind of demystifying analysis such as that carried out by social, critical, and feminist historians of art. Quarantined by being called theory, self-analysis of what deeply structures the discourses named art history is rendered a violation.

In writings on art—his contemporaries were some of the so-called founding fathers of the discipline of art history—as well as in general public interest in art, Freud identified a combination of theological and narcissistic tendencies. A student of both anthropology and histories of religion, Freud established parallels between the history of humankind revealed in these emergent disciplines and the psychological history of the individual being mapped by the discipline he was inventing. Thus, ancient rituals and forms of religion such as totemism and deism could be related to stages of infantile development.[5] Freud discerned the way in which what we might imagine to be a highly sophisticated social practice—art appreciation—is informed by psychic structures characteristic of certain powerful moments of *archaic* experience in the history of the human subject that remain active in social institutions and cultural forms such as religion and art. The high valorization of the artist in modern Western art history as a "great man" corresponds with the infantile stage of idealization of the father. This phase is, however, speedily undermined by another set of feelings—of rivalry and disappointment—which can give rise to a competing fantasy and the installation of another imaginary figure: the hero, who always rebels against, overthrows, or even murders the overpowering father. Sarah Kofman writes:

> People's attitude toward artists repeats this ambivalence. The cult of the artist is ambiguous in that it consists of the worship of the father and the hero alike; the cult of the hero is always a form of self-worship, since the hero is the first ego ideal. This attitude is religious but also narcissistic in character and repeats that of the child toward the father and of the parents toward the child, to whom they attribute all the "gifts" and good fortune that they bestowed upon themselves during the narcissistic period in infancy.[6]

This theme of the artist as incorporating both worship of the idealized father and narcissistic identification with the hero leads to another observation which should resonate for the reader thinking about art history and its typical forms. Sarah Kofman showed how the religious (worship of idealized figures) and narcissistic (identifying with the hero as ego ideal) attitudes toward artists motivates the art-loving public's primary interest in biographies. Writing about an artist in a biographical mode is itself a doubly determined operation. On the one hand, it represents a desire to get closer to the hero, while, on the other, the work and the hero must remain sacralized, taboo, in order both to avoid the unconsciously desired murder of the father that the hero disguises, and to keep up the theological illusion of art which similarly compensates for these conflicting desires. Thus Freud wrote in his study on Leonardo:

> Biographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the

1. Nancy K. Miller, "Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice," *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, 355.
2. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, London, 1980, 35.
3. Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics*, trans. Winifred Woodhull, New York, 1988, 11.
4. Ibid., 15.
5. People always get anxious at this point for it appears to suggest that certain peoples who still hold to these forms of religion are being called childish. The mistake is to assume that the infant stage is childish or is ever surpassed. It remains a rich resource in and a powerful determinant on adult behavior. "Infantile" is a technical term and refers to both founding moments and a continuing register of meaning and affect in the human subject.
6. Kofman (as in n. 3), 18.

> subject of their studies because—for reasons of their personal emotional life—they have felt a special affection for him from the very first. Then they devote their energies to the task of idealisation, aimed at enrolling the great man among the class of their infantile models—at reviving in him, perhaps, the child's idea of his father. To gratify this wish they obliterate the individual features of their subject's physiognomy; they smooth over the traces of his life's struggles with internal and external resistances, and they tolerate in him no vestige of human weakness or imperfection. They thus present us what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related.[7]

Sarah Kofman positioned Freud, and indirectly psychoanalysis, as a "new iconoclast," challenging the religious idealization and narcisstic identification with the artist in order to pass beyond "the childhood of art" into the realm of necessity, where the admiration for the artist is overcome by the analysis of works which ultimately reveal not a mystical genius, "but a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related." Such a project, emerging at the same moment as art history itself came to disciplinary maturity, met and meets still with considerable resistance.

> Psychoanalysis inflicted on man one of his three great narcissistic wounds by deconstructing the idea of the autonomous subject endowed with self-mastery and self-sufficiency, indeed a subject who was his own creator. Narcissism, however, is essentially a death force, so to denounce it is to work in favor of Eros.[8]

Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud sets up two registers. One enables us to have some insight into what is at stake in canonicity, as a formalization of this religious-narcissistic structure of writing on art. The other is the highly gendered terms of such a structure. Fathers, heroes, Oedipal rivalries not only reflect the specifically masculine bias of Freud's attention. They also suggest that structurally the myths of art and artist are shaped within sexual difference and play it out on the cultural stage.

The question then is: Could we invert it and insert a feminine version? Mothers, heroines, female Oedipal rivalry, female narcissism, and so forth? Would we want to, or would we try to side with Freud in the move into an adult rather than an infantile relation to art by wanting to disinvest from even a revised, feminized myth of the artist, and address ourselves to the analysis of the riddle of the texts unencumbered by such narcissistic idealization? Surely we would rather be on the side of Eros than of Thanatos, of love and desire in our writing than of death, which, in the form of avoided "murder" of the father/mother through idealization of the hero/heroine, constantly presses on art history.

I am currently finishing a book exploring feminist desires, women's investment in art, and artists who are women.[9] I pose the question: What makes us interested in artists who are women? It appears to be a simple question with an obvious answer. But it was only feminism—not the fact of being a woman—that allowed and generated that desire, and created, in its politics, theories, and cultural forms, a representational support which could release into discourse aspects of feminine desire for the mother and thus for knowledge about women.[10] In the light of the above, however, any desire, feminist or otherwise, now seems more complex. Why, as a feminist, am I interested in artists who, because of the rigorous sexism of art history, offer no reward as culturally idealized, canonized figures? Can the neglected women artists of the past function for me as a narcissistic ideal? Do I want to set them up as semidivine heroines? What are we doing if we try to make them perform as such—if indeed, within the current regimes of sexual difference, we can? That is to say, is it possible to do the work I want to do on women artists within a disciplinary formation underpinned by an unacknowledged mythic and psychic structure that actively obstructs the historical discovery of difference, that would render uninteresting *re-membered* stories of women?

The answer is probably not. For this reason, I have argued elsewhere that art history does not survive the impact of feminism. But here I want to suggest that we apply certain theoretical insights into the practice of art history, and even question feminist work in the histories of art, using Freud's ironic comments about "the connoisseurs" and the myths that structure our writings.

II. A Feminist Myth from Our Century: Murdered Creativity and the Female Body

In *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1928, Virginia Woolf invented a sister for Shakespeare. Through the telling of her fictive story she dramatized the problem of sexuality, gender, and creativity in a patriarchal culture. She first conjured up a fairly typical picture of the youth of William Shakespeare, a lively and wild boy, well educated—especially in the classics—at a grammar school, precociously sexual, who, because of one escapade which led to an early marriage, had to go to London to seek his fortune on the stage. His sister, Judith, pined at home with the same poet's heart, yet deprived of any education to nurture it, called from her secret reading of her brother's books to mend stockings and presented with the *fait accompli* of an arranged marriage by a loving father. Driven by this to run away, she too makes her way to London.

> Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—

7. Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood," *Art and Literature*, Pelican Freud Library XIV, Harmondsworth, 1985, 223.

8. Kofman (as in n. 3), 21.

9. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London, forthcoming.

10. I am referring to Kaja Silverman's arguments in *The Acoustic Mirror*, Bloomington, Ind., 1988, 125, about the way feminism draws on the "libidinal resources of the negative Oedipus complex," this latter referring to a female child's Oedipal desire for the mother, as well as her identification with her in the formation of her own femininity. This desire is present in all women, repressed by the culture. This comment does not mean that feminism discovered woman-centered sexual desire, but unleashed into a cultural current that element of feminine unconscious to which a phallocentric Symbolic denies representational support.

guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last—for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows—at last Nick Greene, the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so—*who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?*—she killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.[11]

The feminist purpose of this imagined suicide is to create an image of women's internalization of the social murder of the potential artist *"caught and tangled in a woman's body."* The specific corporeality of women is deemed antagnistic to creativity in a way which sets Virginia Woolf's feminism apart from that of the later twentieth century, which has not been obliged to retreat so drastically from the coils of a bodily femininity. Instead, we have embraced the problem, and, in diverse theoretical and imaginative forms, struggled to relate them. Take the poet Adrienne Rich:

> I am really asking, whether women cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body,* to connect with what has been so cruelly disorganized—our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation, our complicated pain-enduring multi-pleasured physicality.[12]

Or the novelist and philosopher Hélène Cixous:

> To write. An act which will not only "realise" the decen-sored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immesnse bodily territories which have been kept under seal. . . . A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter.[13]

Virginia Woolf's historically dated feminist myth is a dramatic and moving image of the murdered creativity of the woman artist/poet in the sixteenth century. Its accuracy, however, has been challenged by recent feminist research revealing a range of writing by women in the Renaissance. Margaret Ezell, a literary scholar studying women in the Renaissance, has pointed out how powerfully Virginia Woolf's fiction of Judith Shakespeare has continued to shape the assumptions held by literary historians about women's sup-posed absence from the canon of Renaissance literature.[14]

Virginia Woolf's conceit must now be read as a feminist myth which paradoxically confirms the patriarchal negation of women and creativity. Her powerful feminist image of "murdered female creativity," internalized as self-inflicted death—embodied in the myth of Judith Shakespeare, there-fore, needs to be examined both for what it reveals about the hold its negative symbolism has had on feminist as much as other cultural historiography and criticism, and for what such myths help to conceal from us about variant histories needed to comprehend women's creativity in culture.

III. Lucy Snowe Meets Cleopatra: The Resistant Feminist Reader and the Female Body

To counter Virginia Woolf's depressing scenario, I want to examine another "figure" for feminist mythology: "the resistant reader."[15] In chapter 19 of her novel *Villette,* first published in 1853, Charlotte Brontë created a scene in which her leading character, Lucy Snowe, recovering from a break-down caused by total personal, social, and psychological isolation, visits the art gallery in Brussels and finds herself in front of a painting.

> One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one picture of pretentious size, set up in the best light, having a cordon stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs . . . : this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.[16]

The introduction to her encounter with the painting reveals Brontë's acute insight into the strategic staging of the visitor's experience of great art—a management of the space of display and an orchestration of a specific gaze.

> It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed around her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. (p. 275)

Lucy Snowe continues with her perusal of the painting, complaining: "She ought to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case." Out of vast amounts of material she "managed to make inefficient raiment" while allowing a complete disarray of pots and pans—"perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets." Lucy Snowe concludes: "Well, I was sitting wondering at it (as the bench was there, I thought I might as well take advantage of its accommodation) and thinking that while some of the details were very prettily painted, it was on the whole an enormous piece of claptrap" (p. 276).

Bold words! Few feminist critics today would dare to utter in public such unequivocal distaste and disdain for any of the "great" pieces of Baroque painting for which this one image generically stands. Charlotte Brontë identifies the painting as a "Cleopatra"—a subject that belongs to an extensive genre of image-making using stories and legends of famous

women of antiquity to stage complex plays of sex and violence coded as moral allegories of fortitude, chastity, honor, and loyalty.[17]

Historically, Queen Cleopatra VII was of the Ptolemeic dynasty, descended from the Greek general Ptolemy who took Egypt over from the empire that Alexander had created on the latter's death.[18] Mythically, however, Cleopatra became a sign in Western culture for an oriental otherness where both her sex and her culture functioned as a dangerous antithesis to Western ideologies of gender hierarchy, sexuality, and power. As a ruling monarch who was a woman, from a culture which, unlike Greece and Rome, did not deny women either public power and authority (women in Egypt inherited property and ruled) or sexual self-determination (women in Egyptian society chose their own husbands), "Cleopatra" has been incorporated into Western culture to perform a complex of fundamentally misogynist roles which dramatize both the East/West opposition Edward Said has named "Orientalism," and the Woman/Man conflict typical of a Greco-Roman legacy reclaimed and celebrated in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.[19] Mary Hamer argues:

> The literal meaning of the name of Cleopatra is "glory of her father." But the connotations of the name do not endorse patriarchal authority. The term "Cleopatra" speaks of the combination of public authority and responsibility with an active female sexuality. It locates political power in a body that cannot be coded as male. In any patriarchal system, it speaks of the transgression of the law. The act of evoking Cleopatra through representation calls that law into question and highlights the position of women within the social order.[20]

In the light of this modern, feminist reading of the sign "Cleopatra," it becomes evident that Charlotte Brontë's image of Cleopatra as a form of gross physicality, indecency, and indolence, and coded signs of an unharnessed sexuality was shaped in nineteenth-century Orientalist terms, confirming yet again that race and gender difference are complexly interwoven in the Western imaginary and that we are always determined by the social formation in which we are positioned as social subjects.

With this important critical proviso, Lucy Snowe might be claimed temporarily as one type of the feminist art historian, but in a way that would immediately place "feminism" exclusively on the side of European femininities. In place of awe and deference for the Western canon and its heroes, Charlotte Brontë's text offers what appears an iconclastic literalness in demystifying the work and in apparently wilfully misreading the codes of Baroque art. She refuses to contemplate uncritically the aesthetic beauty offered in representation, searching instead for a reading that brings the work crashing off its pedestal. She opens a way to explore the fissures in an official, sanctioned culture and its narratives by not participating in its games—the language of connoisseurial consumption and heterosexual masculine scopophilia.

Lucy Snowe's solitary and skeptical analysis of the *Cleopatra* is firstly distracted by her own visual pleasure in "some exquisite little pictures of still life: wild-flowers, wild fruit, mossy nests . . . : all hung modestly beneath that coarse and preposterous canvass," and then by the arrival of a teacher from her school, Monsieur Paul Emanuel. Shocked at her audacity at sitting "coolly down with the self-possession of a *garçon*," to look "at *that* picture" alone, he bids her remove herself to a corner of the gallery to study a series of four dreary paintings collectively representing "La Vie d'une Femme" (The Life of a Woman; composed of Bride, Wife, Mother, Widow). Lucy Snowe is as dismissive of this "sermonising" painting. "What women to live with ! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless non-entities! As bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra in hers" (p. 278). Lucy Snowe's response to the *Cleopatra* and to nineteenth-century painted ideologies of femininity as fashioned textually by Charlotte Brontë's writing tries to use the space to claim for her female heroine another mythic identity, which is determined in its moment of production as part of the emergent bourgeois feminist consciousness that will later shape the writings of Virginia Woolf. As a fictional character in a novel, Lucy Snowe represents a claim for a woman to a specific kind of bourgeois individuality.[21] Chapter 19 of *Villette*, however, sets up a series of oppositions across which we can track the incommensurability of gender

11. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Harmondsworth, 1974, 49–50.

12. Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, 1976, 284.

13. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), L'Arc, 1975, 39–54, reprinted in E. Marks and I. de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminism*, Brighton, 1981, 250.

14. Margaret J. M. Ezell, "The Myth of Judith Shakespeare: Creating the Canon of Women's Literature," *New Literary History*, XXI, no. 11, 1990, 579–92.

15. "Clearly the first act of the feminist reader must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal of assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us": Judith Fetterly, *The Resistant Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature*, Bloomington, Ind., 1977, xii.

16. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), Harmondsworth, 1985, 275. Page numbers in the text refer to this source.

17. Her biographers have identified the picture as a work that Brontë saw in 1842 at the Salon in Brussels, *L'Almée* by De Bièvre. This painting of a dancing girl is certainly an Orientalist work, but the figure is not a monumental one, appearing quite fully clothed. It is more than likely that Brontë had in mind a conflation of representations of buxom women from the 17th century whose Rubensian exemplars Brontë would also have seen during her stay in Belgium. She does take over from *L'Almée*, however, the idea of Cleopatra being a dark-skinned woman. Brontë talks of the "dark-complexioned gypsy-queen" despite the fact that, for the most part, Cleopatra is represented in Western art as a woman of milky whiteness. See Inge-Stina Ewbank, "Transmigrations of Cleopatra," *University of Leeds Review*, XXIX, 1986–87, 65

18. I am indebted for the following information and interpretation to Mary Hamer, *Signs of Cleopatra*, London/New York, 1993.

19. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, 1978; and Hamer (as in n. 18), 1–23.

20. Hamer (as in n. 18), xix.

21. Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, XII, 1985, 243–61. Spivak writes about another Charlotte Brontë novel, *Jane Eyre*, and points to the way in which what some Western feminists read as a progressive moment in women's struggles for self-definition is premised on white women's dream of participating in a kind of self-possession—individuality—which is specifically denied the "native" women, reminding all feminists of the need for acute attention to the historical and ideological specificities of historical and contemporary feminisms.

relations in culture and to culture. Men's access to Western culture is represented as one of vicarious sexuality and permitted visual pleasures; women are meant to look to art to learn their lessons in the restricted performances of a dull and dulling femininity. Lucy Snowe emerges as a *differencing* articulation of Western bourgeois feminine subjectivity in the textual distance created by yet another opposition: that between her character and the contrast of femininities for men and for women just outlined—Cleopatra, "a gipsy-giantess," a fantastic femininity produced as a masculine projection, versus "the good woman," a mythic representation of the symbolically necessary "woman-for-man." But that *differencing* is historically specific and politically loaded, deeply contradictory and troubled—a product of its historical conditions and moment, bourgeois, racist, individualistic, Protestant, Ruskinian—deeply embroiled in the ideologies shaping the pressures and limits of that moment of European women's history and the novel form as the cultural stage of a limited, class- and race-specific self-articulation. This too is, therefore, ultimately a disfiguring myth that nonetheless, like that of Virginia Woolf, gives access to the problem of women and culture to which neither heroically sacrificed nor self-possessedly resistant femininities provide simple solutions, though the texts in which they are inscribed offer images with which to work critically.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

I am not interested in the slightest in "art history and its theories" because I am not invested in the strategy of management that this formulation represents. There is something much more substantial at stake than whether psychoanalysis, semiotics, and poststructuralism are necessary for art history or can be justifiably deployed in the analysis of art objects and related texts, or whether they herald the end of art history as we know it. What is at stake is, however, defined, or rather revealed, precisely by considering the insights into the functioning of language and sign systems, discourse and power relations, and the function of the unconscious and sexual difference that these various bodies of analysis have made the object of speculative analysis. But what that is, is in fact outside these particular practices, in other theorizations. In several instances recently I have noticed that the list of theories that are presented for discussion is always so selective, indicating their management through establishing a new orthodoxy. The long arm of the Cold War quarantines historical materialism and in doing so amputates the political/ideological implications of those theories that are mentioned by excising history.[22] Thus, the issues of class, race, and sexuality, which the above two case studies point out, are once again elided by idealism—the mistaken deification of thought processes over the social practices within which they are founded.

"Theory"—that most ghastly neologism of the late twentieth century—is an invention of the Right, even by those who think that by using "theories" they are being radical. There is no such thing except in the imaginations of those in academe for whom naming is a major means of disarming. We all know that theories are but one face of what we actually do: practices. These have effects; they constitute an element of ideology within the social formation; they are ways of framing the world in the interests of particular positions, groups, classes but, as against ideology, they do not pretend to being facts, common sense, "like it is." Theory is not abstraction, but an attempt at a critical distance on our own social imbrication. Perhaps the debate would be less polite if we named what is being considered as political philosophies: to insist upon the relations between what one thinks and how one thinks and the actual effects of such thought in concrete social practice.

> The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of the world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.[23]

Here is Marx puzzzling about the oblique relations between mental appropriation of the world for analysis—theory—and the world of social practices and historical processes existing concretely in ways that are recalcitrant before thought. In the text from which this is being quoted, Marx was attempting his famous reversal of Hegel's idealism, Hegel having mistaken the Idea, thought, logic, appropriation, or in our terms, representation—that is, the projection of the way the human mind works—for the social and historical reality upon which it works. We can but struggle with the various forms of appropriation, representation, by identifying the characteristic dislocations between representation and the represented, between the sign and its supposed referents, between language and meaning in thought, that is, in theoretical, speculative work, as in other forms of representation, artistic, religious, practical. Is this not another face of modernism? Fetishizing "theory" or even "theories" is precisely to renege on what most of the theories being used have in common: a typically modernist self-reflective awareness of the need to specify what is speculative mental analysis, and what is its thereby constructed object as different from that which both claim to represent. The developments within analysis of the history of art using such acute self-criticism represent a necessary moment of intellectual self-consciousness. But if "theory" comes to authorize the uncritical use of selected theories, without any sense of the political, the historical, and the ideological, then we have fallen away from the tension Marx identified for himself between mental speculation and the concrete, back, as Freud suspected, into religion: orthodoxy, canonicity, idealism, fantasy.

"Art History and Its Theories" suggests two discrete entities and means that the debate can only take place within the field defined by an—as yet—unquestioned notion of the given identity of something called Art History (which is, of course, only the cumulative effect of all the concrete practices in colleges, museums, and publishing houses). It already exists and these "theories" are foreign imports, by

definition alien. Thus, a fanastic xenophobia is operative before we even begin. What has happened historically in the last forty years has been the resumption, after a thaw in the freezing blast of Cold War ideologies, of the intellectual movements of modernity: engagements with language, meaning, subjectivity, identity, all framed within the terms of engagement created by the global consolidation of Western industrial capitalism, its contradictory inner forces, and those which it generated to oppose it: reformist, radical, revolutionary. Art history seems so little to take its own subject, culture, seriously that it fails to see itself as a player in this historical field, a reflexive response to modernity with its cultures of self-definition and self-mystification, one of what Michel Foucault named the "sciences of Man" which would invent, and then preside over the demise of, this curious fiction.

Art History is at last becoming critically modernist. Modernist painting echoes modernist linguistics in the search for the fundamental structure of its own practice. "A painting is a flat surface covered with marks and colors" is a statement of comparable order (if not of comparable sophistication) to Ferdinand de Saussure's interrogation of language concluding that its basic unit is the sign, composed of signifier and signified combined according to relations of difference to produce meaning. Deconstruction is the logical extension of that same question: it is, culturally speaking, but another, extended and philosophically formulated moment of modernism tracking its own contradictions.[24] Questions of social identity combined with interrogations into the nature of "Man" via positivist science produce another moment of structuralist attention—psychoanalysis—painfully forged with an almost premodern science, but retrieved and revised, later in this century, through the prism of the linguistics of Saussure, Freud's contemporary. Thus, if we think this matter through both thematically (that is, what these practices are theorizing: language, the unconscious, meaning) and historically, in terms of the histories of modernity and modernism, rather than through the idealist abstraction created by talking about "theory," we find ourselves confronted, as cultural historians, with a complex set of conjunctions—and disjunctures—which contemporary interest in the problematics proposed by the early moderns like Freud and Saussure are helping us to explore.

By the same turn to history, we find another face of modernity to set in this modernist conjunction: feminism, and we find, too, a tighter correlation between women in revolt—the politicization of sexual difference—and the radical retheorization of the human identity as split—conscious/unconscious. Freud's transition from the legacies of Charcot and nineteenth-century energistic neurology was made through attention to the words and signs of young women in profound psychic distress as daughters of the emerging bourgeois patriarchies. Deciphering a semiotics of the displaced boldily symptom in what is known as conversion hysteria, Freud began to imagine another scene and sense other economies than the energy flows he inherited from positivist, indeed virtually capitalist theories of the organism with which he had been trained in nineteenth-century schools of medicine. Through reading the stories told by the bodies of women, Freud came upon what Berthe Pappenheim dubbed "the talking cure": a semiotics of the unconscious. Feminism—as the visible, political, and intellectual outbreak of revolt against the triadic authority of a patriarchal State, Family, and Church—is not a novel intrusion created only since the 1960s, but the resumed engagement with an interrupted project of modernizing sexual difference. The repression of history and of the determining pressures of social practices on the development of the major theoretical projects of the twentieth century alone allows for the present confusion about "art history and theory," about the effaced relations between the political and the cultural.

The debates and conflicts that currently define the field of cultural analysis and history we call art history cannot be adequately negotiated through the abstraction "Art History and Its Theories." The situation in which we are at present requires a historical analysis and beyond that, an ideological reading of how what anyone of us thinks or theorizes arises within a social formation to produce what Roland Barthes redefined the cumbersome Marxist notion of ideology as: myth. No theory will protect us against our own mythologizing tendencies. For the former is often the intellectual face of the latter. But a practice, committed to critical self-analysis and to the necessary tension between what the mind invents in the way it thinks and the political effects of the logical structures we produce for representing the concrete, social world and analyzing historically those representations, such a practice may get us somewhere. But then, we will need other insights into the ways in which we cannot ultimately trust what we think we are doing. If at one level, we are determined "elsewhere"and "otherwise" by a social as well as a personal unconscious—social relations and its determinations producing in ideology what Althusser called a specific form of social unconsciousness, named consciousness—then we need also to note Freud's formulation of the profound roles of fantasy and desire, identification and self-delusion in what we—the connoisseurs/art historians—do. The self-reflexivity of modernity is as symptomatic in the arena of intellectual activity as in its cultural forms. An engagement with that legacy in the tense interaction between Marx, Freud, and Saussure—theorizations of the social, of the historical, of the ideological, of the textual, of the sign, and of the subject—is only a matter of art history moving into its own modernity and out of the nineteenth-century intellectual traditions in which it was initially forged. It is not a tension between art history and its theories, but a situation in which art-historical practices are the symptomatic site of the

22. For a discussion of this tendency, see Griselda Pollock, "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories," *Genders*, XVII, 1993, 97–120, reprinted in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, London, forthcoming.

23. Karl Marx, "Introduction," *Grundrisse* (Foundations of the critique of political economy), trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth, 1973, 101–2.

24. I am relying on Zygmunt Bauman's definition of postmodernity as a moment at which the contradictions of modernity have become self-evident. Thus, the poststructuralisms and postmodernism are not supersessions of their predecessors, but the moment of a critical, and potentially political, self-consciousness. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London, 1993, passim.

continuing historical conflict within modernity between the forces of its own self-criticism and those that would wish it to remain the undisturbed terrain of unnamed Oedipal fantasies, rivalries, and archaic pleasures of narcissism. These Freud identified with the death drive. Such resistance may, therefore, be read as art history's death wish. Others—like feminists—permit themselves different desires, by admitting to the role of desire in the production of cultural forms and in their viewers, readers, and users. In the words of Adrienne Rich quoted above, at issue is not simply a chapter in new cultural history. It is a matter of life and death, for re-viewing the histories of the histories of culture is not a polite debate about "Art History and Its Theories," but a political act of survival.

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Theories of Reference

Christopher S. Wood

What we have mostly come to mean by "theory" is an attitude of ironic doubt toward any truth claims made by a language or a representational system. This skepticism has been learned, in part, from aesthetic texts. Aesthetic texts are unusually dense clusters of signification where staged contradictions among messages dramatize the treachery of all representation. In our intellectual culture, "theory" seems to thrive in proportion to proximity to such texts. "Theory" has also acted as a powerful lever, shunting entire disciplines away from the study of reference, that is, the capacity of a language to point at a real object or event; and instead toward the study of signification, that is, the property simply of making sense. Here it may help to introduce the distinction drawn by analytic philosophy between an "extensional" and an "intensional" semantics. An example of an expression that has intension but no extension is "the very first landscape Dürer ever drew"—the phrase makes sense but we are not certain what object it refers to. Another such phrase is "the meaning of Cézanne's *Card Players.*" Other expressions, supposedly, make precise reference to things in the world. In the humanistic disciplines, however, "theoretical" skepticism has nurtured the extreme belief, derived from idealist epistemology, that signification is the only reality available to us: the belief, in other words, that no expression can ever be *more* than intensional.

In this sense, art history has always been strongly "theoretical." Images are insecurely hooked to reality. Unlike language, images do not formulate expressions by means of a system of oppositions within a stable structure. Indeed, some art historians believe that images fail altogether to signify and so will not even yield to an intensional semantics, let alone to a historicist hermeneutics with extensional ambitions. Because it refuses to deliver precise meanings, the image (even the nonaesthetic image) has become the emblem of the aesthetic text in general. The use of eidetic metaphors in poetics attests to this (figure of speech, imagery); so too does the use of the generic word "art" as a shorthand for the plastic arts.

Art historians hesitate to submit visual texts to the reading strategies developed by ordinary historians for their own less charismatic documents. Art historians mistrust causal or circumstantial explanations of the genesis of their texts, and disdain any coarse assumptions about what an image might represent. Because they are so protective of the intensionality of the work of art, art historians tend to clear room within their writing for subjective, normative, and critical responses. From the point of view of, say, an economic historian, even the most buttoned-down art history will echo annoyingly the elliptical cinquecento "conversation," the knowing prattle of Salon journalism, or the turgid Victorian appreciative essay.

Traditionally, "theoretical" skepticism about the extension of works of art has been coupled with a taste for exceedingly precise description and taxonomy of those works. Art-historical scholarship often seems little more than an amplification of the philological and archaeological disciplines of epigraphy, numismatics, *Quellenkunde*, and folk-

lore. Iconography itself retains some of the flavor of an auxiliary discipline. Thus it is no wonder that the peculiar maneuver of the discipline, and its most distinctive accomplishment, is connoisseurship. Connoisseurship marries a philological appetite for precision to an extreme epistemological fastidiousness. Connoisseurship worships the incongruity between the signifying structures of the image and the world of objects and events outside the frame. It avoids making any uncouth statements about what the image means. Instead, connoisseurship is content to point out the family resemblances among images. The connoisseur will at most offer aphoristic or lyrical phrases as the only possible rejoinders to the image. Connoisseurship is sometimes too squeamish to follow the graphic trace back to a living, thinking, intending mind; it suffices to attach the trace to a name. Connoisseurship thus carries semiotic idealism to an extreme of nominalism.

So art history is most "theoretical" at its extremes, the extremes of aestheticism and empiricism. There is nothing more theoretically respectable than treating the image as a nonsignifying entity (for example, an altarpiece considered as the end product of a collaborative process of fund raising, consultation, carpentering, and painting), or as an entity with an agreed-upon meaning that gets attached to a new signified, thus becoming a signifier in its own right, within a larger system of meaning (the altarpiece considered as the public emblem of the munificence, piety, or good taste of whoever paid for it). In this way no unwarranted statements are made about what is signified by the representational apparatus at work *within* the image. Patronage studies and reception history all commonly perform such a bracketing, as does connoisseurship. It is the very tactic—unexceptional and unexceptionable—employed by a religious historian who studies the fortunes of a particular eschatological doctrine without ever interrogating the truth value of that doctrine. Despite the soundness of the tactic, many art historians believe empirical method to have been refuted or superannuated by "theory." Empirical method, which is based on accumulation of evidence, inductive reasoning, and probability, is actually noncompetitive with theoretical skepticism. Empirical method was devised precisely to minimize credulous and slipshod assumptions about representation and meaning.

Early on it was recognized that the conventionality of visual representation—the same conventionality that seemed to lock the image into an intensional semantics—could also serve as the foundation for a social history of images. This apparent paradox was the mainspring of the historically ambitious formalisms of the early twentieth century. Neo-Kantian art criticism of the late nineteenth century—the writings of Konrad Fiedler, for instance—had convinced many scholars that the image gave no trustworthy access to real objects and events. But clearly the image *was* linked to other representations, and not only visual and linguistic representations, but also representations in the widest sense, throughout the society and the culture. All these representations were governed by a common repertoire of conventions.

The insight into the sociality of vision bloomed into the grandiose contextualisms of the 1910s and 1920s, some highly theorized, some less so: the "Expressionist" art history of Fritz Burger or Max Dvořák; the imaginative Marxism of the Hungarians Arnold Hauser and Frederick Antal; Erwin Panofsky in his essay "Perspective as Symbolic Form"; the so-called *Strukturanalyse* developed by Otto Pächt, Hans Sedlmayr, and Guido Kaschnitz-Weinberg, the most zealous disciples of Aloïs Riegl. These art histories tried to coordinate the content of the aesthetic text with real phenomena and conditions, not by some limpid, analogic correspondence between text and world, but according to complex representational models provided by the aesthetic text itself. The key was to treat the objects and events of the world as if they, too, were texts to be interpreted. The work of art was then revealed to stand in certain allegorical or generally figural relationships to those other texts. Works of art emerged, finally, not as mere registrations of reality, but as a reality in their own right, capable of working feedback effects upon politics, ideology, and even sensory perception.

It is easy to see that these "figural" contextualisms are not so different from our own late twentieth-century contextualisms, no less heady and precarious. The allegorizing or poeticizing mode of doing history is common to a broad range of contemporary practices, including some Foucauldian and "New Historicist" art histories, Cultural Studies, and much British and German Marxist art history. Figural contextualisms solve art history's "theoretical" problem by deriving their epistemologies from the image itself, or ultimately from language. What distinguishes our own versions of this practice is a familiarity with ever more nuanced and flexible models of representation. Terms such as intertextuality, *mise en abyme*, appropriation, and colonization, adapted from semiotically based poetics or discourse-analysis, are now routinely used in historical writing.

Figural contextualism works best in the field of modern Western art, where the perspectival distortion of temporal and cultural proximity favors allegorical modes of writing. But a method really gets its mettle tested in the study of non-Western and pre-Romantic art. For many who work in these fields, the results of the figural contextualisms are unsatisfying, for the disarmingly simple reason (which any semiotician would concede) that extension to reality is not achieved. In other words, it is hard to tell which figurations are true and which are false. It is a discouraging fact that figural contextualism, because it is rooted in idealist epistemology, today no less than in 1910, does not command much respect from scholarly disciplines beyond the hard-core humanities.

Empiricist-aestheticist art history, then, produces good but limited results because it delicately ignores the representational mechanisms at work within the image. And the semiotic approach either is satisfied to interpret the image ahistorically, or attempts a historicization that semiotics can never deliver.

It is therefore not surprising that some art historians have lost patience with the fastidiousness of "theory," whether in its more traditional aestheticist guise, or in its current incarnation as semiotic idealism. They are ready to argue

that the image, so far from merely signifying, or even not signifying at all, can actually be used to *refer* to the world. Some claim that the image refers more effectively and more dramatically than words ever can. Others believe that the image, as a representation with material substance, inflicts uncoded effects on its material beholders, effects that semiotics cannot account for. In sum, many art historians are unwilling to quarantine the image within an intensional semantics.

To refer is to point at the world, perhaps with an index finger or with the slide lecturer's thin red beam, but more commonly with statements, terms, names, descriptions, or images. Portraits, effigies, maps, botanical illustrations, and religious icons (provided that one believes in the existence of the sacred personage portrayed) are all examples of extensional uses of images. When images are used in this way, they do not merely signify; they also mention real objects in the world. A society may agree on a standard formula for making such referential images. This opens the *practice* of referring to semiotic analysis. But the precision of the particular reference, or its success in singling out the correct object in the world, is not arbitrary.

The precision of an image's reference is in part a technological matter. An assemblage of surrogate stimuli can make beholders believe in a reality "behind" a representation almost as firmly as they believe in their own perceptions, although it is true that not all referential usages require such an assemblage. To the extent that the image is a product of technology, its form is governed by matter and nature, and not only by conventional agreement.

Finally, images are material samples. They do not merely stand for an absent world, as linguistic signs do. They are actual physical fragments, visitants, from that world. Images thus partially re-create their own original, historical performance. They do not stand in the same pressing need of contextualization that a linguistic utterance does.

Images—including works of art—provoke desire, awe, confusion. Images provide information. Such functions are not so easily demystified by critical analysis. These functions are to blame for art history's permanently "unfulfilled" relationship to theory. But they have also been the most pointed instigation to the project of a cultural history built on images. It was these more-than-semiotic functions of the image that gave the discipline of art history the great prestige it enjoyed from about 1915 to 1930. In those years art history seemed to mark the crossroads between anthropology, the history of religion, social history, psychology, and the history of ideas.

Early attempts to resist the total semioticization of the image were clumsy. Nineteenth-century "empathy" theory, for example, tried to account for the capacity of images to stimulate certain psycho-physical responses in beholders. Obviously images do such things, and there is little that is semiotic about it. The "content" of the visual stimulus is only partially governed by a conventional code. But knowledge about such somatic processes was completely inadequate, and still is. There is no physiology of aesthetics.

Empathy theory did contribute to one very extraordinary art-historical model: Aby Warburg's "iconology." Influenced by the theories of Friedrich Vischer and Robert Vischer and by Darwin's writings on the expression of emotions, Warburg developed a concept of the symbol that would bridge the phenomenal world and the mind, a kind of scientifically refurbished avatar of the Romantic symbol. Warburg's symbol is never quite reduced to a coded vehicle for content because it retains a "live" connection to passion and fear. The symbol infiltrates art not only in the obvious way—in the cult image—but also in secular portraits, emblems of political power, cosmological imagery, and crisis zones such as the early Renaissance rapprochements with antique form. In our own time, the Romantic symbol has been more or less banished by the idea of allegory. Perhaps its last epiphany was in Jean-François Lyotard's *Discours, figure* (1971), which offered "figurality" as a mode of permanent resistance to discourse's regime, resistance waged precisely by the mute operations of designation and tropological deformation.

Phenomenological thought, meanwhile, envisions what might be called a "presemiotic" art history. Phenomenology seeks to make contact with an irreducible ground of objecthood behind the sign. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, rebelled against the neo-Kantian acceptance of mediation between subject and object, whether by signs or by the visual metaphors employed by art historians ("form," or "symbolic form"). Henri Maldiney, another French phenomenologist who writes on Cézanne, accuses semioticians of using the code as an "alibi," as if he cannot believe that they really care so little about the making of aesthetic texts and the mysteries of figuration.

Another line of interpretation that tries to burst the boundaries of semiotics, and so appeals to many who still believe in the "truth" of the work of art, is the psychoanalytic. An example of such an interpretation is Julia Kristeva's essay "Giotto's Joy" (published in *Calligram*, edited by Norman Bryson, Cambridge, 1988), which contends that painted color, because it is linked by contiguity to perceived objects in the world, can serve within a system of representation as a trace of various excessive and physiologically supported drives that perpetually escape representation. Kristeva goes on to argue that color in Western painting, at the moment when painting was extricating itself from the medieval system, became the locus of the self's reconstitution against the coded, nomothetic Christian narrative of transcendence.

In our own time, the most characteristic symptom of uneasiness with the semiotic model is perhaps the concept of indexicality. Indices in language, which are also called shifters or deictic markers, are words whose content is determined by the proximity of actual people and things, or of points in space-time, in other words by the particular circumstances of a linguistic utterance. Personal or demonstrative pronouns, for example, are shifters. This concept has been adapted with considerable success to pictures, even though a picture can only metaphorically be called an utterance. The index in the picture is the point where signification breaks down and the picture is connected to the moment that produced it. Recent work that avails itself of this concept has dealt with self-portraits (here laying claim to territory that might otherwise be conceded to phenomeno-

logical art history); the technology and rhetoric of linear perspective; the gaze; and subject-enunciation.

Shifters are often discussed alongside true indices, which are objects that point to the existence of other objects or prior events because they were physically caused by those objects or events. The connection between an index and its cause is established by inferential reasoning. The index then becomes a piece of *evidence*. Indexical elements in an image—for instance, deposits of ink or pigment or the scars left by a chisel—can be used as evidence for all sorts of things, including the circumstances of the image's fabrication. An image dominated by indexical elements, like a photograph, can even be used in its entirety as an index of reality.

The semiotician Charles Peirce argued that an index is also a species of sign. But it is not clear that he was right. A sign, properly, is a manipulation of an agreed-upon code. Neither the content of the sign nor its status as a sign can be contingent upon the factual existence of a referent in the world. Of course, any indexical image or indexical component of an image can be made to function as a sign. But that function is supererogatory to its identity as something caused by something else. Nevertheless, Peirce's effort to recuperate the index for semiotics is often adduced by art historians as if it were uncontested. Many supposed analyses of indexicality in art are really no more than semiotic analyses of signs of indexicality, that is, signs that signify pointing or contiguity—for example, the rhetorical tropes of apostrophe or metonymy. Contrariwise, some empiricists are beginning to call their bits of evidence "indices," as if the semiotic-sounding terminology could make empirical method respectable again.

The index is thus an amphibious term that is used, not quite honorably, to cover both signs and evidence at once. If you wish to backtrack from the index to the existence of an actual object (reversing the causality, as it were), then you are dealing with evidence. If you are uninterested in the existence of the object that the index indicates, then you are dealing with a sign—and from the point of view of the semiotician, a sign no less conventional (although much less arbitrary) than a linguistic sign.

The currency of the parasemiotic concept of indexicality is evidently an effect of the turbulence generated by recent attempts to "denature" all the old discourses of power, gender, and representation. Difference used to be seen as the product of both nature and convention. The shock of the recent abolition of nature has produced a recoil in the general direction of materiality, facture, the body, desire, and perhaps as well toward some reconciliation between intension and extension in art-historical interpretation. The index may prove a mediator in this affair.

Many scholars are disappointed by the results of social art history and cultural history. But it is not the case that these projects have faltered because they are "politically" driven, as we so often hear. Cultural Studies and Foucauldian discourse-analysis are brought down neither by their partisanship nor by their moralism. When the contextualisms fall, it is because they have so little extension, or truth-value. Right now, art history operates with maximum theoretical integrity when it verges toward the extremes of empiricism and aestheticism: the truth of the fact, the truth of the work of art. Clearly, truth is a little more elusive once you venture into the wide district between these extremes, which is where most people want to be. But if art history is to regain some of the interdisciplinary prestige it had earlier in the century, it has to keep working this territory, and without abandoning theory. The way to do this is to worry again about all the things images do other than signify.

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