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Virtual (Art) History

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine les liens fondamentaux que l'histoire de l'art entretient avec la modernité dont la discipline a participé à l'élaboration et contribue encore aujourd'hui au maintien. La réalité virtuelle mise en place par la modernité consiste en une immense reconfiguration du temps et de la mémoire adoptant la perspective, et devant servir les intérêts, des états-nations de l'Europe. L'idée de l'art et le besoin d'en retracer l'histoire sont apparus ensemble; ils ont eu comme fonction de baliser, par objets interposés, la trajectoire et l'accomplissement de sujets humains (entendre européens, blancs et mâles). Le dispositif des grandes expositions universelles, mises en scènes spectaculaires de l'appropriation impérialiste des cultures de tous les peuples du globe, n'est pas étranger aux procédés de l'histoire de l'art. Celle-ci doit au développement de la photographie d'avoir aménagé son propre site virtuel d'exposition, gigantesque musée imaginaire (dont les musées existants réalisent en partie le projet) qu'elle réorganise à l'infini sans que soient vraiment remis en cause la visée et la fonction du système. L'histoire de l'art demeure liée à un modernisme raciste et phallocentrique, et ceci malgré les revendications de tous les postmodernismes critiques.

Virtual (Art) History[1]

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Résumé

Cet article examine les liens fondamentaux que l'histoire de l'art entretient avec la modernité dont la discipline a participé à l'élaboration et contribue encore aujourd'hui au maintien. La réalité virtuelle mise en place par la modernité consiste en une immense reconfiguration du temps et de la mémoire adoptant la perspective, et devant servir les intérêts, des états-nations de l'Europe. L'idée de l'art et le besoin d'en retracer l'histoire sont apparus ensemble; ils ont eu comme fonction de baliser, par objets interposés, la trajectoire et l'accomplissement de sujets humains (entendre européens, blancs et mâles). Le dispositif des grandes expositions universelles, mises en scènes spectaculaires de l'appropriation impérialiste des cultures de tous les peuples du globe, n'est pas étranger aux procédés de l'histoire de l'art. Celle-ci doit au développement de la photographie d'avoir aménagé son propre site virtuel d'exposition, gigantesque musée imaginaire (dont les musées existants réalisent en partie le projet) qu'elle réorganise à l'infini sans que soient vraiment remis en cause la visée et la fonction du système. L'histoire de l'art demeure liée à un modernisme raciste et phallocentrique, et ceci malgré les revendications de tous les postmodernismes critiques.

Comprehending art history's past is a prerequisite to productively imagining its possible futures, should it have any. So much would seem obvious. But to do so effectively would mean at the very least abandoning some of our comfortable academic habits of viewing art history's history as simply a history of ideas about art, or as genealogies of European males who had ideas about art and its so-called life and so-called history or as the evolution of increasingly refined protocols of interpreting objects and their histories and their makers – from marxism to feminism, or from formalism and historicism to deconstruction. Art history was a complex and internally conflicted enterprise throughout its two-century-long professional history. Since its beginnings, it has been deeply invested in the fabrication and maintenance of modernity – which is what, in fact, it was designed to do.

At the same time, in comprehending art history as a supremely modernist enterprise, it is essential that we turn down the volume of all the journalistic chatter noisily celebrating or denigrating one or another form of "new" or "post"modernist art historical practice: millennialist postmodernisms, after all, have always been one of modernity's favourite masquerades. In my view, it is necessary to think about the practice of art history in fundamentally different ways if we are to go on thinking about it seriously at all.

Despite its hard-won institutional status and its international professional prestige in the contemporary world, art history was never an autonomous discipline or a coherent means of knowledge-production unto itself. If we isolate it from the broader domain of practices within which it was designed to operate, art history makes little historical, theoretical, psychological, social, ethical or political sense on its own. Or rather, the sense it makes is akin to that of a virtual reality machine.

Understanding the larger social institution of *modernity* – and modernity's core problematic, namely the orchestration of disciplined and predictable relations between subjects and objects grounded in a theory of representational adequacy – is a crucial and indispensible prerequisite to any attempt to appreciate what art historical practices were all about, or where they might be leading. I want to spend my time here briefly (and of course very roughly) sketching out some of what is implied in what I've just been saying.

From their beginnings in the European Enlightenment, what we distinguish today as art history, aesthetics and museology were integral components of a mosaic of evolving social practices concerned above all with reconfiguring time and memory – that is, with dis-membering the past so as to re-member it, to re-assemble it, in new ways. These were practices which in concert worked to make versions of the past synoptically visible so that they might function in and upon the present, and so that the present might be seen to be the demonstrable *product* of a specifically articulated and re-presented (re-membered) past. These historical constructions could then serve as guides to individual and collective futures projected as fulfillments or realizations of unfinished histories; some ongoing ethnic or ethical teleology. The past so staged was framed as an object of historical and genealogical *desire* in its own right, (con)figured as that from which properly socialized national subjects – citizens – might desire descent, and learn thereby to delineate the horizons of their identities, and the trajectories of their hopes for the future.

As a regime of social discipline, art history shared with museology a dedication to fabricating elaborate typologies of "specimens" of aesthetic activity, connected by branching episodic chains of causality and influence over time and space and across the kaleidoscope of cultures, which could thereby be linked together as close or distant in evolutionary and diffusionist ways. All of this immense genealogical labour on the part of generations of historians, critics, artists, connoisseurs, aesthetic philosophers, merchants, the designers of expositions, tourists and the heritage industry was in the service of assigning to each object a place, moment and address in the historical evolution of (what thereby became further instantiated as) the allegedly

pan-human phenomenon of "art" as an object worthy of critical, historical, scientific, psychological, philosophical and – by the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and North America – academic attention in its own right.

Like sex, art became in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the little secret to be uncovered about all peoples everywhere; an omnipresent, "universal" phenomenon linking the caves of Lascaux with the salons of Paris. A fictitious unity, of course; yet an immeasurably powerful and unique signifier and a universal signified.

Art did not precede art history like some phenomenon of nature discovered and then explained by science; it was rather its product. Art history, aesthetics, museology and art itself are historically co-constructed and co-determined social phenomena. Their joint historical mission was the *co-production of subjects and objects commensurate with each other and appropriate for the emergent nation-states of Europe and elsewhere.* This mission included the co-construction and naturalization of an entire domain of dyadic concepts resonating with and framing many facets of modern life. These commensurabilities have included forms of individuated subjectivity and objecthood that could themselves be cogently abstracted as *instruments* for speaking about all peoples and their cultural "products."

The possibility of a profession of art history presupposed the existence of an emergent collective political entity which represented versions of the subject or citizen writ large – namely, the modern nation-state. It was this sociopolitical entity – characterized by imaginary and idealized uniformities of language, material culture, politics, social morality and religion – that art history was, after all, designed to serve. The nineteenth century's need to instantiate a scientific object of aesthetic attention contributed substantially to the institutionalization of exegetical or interpretive professions which could serve the needs of modern nation-statism and its inherent complement, imperialism, in cogent and convincing ways. In addition to defining and supporting complementary concepts of individualist subjectivity and nationality, art history worked to instantiate and naturalize the various inflections of essentialism underlying the complementary and co-constructed grand modernist fictions of ethnicity, race and gender.

The *art* of art history is itself an eighteenth-century invention, and the complementary (civilized) foil to its implicit obverse, that great enigma of the Enlightenment, the (uncivilized) *fetish*. It was a powerful instrument for legitimizing the belief that what you see in what you make is an image, reflection, representation or expression of what you are in some deep way. At the same time, it provided a powerful instrument for making palpable the proposition that Europe was the brain of the Earth's body, and that all outside the edifice of Europe was its prologue. Of course that external prologue, that Other, was the necessary support and defining instance of what constituted the presence, the modernity of Europe.

Fetishism was constructed as the uncivilized anterior to the disinterestedness of European aestheticism. They imply each other and cannot be understood in isolation from each other; their dyadic complementarity has served as the skeletal support of all that art history has been for the past 200 years. If sexuality was privileged by European society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the essence of the self, the innermost truth of one's personality, art came to be its civilized and complementary obverse; the very mark of civilization. The modern(ist) construction of sexuality and of the aesthetic, art, coincided with and is cut from the same cloth as imperialism and colonialism. Essentialist perspectives on either art or sex are always already racist.

The principal function of the series of interwoven practices (of which art history was a facet) has been *the fabrication of an historical past that could be effectively placed under systematic observation for use in staging and transforming the present.* Common to all of these modernist practices was a shared concern with spectacle, stagecraft and dramaturgy: with the locating and siting of what could be delineated as *objects* within material, discursive and virtual environments such that their relations amongst themselves and to their original circumstances of production and reception could be imagined – *envisioned* – in a cogent and useful manner: useful, that is, to the co-production of certain modes of civic subjectivity and responsibility. The problematics of historical causality, evidence, demonstration and proof constitute a rhetorical scaffolding of this matrix or network of social and epistemological technologies, of which art history is and always has been but one instrumental component or facet.

Essential to the articulation and justification of art history as a systematic human science in the nineteenth century was the construction of an indefinitely extendable *archive*, potentially coterminous, as it has since in fact become, with the material culture of all human societies. Within this vast imaginary museum (of which all museums are self-identified fragments) every possible object of attention might find its proper place relative to all others. Every item might thereby be sited (and cited) as referencing or indexing another or others on multiple horizons of useful association. The resultant set of objects (such as that displayed in any museum) is sustained by the willed fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent "representational" universe, as signs and surrogates of their authors (individuals, nations or races).

Needless to say, all this was made feasible by the invention of photography, a technology equally enabling of art history's fraternal (and normally forgotten) siblings, anthropology and ethnology. It was photography which in a very real sense made

it possible to *think art historically* – to actually put Winckelmann, Kant and Hegel into high gear, as it were, to delineate the stagecraft of an academic "science" – and thus, and most crucially, to systematically envision and discursively field objects as *signs*. The impact of photography on determining the future course of the discipline of art history was as fundamental as Marconi's invention of the wireless radio six decades later in envisioning the concept of arbitrariness in language – which, as linguists of the 1890s very quickly and clearly saw, paved the way for a new delineation of the key concepts of modern linguistics.

A primary motivation for this massive and ongoing *archival labour* was the assembly of material *evidence* and justification for the construction of historical narratives of social, cultural, national, racial or ethnic identity and development. Art history was (and remains) a key rhetorical instrument for giving voice to that archive, providing access routes into it for a wide range of potential users, both lay and professional. Art history became one of several *arts* of that house of historicist memory, evolving as a theory of the museological archive; a theory, that is to say, of the institution, of the instituting, of archivable events (a world wide web navigator, so to speak, but with an attitude).

It may also be useful to consider the emerging professional discourse of art history in its instrumental relationships with nineteenth-century colonialist and imperialist expositions and fairs in order to understand the rhetorical, architectonic and spatio-temporal mechanisms whereby art history came to be successfully "universalized" in the twentieth century. Viewed from one perspective, the emergent discipline might be comprehended as a holographic projection of expositionary order. While this is an issue which time prohibits from expanding upon here, I would like to make one observation.

The Paris Exposition of 1900 was organized spatially in such a manner that the "palaces" of two major French colonies, Tunisia and Algeria, were placed between the Trocadero Palace and the Eiffel Tower. Looking from the airborne eye of the Tower toward the Trocadero, you would see the colonial buildings embraced by the arms of the "neo-islamic" facade of the Trocadero: the colonies embraced, as it were, in the nurturing and protective arms of the French nation, whose own identity is seen as assimilating and validating what was symbolized by the colonial edifices. But looking the other way, from the Trocadero, you would see the gigantic technological feat of modern French engineering dwarfing all colonial edifices like a colossus; putting things (back) in a proper perspective.

This extraordinary image[2] might be taken as a poignant emblem of what modernist art history sought to accomplish, and a metaphor for how it functions. From a Eurocentric point of view, art history appears to be a universal science, systematically discovering and explicating specimens of a seemingly universal human phenomenon – "art" – the "art" of all peoples, all arranged relative to each other as at a universal exposition, with each allotted its proper historical and geographical space: representatives in a congress of equals.

But if you shift your stance just a bit, it becomes apparent that this virtual museum has a built-in narrative structure: all its spaces lead to a European present; an apex or observation point from which and only from which all the rest is seen to make evolutionary sense. European aesthetics becomes the self-designated Cartesian zero-point or unmarked centre around which the entire virtual edifice is organized, and toward which it aspires.

The very fabric of this archive is woven out of European Enlightenment materials, which aimed at developing a universal language of description and classification whereby all differences could be reduced to the appearance of transformations out of some common human essence. And of course the notion of "art" was central to this entire project of intertranslatability and control.

Grounded upon the metaphoric, metonymic and anaphoric associations that might be mapped amongst its incorporated specimens, the disciplinary archive was no passive storehouse, nor was it simply a virtual museum; it was rather (in tandem with actual museums themselves) a critical artifact, a mode of critique, in its own right; a dynamic instrument for calibrating and accounting for variation in continuity and continuities in variation and difference. The technology of the art historical archive was (and remains) indispensible to the social and political formation of the modern nation-state and to its various legitimizing paradigms of ethnic autochthony, cultural uniqueness or social, technological and ethical progress relative to real or imagined Others.

These enterprises of romantic nationalism required a belief that the products of an individual, studio, nation, ethnic group, class, gender or race should share certain demonstrably common, consistent and unique properties of form or principles of formation. Correlative to this was a temporal notion of the (art) historical "period" marked by comparable homologies of style, thematic preoccupation or manufacture. Such idealist, essentialist, racist and historicist assumptions which were so explicit in our field in its origins still comprise the subtext of contemporary practice, underlying many otherwise distinct or opposed theoretical and methodological perspectives, from connoisseurship to marxism to feminism, or from iconography to semiology. Art history, in short, has never *not* been what would be called today racist. Whether *any* form of art historical practice could ever escape the racism and phallocentrism that are the very engines of its systemic practices remains a very large and open question, and I would value your perspectives on this problem.

As the rhetorical and theatrical branches of that larger and fuller social technology of modernity, art history and museology traditionally fabricated object-histories as surrogates for or simulacra of histories of persons, mentalities and peoples. These comprised narrative stagings which served to demonstrate and delineate significant aspects of the character, level of civilization or degree of social, cognitive or ethical advancement (or decline) of an individual, gender, race or nation. Art historical and museological objects have thus always been *object-lessons* of documentary importance in so far as they might be staged as cogent "evidence" of the past's causal relations to the present, enabling us also to articulate certain kinds of desirable relationships between ourselves and others. It is in this regard that the academic profession of art history should be seen as having served, in its heyday, as a very powerful effective modern(ist) *concordance* of politics, religion, ethics and aesthetics. Its heyday, perhaps, may be past, but its effective power, one should add, remains in several ways unabated: it is virtually impossible, at the end of the twentieth century, *not* to see a direct, causal and essential connection between an artifact and the moral character of its producer(s).

The broad amalgam of practices, professions and enterprises within which art history is functionally embedded, on which it is dependent, and without which it cannot be properly understood theoretically or historically, never fully achieved uniform *institutional* integration. An appreciation of this is in my view absolutely essential to understanding the history of art history. A close examination of the history of art-related professions of the past two centuries shows continually changing alliances and associations among history, practice, philosophy, criticism, trade, tourism, collecting and museology, with one or more in dominance or of greater social or intellectual prestige at a given time or in particular institutional or national settings.

This diversity and complexity is also manifest in the distinctly different ways in which art history was professionalized and academically institutionalized in different countries, both in Europe and elsewhere, and its shifting alliances with one or another discipline or profession. This fact has made the process of writing critical histories of the discipline very complex, for any such history is at base a function of where the historian takes up a stance: there are in point of fact multiply-valid genealogies – as there were various different Europes, depending upon whether one envisioned it from Paris, St Petersburg, Berlin, London or Rome.

In the long run, however, the very looseness of the overall epistemic matrix, the opportunistic adaptability of its component practices, and the refracted and reverberating echoes of one practice in another or others, have proven especially effective in *naturalizing* the very idea of "art" as a kind of innate "universal" human phenomenon and historical fact. This has served to legitimize even more powerfully *art's principal function for modernity as a powerful instrument, measure and frame for staging the social, cognitive and ethical teleologies of all peoples* – even, and most poignantly today, in the very hands of the colonized themselves. In point of fact, art history makes colonial subjects of us all.

Trying to imagine futures for art history inevitably evokes the basic paradoxes of history-writing itself as a peculiarly modernist practice – problems which we as art historians normally prefer to leave to others to deal with. Among these are the perennial conflicts between, on the one hand, the grand historicist narratives of Truth on the side of power, Right on the side of the victor, and Reason on the side of conformism, and on the other hand, the ambivalences, discontinuities and contradictions of individual remembrance and collective memories.[3] At the still centre of that maelstrom – itself a product of the inextricable interrelations of historiography and psychoanalysis, as the late Michel de Certeau so eloquently reminded us – at the centre of that storm was precisely what art history defined as its object domain: a *virtual space* populated by artifacts simultaneously historical and a-historical, documentary and monumental, semiotic and eucharistic, ethical and aesthetic, and never entirely reducible to the one or the other. It is precisely this *irreducibility* which renders the very idea of "art" for modernity so powerful, so seemingly natural, so apparently universal.

In fact, *the entire amalgam of practices of which art history is a facet – this grand epistemological technology – exists both* in *and* as *that virtual space opened up by the juxtaposition of history and memory*. No consideration of history can proceed productively without attending to the problem of memory formation and deformation, as well as to the multiplicities and contradictions that the very term "history" must necessarily evoke. Further progress in understanding art history's own story would also entail taking very seriously indeed the paradoxical nature of that *virtual object* – what I have called elsewhere its eucharistic object – that was the artifact of art history's purview – its "art" – so as to understand not least of all that paradox and enigma are historically palpable and materially effective forces in sustaining the illusions we love to love.

Art history's "objects" were *modernist instruments for thinking historically, for imag(in)ing a certain kind of historicity commensurate with the nationalist teleologies of European colonialism and imperialism*. An appreciation of the implications of this may begin to make it clear why it was that the academic institution has seemed for so long to be fixated upon the curious ideology of art for art's sake; *masquerading* as an *ars memorativa* seemingly dedicated to tracing with its pencil the shadow of its own pencil.

It may well be uncomfortable to admit that art history remains

an inherently racist and phallocentrist enterprise, or that our comforting views that the discipline has progressed and critically or theoretically refined itself over time may be illusory and that such illusions are artifacts of the discipline itself as a modernist technology in the first place. Given the ubiquity and extraordinary success everywhere in the world of the European social disciplines of art history, aesthetics and museology, it is unlikely that further refinements in our interpretations of "art" will have any effect on the systemic foundations of these practices. This much at least should have become clear in the labyrinth of theoretical and methodological debates we have wandered through over the past quarter-century. If their theoretical rationalities are the effects, not of reason itself, but of power, then adhering to remodelled art historical rationalities will solve nothing.

It has been argued that any practice of history-writing would be effective to the degree that it introduced greater dimensions and discontinuities into our very being, to the extent that it foregrounded the contradictions within all of our desires, and above all to the degree that it deprived us of the reassuring stability of the obstinacies of millennialism.[4]

I would add to this the obstinacies of *disciplinarity*, as well: effectively remembering what the millennialist discipline with the innocuous name of "the history of art" *did* may, in its own ironic way, and at the same time, require *forgetting* "art history."

Notes

1 This piece appeared originally as a paper read at the *colloque* "Pratiques d'histoire de l'art: des choix pour le XXIe siècle," 64e Congrès de l'ACFAS, Université McGill, Section *Histoire de l'art, esthétique et muséologie*, Montrèal, 13–17 mai, 1996.

2 I owe this image to a very fine paper by Zeynip Celik, "'Islamic' Architecture in French Colonial Discourse," presented at the 1996 UCLA Levi Della Vida Conference, Los Angeles, 11 May 1996.

3 Negar Mottahedeh, in an unpublished essay, September 1995.

4 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (1971), 145–72.