



1 Unknown photographer, *Maria Bueno*, c. 1962.

ART HISTORY: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON METHOD

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The historiography of art history has been a potent theme in the discourses of the discipline of the last thirty years. And the approaches and methods in the study of the visual are probably more varied, and more vigorously debated, than in any other area of historical enquiry. This is so much so that the interest in the practice and history of the history of art history has at times appeared to be equal to object-based study and it is arguable that this now forms part of the archive of the discipline. There is of course no doubt that since the inception of art history as a field of academic study, works of art have been 'read' in a variety of ways. These different modes of description and interpretation inscribe meaning in to art and it is here that art and its history are perhaps most intricately linked.

The interest in historiography and method is manifest in a broad spectrum of the literature of art history from the general introduction or survey to the highly focused academic monograph. At points art history and the history of art history become so closely intertwined as to be almost indistinguishable. This is evident for instance in surveys of art history that are at once general introductions which aim to explain what art is and how it has been written about.¹ These studies present overviews of the different ways art histories have been written, covering such large topics as Hegelianism, Marxism and post-colonialism as well as the influence of the work of individual historians. But a common theme in these analyses and explanations of art and its history is the effect that a chosen method of enquiry has on the objects themselves and on the subjects of art history. In other words the ways in which the methods used define the artwork. The study of the historiography of art history has also occasioned several anthologies of key writings taken from a broad historical sweep.² Here the authentic voices of art history whether it be Giorgio Vasari's biographical narratives, Jacob Burckhardt's historical observations, or Johann Joachim Winckelmann's reflections on the cultural context of art speak for themselves, albeit annotated and truncated by the deft hand of the volume editor. Needless to say, art historians have also added to this body of literature in the form of both collections of newly commissioned sets of essays and monographs.³ At least from Vasari, if not before, the concept of the artist as genius continues to be a mainstay of art historical enquiry. And the debates around authorship, authenticity and how biographies determine our understanding of the myth of the artist remain live. An equally important theme is the organization of symbolic form and the processes through which the visual

world has been, and continues to be, systematized and homogenized into a unified field of enquiry – art history – and the ways in which art can in fact resist these pressures. This line of enquiry follows the development of art history as an academic discipline in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the work of historians such as Panofsky, Warburg, Riegl and Benjamin through to the engagement with structuralist and post-structuralist thought.

The chapters in this volume aim to respond in a range of ways to these various patterns in and approaches to the discipline of art history as they are manifest across the scholarship of all periods over the last thirty years. There are points of contact and common themes across the chapters as they examine the impact and influence of a given approach on the formulation of histories of art alongside its intellectual consequences. A central concern in the volume is how these issues in turn raise questions to do with our preoccupation with authorship, authenticity and chronologically defined linear progression, all of which have informed the canon of art history but which may be only one way of looking at, analysing and historicizing art. Of particular interest is what is lost or left out through these methods of historical enquiry and the points of contact and convergence with other methodologies. In addition, the porosity between art history and other related disciplines is brought to the fore and in turn how the archive of the discipline has changed over time. We now see the link between cognate fields such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology and art history as a given, and a significant number of recently published studies of these trans-disciplinary trends confirm this.⁴ Together the chapters combine to present a cross-section of art history and offer timely new perspectives on method.

A central concern is the emergence of how other kinds of histories – social histories of art, feminist art history, queer art history – differ from and interact with the writing on art history at the moment when it emerged as a discipline during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specific attention is paid to the bias towards a male interpretation of the subject, which it is argued leaves its trace in feminist art history through the binary categories of gender. Our bodily experience of artworks and the effect this has on art history is also re-evaluated, and this takes us back to one of the fundamental art-historical problems, the complex business of turning visual phenomena into verbal history. The result of this process is the establishment of canonical subjects for art history and the notion of linear progression as these are placed in chronological order to provide stepping stones across the temporal spread of the discipline. Here the limits of chronology and with it our expectations of progress are reviewed.

The role of Germany as a locus for the beginnings of art history is also revisited, and the effects and reception of the intellectual diaspora that spread from there in the middle years of the twentieth century. The idea of the trans-disciplinary nature of art history is again a common theme across the chapters and this extends beyond art history's relationship to philosophy and sociology to investigate the ways the narratives of artists' lives become subjects of fiction, both literary and filmic, and finally how the intertwining of the biography of the historian and his/her subject object produces discourse.

In the opening chapter, Nick Chare works to destabilize the ways in which our categories and taxonomies of art are tacitly based on heterosexual discourse.

Gender is defined as a social construct – in this it is unlike sex, which is biologically determined – and the implications of this established position within art history are worked out for the discipline. The gendered nature of art-historical discourse is here undermined in order to disturb our habitual acceptance of male/female binaries. Chare demonstrates how the discourses of art history are often complicit with biological and philosophical ‘Old Master narratives’ of sexual difference, and explores the various ways this complicity has been challenged over the past thirty years. He considers how concepts of gender have enabled art historians to expose the ways in which both art and art history have contributed to the cultural construction of identity. This growing interest in sexuality has encouraged some art historians to displace the predominantly heterosexual framework that has characterized the discipline’s understanding of difference. Through his case studies Chare demonstrates how some of these gendered approaches to art history have proved problematic and may actually have inhibited our understanding of visual cultures of the past. For instance, the *Venus of Willendorf* is usually interpreted as a representation of a Mother Goddess, but Chare suggests that this relies upon a cognitive style that would have been alien to any prehistoric beholder. Chare argues that such an interpretation actually reveals more about the sexual politics of the late twentieth century than about any possible gender relations in the Upper Palaeolithic period. He goes on to consider the representation of sexual difference in art and how ideas about gender have historically been articulated and reproduced through specific media and techniques. There has been much scholarship on the ways in which both the spaces of production and reception and the subject matter of artworks at given historical moments have functioned to reinforce or subvert norms of femininity and masculinity, but less research has been devoted to how different media and techniques enact sexual difference. Chare shows how unstable these binary categories of male/female can be by examining the ways in which the gendering of the materials and modes of making art have contributed significantly to the construction or deconstruction of sexual difference.

The object-viewer relationship and the physicality of both the art work and onlooker is analysed in a very different way by Amanda Boetzkes. She moves our attention towards a consideration of the role of phenomenological interpretation in art history, specifically how one’s encounter with an artwork calls embodied experience into question. Particularly since the 1960s, when Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1959) had a substantial influence on artists, critics and art historians, the issue of embodiment has centred not purely on embodied perception, but specifically on the extent to which the spectator perceives from a state of quasi-immersion in the artwork. She investigates how our bodily experience in relation to the artwork can in fact operate to confirm and reproduce our expectations of it, and so produce a fiction of the object, providing distance rather than engagement with it. In this way the chapter calls into question our acceptance of phenomenological approaches in the study of artworks. Boetzkes argues that, as the validity and possibilities of phenomenology as an art-historical method are reconsidered, we must take on board the fact that not only are our interpretations of art informed by our embodied condition, but, even more strongly, that this condition exteriorizes the subject and denaturalizes our perspective rather than affirming it.

Using examples from contemporary art, postminimalist sculpture, and installation art, Boetzkes explores the ethical questions surrounding our phenomenological approach to art-historical interpretation. Through her investigation of the notions of embodiment, intentionality, and modes of confrontation, Boetzkes suggests that phenomenology not only mediates a trenchant understanding of the perceptual experience of the artwork, but that it is predicated on an acknowledgement of the resistance of art to interpretation. In this way, phenomenology demands a recognition of the ethical dimension of aesthetic experience. This ethical dimension is potentially of crucial importance to the writing of art history, as it calls into question a predetermined history of representation by shifting our focus to the immediacy of the work of art.

In Dan Karlholm's chapter, our understanding of chronology as a standard tool in the writing of Art Histories comes under scrutiny. Karlholm examines a widespread and influential art-historical genre, the survey text, and concentrates on how the 'contemporary' has been absorbed into this form of narrative since the early 1980s. He is mainly concerned with the uses of language and the problems of classification and periodization in the writing of these large-scale and broadly ranging art histories. Karlholm focuses on the accounts given in a series of survey texts of two conceptual artists, Joseph Beuys and Cindy Sherman, and forges links between contemporary art of recent decades and philosophical constructions of the contemporary in the nineteenth century. In this way Karlholm questions our established notions of chronology and sequence in art history. He proposes instead the idea of co-existing temporalities for art that run contrary to these accepted norms.

Karlholm's chapter opens up debate about the function of a genre which, by definition, presumes the existence of a continuing story of art that has a linear direction and no end point. At the crux of his argument is the theoretical understanding of art, prevalent in recent decades, that has privileged the context and institutions of art over the artwork and artist. This prompts Karlholm to question first of all how we should engage with this way of thinking about the art of the last thirty years. Secondly he asks what methods we should use to incorporate the notion of the contemporary into our chronological, object-based, histories.

Another aspect of how we write about art is examined in the concluding pages of Catherine M. Soussloff's chapter in which she reflects on the relationship between art history and visual studies. Soussloff concentrates on Michel Foucault, but shifts attention away from Foucault's acknowledged role as one of the founders of the field of visual studies to ask what happens if we consider him as an art historian. This question is explored with specific reference to the four essays Foucault wrote between the years 1965 and 1975, addressing the importance of high art, its history, and its episteme, through the medium of easel painting. Soussloff demonstrates how Foucault used painting to address technical and theoretical matters of significance to art history and theory. Many of the themes raised connect with the concerns of the chapters in this volume: for instance, the nature of the medium of painting, and with it the role of light, shade and colour; the meaning of representation and resemblance in Western art; the relationship between word and image; and the effects of photography on painting.

Soussloff goes on to argue that Foucault's choice of painting, rather than another medium, is significant in his exploration of its history, or, rather, in his own terms, its archaeology. For Foucault this archaeology of painting is not about

intentionality but is instead about the discursive practice that is embodied in techniques and effects. Foucault shared this understanding of the history of painting with his contemporaries, including Hubert Damisch, and the writing they produced differed significantly from the phenomenological approaches found in mid-twentieth-century writings on art by the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. While Foucault accepted the primacy of painting in the visual arts, as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre had, unlike them he turned to earlier, Renaissance theories of painting in rejecting a phenomenological approach.

Jeremy Tanner turns our attention to Karl Mannheim, as he says a somewhat forgotten figure by both sociologists and art historians. Mannheim's ambiguous role in the history of art history is outlined by Tanner. On the one hand, he has been characterized as a secondary player in the development of iconology and iconography for which Mannheim's contemporary Erwin Panofsky is better known. On the other hand, and less positively, Mannheim was the focus of both Karl Popper's and Ernst Gombrich's rage as an 'enemy of reason'. Tanner takes a more affirmative view of Mannheim and explores how he and Erwin Panofsky used Alois Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* as a common point of departure in the development of their theories of cultural appropriation. The very different readings and uses of Riegl by the two thinkers as they grappled with the problem of how to construct feasible histories of the visual is closely mapped by Tanner. He shows how the sociological appropriation and transformation of the concept of *Kunstwollen* was central to the development of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, and in particular to the analysis of 'styles of thought' in his classic study *Conservative Thought* (1927).

The journey that Tanner takes us on in his analysis of Mannheim passes through the early years of art history as an academic discipline in Germany during the opening decades of the twentieth century. The repositioning of Mannheim in the group of writers who set out the parameters of the discipline at this time allows Tanner to offer a new configuration of the relationships between them. In this way, connections we do not regularly make become apparent between Mannheim and, for instance, Walter Benjamin and Wilhelm Dilthey. And the resonance of Mannheim's thinking is traced forward by Tanner into the work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Baxandall. The academic diaspora occasioned by the rise of Nazism in Germany is also unravelled by Tanner, and here he makes particular reference to the limited reception of Mannheim's synthesis of sociology and art history as interpreted in the intellectual context of early post-war Britain.

The biographical trace receives very different treatment in H. Perry Chapman's consideration of three recent novels that fictionalize early modern Netherlandish painters and paintings. These are Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999); Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (1999) and Michael Frayn's *Headlong* (1999). Chapman argues that fiction about art elucidates a form of art history that runs in parallel with the more traditional loci of the academy and the museum, but which also rests outside these powerful and coercive institutions. This enables her to examine how such fictionalizations operate as mirrors to our own practices as art historians. The novels focus on paintings of life in ordinary domestic settings and use similar narrative techniques as artists such as Vermeer and Bruegel in order to make these everyday scenes appear extraordinary. Chapman argues that each of these books both exploits and challenges recent

trends in art-historical method. For instance Chevalier responds to the emphasis of the social history of art on economics and cultural context in preference to the artist. Vreeland and Frayn both take on board reception theory that privileges the viewer's response to the artwork and so moves attention away from the artist. Chapman uses this fact to critique the tendency in visual studies and material culture to downgrade the status of both artist and work. Through her discussion of art fiction she argues against this tendency, exploring the unfamiliar idea that, however determinedly we downplay the role of the artist as author/creator, images continue to have a vital impact on humankind.

The multifaceted nature of art history is explored further by Adrian Rifkin in a discussion which delves forcefully into the discontinuities and diversity of the discipline. Rifkin argues that the strength of art history is rooted in what he sees as its constitutive irrationality, precisely the quality in art that ultimately prompts us to speak about art, or to speak through and with it, and to desire art in the first place. For Rifkin, art history as an academic subject encompasses such a vast archive and broad spectrum of knowledge that it can sustain scholarship that ranges from Aby Warburg to Bernard Berenson, Griselda Pollock to Herbert Read. The relationship between these various modes of art history is complex and, he argues, sometimes unexpected. These considerations lead Rifkin to reflect on his own work, especially the notion of a finished piece of writing. For Rifkin, articulating the almost infinite possibilities of meaning and interpretation in art history helps him to understand the reasons why he can never think of a piece of work as complete and what this implies for the project of the discipline and for its capacity to help us understand and think about the world that art and its commentaries can offer us.

My ambition in this volume has been to try to refocus attention on contemporary views on method in a series of newly commissioned chapters. The range of subjects and the ways in which the authors chose to frame their arguments are representative of the breadth, complexity and ultimately the richness of the discipline. The format of the edited volume is also important here. Rather than trying to put together a monograph by many hands I instead wanted, in editing the volume, to explore and exploit the diversity of the subject matter, methods of writing, and ways of expressing the authorial voice possible in art history writing. In this way, *Contemporary Perspectives on Method* offers a picaresque journey through the discipline of art history, which I hope is as thought provoking as it is inconclusive.

Notes

A volume such as this is the product of the hard work of many for which it is easy for the editor to receive too much credit. First of all I would like to thank the David Peters Corbett for giving me the opportunity to return to *Art History* and guest edit this review of the discipline as it has evolved over the thirty years of the journal's existence. This would not have been possible without the contributors, all of whom stepped up to the plate to provide me with a fascinating set of chapters that are as intellectually rigorous as they are original and incisive. I am also grateful to my editorial assistant Karen Fielder whose organizational and technical skills have been invaluable assets to this project and to Sam Bibby for his help in preparing and designing both the journal and book versions of this volume. Any lapses and shortcomings in this collection remain my own responsibility.

- 1 See *inter alia* Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester, 2006, which surveys approaches from Hegel to post-colonialism again with an undergraduate audience in mind. Similarly, Vernon Hyde Minor, *Art History's History*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 2000, and Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*, Boulder, CO, 1996 are both aimed specifically at undergraduates in the United States. My own *Art History: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2004, attempts to explore thematically the different ways in which art has been written about, historicized and presented in galleries and exhibitions.
- 2 Eric Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, London, 1995; Steven Edwards, ed., *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, New Haven, CT and London, 1996.
- 3 See, for instance, Karen Lang, *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History*, Ithaca, NY, 2006; Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis, MN, 1997; Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven, CT and London, 1995; Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, eds, *The Subjects of Art and History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1998.
- 4 See, for instance, my book series 'New Interventions in Art History' that explicitly aims to explore the interaction between art history and other disciplines, and my complementary series 'Companions to Art History' and 'Anthologies in Art History', both of which aim to include historiographical and methodological aspects of the discipline. All of the above are published by Wiley-Blackwell.