



ART HISTORY, INTERRUPTED

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“After what is now more than a quarter of a century of disciplinary self-critique, why is it that we have been perennially unable to escape art historicism?”

Donald Preziosi, *Hearing the Unsaid: Art, Museology and the Composition of the Self*

This text discusses a mode of artistic and curatorial action that explicitly thematizes art history and its mechanisms of validation, its organization of disciplinary centers, frontiers and wastelands, its institutional limbs and props. I propose to think of the exhibition as a locus where two distinct ways of imagining the future converge and are tested against each other: art’s and art history’s ability to figure – or fabricate – the future. Seen from a conventional perspective, the new struggles for commensurability with the old, and the future occurs at the gates of the archive. Traditionally, the only thought of the future that art history could accommodate in its institutional identity was that of “more, better art,” barely obscuring the subsequent moment – and terminus point – when art ceases to be and the archive comes together, complete. What follows speculates on this endgame, and questions what it might mean for art to be understood and historicized *on its own terms*, as opposed to submitting to the secular theologism that art history preserves at its core – its Vasari complex.


According to the ways in which they frame their object of historical desire, there are three, theoretically coextensive modes of enunciation that perform or contest art history’s former authority and disciplinary confidence. A default art history informs blockbuster exhibitions, is taught in some schools, and is popularized in “Great Masters” books and films. It concatenates artists, styles and historiographic data in an epistemological vacuum. It considers art to be a privileged manifestation of history, and the shifts in art as an index of the temporality of history. It is punctuated by metaphysical circularities and interjections of elucidation, and it resembles an award ceremony in more ways than one. Another mode of enunciation contends with both the default of the discipline and the hypothesis, formulated from a variety of ideological standpoints, of the “end of history” (which art history as a whole tends to engage, not within a culture of post-history that would threaten to delegitimize it, but as one of the parables it habitually deciphers), with the disintegration of the internal logic and self-sufficiency in the



discipline.


The different strands of the new art history, fueled by Marxist criticism, feminism, post-colonialism, visual studies or semiotics, explore the constructed symmetries and hegemonic exclusions in traditional art history, the interdependence of critical biases and ideological missions, and the ways in which the discipline has kept its own relevance and foundational dilemmas center stage. Looking at the pathos and Freudian slips in older incarnations of art-historical discourse is an occasion for the new art history to acknowledge and elaborate its own difficulties, trying to reestablish a sense of historical course or destination after the putative halt of history – Hegel after Danto – and to reconcile its complicated, messianic legacy with a partial, theoretical evacuation of historicism. This engenders series of prologues, antecedent to several histories that would (if they were written) dispense with chronologic confabulation or mutations of style, non-histories saturated by methodological self-consciousness, aware of – and to some extent, incapacitated by – their alternatives and their own inability to contain and reflect a multiplicity of subject-positions, to diffract across plural and unregulated claims of interpretive authority.

A third instance of art-historical discourse, or replica of the lost art-historical original, is mapped out in contemporary art's inordinate relation to what it sometimes perceives as its own adolescence and, at other times, as a background against which to project its own legitimacy or prodigal anxieties. It reflects contemporary art's determination to have a history, even if premised dubious foundations and perfect malleability. A chronic historiographic compulsion is arguably the defining feature of today's art, with the inbuilt contradictions of a particular, reductive understanding of modernism as the prime object of scrutiny: the past this art portrays reads like a series of quirks and blips of historiographic time against a background of grand narratives that relentlessly manifest themselves. In this case, art history is both the site of unrealized futures – in the reinstatements of marginalized figures or the retrieval of ruptured connections – *and* the lineage from which contemporary art would like to portray itself as descending. The tweaked timelines of postmodernism or the moral pleas against art history as an imperial practice engendered a poetics of memory and oblivion rather than an epistemological innovation, or at least an increased permeability, in the dominant discourses of art history.



If the inconclusive threads and possibilities, blocked vistas and shifting foci that define art history today do connect at all, it could be argued that they intersect in the growing chasm between the contemporary – with its fatigued diversity and archeological disposition – and an unfamiliar, if not impervious, past. Or perhaps in a former disciplinary topography, half-excavated and turned into a museum for the fragments of a discursive apparatus: instruments of connoisseurship, iconography or social history, absented categories and the totems of the founding fathers. In a vacant site of declamation, where the angel of art history hovers or zigzags. In order for the present to have a history other than the progressive agglomeration of present objects, it is necessary to ask if this decrepit but functional rhetorical machinery can be recalibrated, if what is left of art-historical canons – the periods and the misjudgments, the frescoes and the cut-off ears, the fallacies and the brilliant intuitions – can be re-articulated in a discourse of the present, a present that does not adhere to the past as an inexorable condition or to a future as a necessity of confirmation. The relationship of contemporary art or exhibition-making to the history of art needs to be understood differently from a melancholy disconnection or Zeno-like paradox, so that they operate in tandem, or so that a reciprocal visibility is instated, one not premised on a shared teleology but on a flux of knowledge and common instruments and critical goals.


“Is art history?” Svetlana Alpers asked of Tiepolo.ⁱ Answering this question – whether in the affirmative, negative or dubitative – would presuppose looking at art history beyond the metaphors and adverbs of agony and ecstasy, that seek to somehow abstract a self, a Pygmalion-like interlocutor from the multiplicity of art. Instead, it would entail interrogating the fraught relations between works and their becoming-history, the particular and systematic iterations of the vexed circumstance linking art, ideology, forms of resistance and deferral. Institutional critique provides a convenient analogy for this critical elaboration: there *can* be the fielding of an impasse called art history,ⁱⁱ an investigation of the conditions that complicate or burden the transitions or exchanges between art and history, a critique that proceeds from a complete set of contradictions rather than desists upon encountering them. If we are indeed today traversing the corridors of a museum of art history, where the formerness of the discipline is put on display, together with its strategies for naturalizing or making heterodox – much in the same way that the Museum does in a standard institutional critique scenario – how can



this institution be engaged? The examples that follow are construed as cardinal points, extremities of conceptual trajectories interspersed with those of institutional critique, yet aimed at something markedly different from the exposure of white-cube ideologies. The institution they refer to is more venerable than the museum: it is the institution of art history, the sum of factors and variables that determine the historical inscription of the work (or its historiographic “administration,” to recuperate an important trope of the 1970s).

For Agnes Denes’s *Tree Mountain* (1992–1996), eleven thousand people planted eleven thousand trees on a hill in Ylöjärvi, Finland, according to a pattern derived from a mathematical formula. All the planters received a certificate of ownership valid for four hundred years: they can leave their trees to their heirs, celebrate or mourn by them, be buried under them, sell them, etc. While the forest is to remain intact, forms of ownership and use orchestrated around it can change course or mutate at the same speed as the forces traversing social space and reshaping its ideosphere or notions of value. The forest is designed as a place to visualize the future, but also to withstand its possibly deleterious impact: its purpose is to exhibit the future, as well as to exhibit itself as the impregnable past of that future. Changes in the articulation of ownership and individuality will refract upon contact with Denes’s work, their momentum decelerated by the contracts which stipulate the integrity of each tree in the forest. The work juxtaposes separate futures: it lays out its own future as four hundred years of resisting obsolescence and ruin, in tandem with (but firmly distinguished from) another future, that of the world around the work, its “ground.” It introduces distance between these versions of the future – between their literalness and the anticipated epiphanies, prolepses or dialectical reconciliations we employ to underpin visions of our collective destination. It functions as a stage for the interpretive negotiations binding them.

The second example is *Document* (1963), Robert Morris’s small sketch on lead of his sculpture *Litanies* (1963), described as “Exhibit A” and accompanied by a notarized statement in which the artist withdraws “all esthetic quality and content from the work.” *Document*, also known *Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal*, pits authority against authorship, legally encoding authority to evacuate authorship from art history, into another historiographic territory where their disjunction can be resolved. Authorship is accentuated as authority over the object, and proffered as the authority to remove the




object from the sphere of aesthetic beholding. Morris's legalistic inversion echoes – and reverts – one of the fundamental gestures of modern art, the designation of a urinal as a *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp. It is probably not a coincidence that the *Litanies* themselves reproduce words from Duchamp's comments on the *Large Glass*, a work predated and prefaced by its explanation, submerged in the artist's commentaries on it, which, in a sense, preempts any subsequent interpretive effort as a commentary on the artist's commentary.ⁱⁱⁱ

Luc Deleu's *The Last Stone of Belgium* (1979) is both a (counter-)manifesto etched in stone and a tombstone for monumentality. Declaring the demise of commemoration – or perhaps the inauguration of a post-metaphysical commemorative practice and its “nonumental” correlates – , it not only challenges the validity of subsequent monuments, but draws attention to what lies underneath the flurry of current memorial culture: in this case, Belgium's colonial history, divisions and disparities, then and now. In relation to these issues, and the monuments – stones, vast amounts of bronze and slabs of concrete describing political enmity, uncertain victories and a fabricated sense of eternity – designed to silence them, Deleu's work functions as a permanent epilogue, one that can adhere to and upend any constructed timeline of commemoration.


Made under very different political conditions, Mladen Stilinović's banner *An Attack Against My Art is an Attack against Socialism and Progress* (1977) claims to ally itself with the repression and censorship of Croatia in the 1970s. It seems to insulate itself against criticism, even the criticism of said censorship, in the way totalitarian regimes do, by continually unmasking the enemy and portraying its vile nature. It sardonically emulates the existential and interpretive conditions of its own age and context and thus survives them as a document of their brutality. Stilinović's banner also operates as a sharp comment on the new regimes of Eastern European art and East-West alienation, articulated in exhibitions after and about 1989, on the politics of “after-the-Wall” and after-the-mall entwined.

If institutional critique proper was co-opted by the institutional, works and practices like these channel its critical, transformative potential to other sites and modes of enunciation. From the tangles of synonymy in institutional critique, where each element manifests itself with all its political force or poetic dexterity to incarnate the other, and where transgression is forever matched by what was being transgressed, they



extract the terms of another polemic. From institutional critique's attempts to locate and visualize power as a stable, definable interlocutor and to materialize a transfer between dismantled institution, radical artist and critical spectatorship, they recover the notion of an "elsewhere," of a constitutive space outside the institution, which they modulate along a temporal axis, without diminishing institutional critique's political effectiveness. They posit the "elsewhere" as a rupture in the conditions and mediations that constitute and ensure both the visibility and the historical legibility of a work. The temporality of *Tree Mountain*, for instance, overflows the capacity and relevance of institutional confines: it amply exceeds the attention span of contemporary art institutions and chooses to administrate itself, elliptically rephrasing the ways in which the art-historical past proceeds into an immaterial present and towards the future. Robert Morris's exclusion of his own work from the history of aesthetic contemplation is the discursive function of an absolute use of the instruments afforded by the "inside," taking maximum advantage of one's position as an artist.


The affinities between these works are political, to the extent that they suggest the contours of a quasi-institution, and temporal, in their capacity to look past the contemporary, transforming it into an undifferentiated episode within their own existence.^{iv} In vastly different ways, all four works script the contemporary in advance, preparing for its passage and what might lie ahead of it. Their suspension of art-historical protocols, which the discipline can interpret only by a distancing from itself, is simultaneous with their promise of meaning, and being, set in a future defined as the consummation of the dialogue they initiate. The future available to art, they seem to indicate, is neither the futurism of doom nor the futurology of gridlock. Much recent art specializes in allegories of technology or ecology, yet the future art can access, the future it can breach or make, is the future understanding of art, the degree to which works or practices partake in their own interpretation. Works can have different destinies or trajectories, but they have a future if they write or construct their interpretation, or inquire into a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities: if they are metonyms for the future, rather than its metaphors. The artwork is both the site for the future's arrival and an interpellant of its unfolding. History typically distinguishes between objects and proposals that "stand the test of time," and art that does not extend beyond the present it inhabits, being captive to it and hence unworthy of historiographic attention. But what if



art were itself “the test of time”? What if the resilience or efficacy of works were to be measured in the time they create, against a future they envision for themselves?

While Agnes Denes’s work postpones its future, or complicates its emergence by pairing it up with a manifestation of the sublime, Robert Morris treats the future of his work as having already occurred, or assigns to it a condition of permanent anteriority. One artist asks us for infinite patience, the other for infinite acumen. Mladen Stilinović and Luc Deleu establish reciprocities between an art-historical investigation originating in the future and works that appear, in hindsight, like indispensable antecedents in political and cultural genealogies. The production of history is located in works which define themselves as historical objects, conceived so as to interlock with the configuration of imminent or distant historical interrogation. They operate via a permanent address to that history; they never stop meaning something to it, and never abandon the claim to be recuperated by it. Finally, they re-conceptualize the positions from which art-historical assertions – about the continuities between objects and subjects, worlds, institutions and selves – are made.

These are models, or perhaps instigations, to think about curating as a historiographic enterprise, entrusted with the task of indexing the present. Exhibitions reflect on themselves, on a history of exhibitions and the history of art interwoven with it; new epistemologies are sketched, connections and incompatibilities are drawn between then and now, here and there, things are provisionally placed out of interpretive reach. What is missing is an explicit conceptual articulation between our historiographic deficit and the omnipresence of history. Curators need to reconsider the asymmetry between, on one hand, the ungraspable, defiant, absolute totality of manifestation and display across the growing surface of the art world and, on the other, a sense of those elements and trajectories that will constitute a history of the present. The art-historical solution, teased out via different strategies in each particular case, could be that of an inverted *repoussoir*. The *repoussoir* is a compositional device that blocks the edges of the frame, drawing attention into the perspective system, toward the center of the work and the vanishing point. As an art historical strategy, a *repoussoir* figuratively creates the depth of historiographic immersion, taking the art historian into an anteriority of work and time itself, from whence to recuperate the primal scene of the Original. The temporal reversal of this artifice could push vision into the perspective before us, while apprehending in its



depth a future object, an object incompletely commensurate with our current archival models.

ⁱ In Svetlana Alpers, James Hyde, Barney Kulok (eds.), *Painting Then For Now: Fragments of Tiepolo at the Ca'Dolfìn* (New York: David Krut Projects, 2007), 23.

ⁱⁱ “If art history is to be understood as an *occasion* for the practice of irreconcilable and conflicting perspectives on the nature of the relationships between objects and subjects, what then could it mean to understand art history as the fielding of an impasse?” Donald Preziosi, ‘Unmaking art history’, in Elisabeth C. Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History. A Changing Discipline and its Institutions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of Marcel Duchamp and art history, see Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

^{iv} Julia Bryan-Wilson recently asked, with regard to establishing a chronology and an epistemology for the emerging sub-discipline of contemporary art history: “What kinds of interventions, art, and information will persevere in the future beyond the rapid cycles of boom and bust? We admit we cannot know what might happen in the next twelve months, much less the next 10,000 years. That not-knowing could be a strength. It could produce an art history that revels in the warping of time by looking *past* the contemporary – that is, a method that still attends to its history, while also trying (even if failing) to see beyond the present. The model of forecasting could be both a problem and an opportunity for contemporary art history, for it permits and encourages unpredictability, and even disaster.” Julia Bryan-Wilson, untitled response to “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary,’” *October* 130, 2009: 6.

Forthcoming in Manifesta Journal #9, *The Historicization of the Present*.

Thanks to Filipa Ramos, Lisa Mazza and Joanna Fiduccia.