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Contents

Series Preface / 1
Introduction by Anna Sigríður Arnar / 7
Master Narratives and Their Discontents / 29
1. Modernisms / 37
2. Postmodernisms / 83
3. Politics / 99
4. The Importance of Skill / 123
5. The Idea That None of This Matters Anymore / 147
6. Conclusions / 153
Seminar / 161
Bibliography / 179
Index / 189

Plates

- Plate 1. Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *Diana Discovering the Pregnancy of Callisto*, 1556–58. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- Plate 2. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
- Plate 3. Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793. Louvre, Paris.
- Plate 4. Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
- Plate 5. Pablo Picasso, *Reservoir at Horta de Ebro*, 1909. Private collection, New York.
- Plate 6. Philip Guston, *Painting no. 6*, 1951. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
- Plate 7. Pierre Soulages, *Peinture (Painting)*, April 14, 1956. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource.
- Plate 8. Roy Lerner, *Resolute*, 1997. Acrylic and gel medium on canvas. Collection of the artist.
- Plate 9. Günter Umberg. Installation view of two untitled paintings, Wiener Secession, 1994. Photo by Matthias Herrmann. Courtesy of the artist.
- Plate 10. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964. The Andy Warhol Foundation, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- Plate 11. Antonio López-García, *Taza de Water y Ventana*, 1968–71. Private collection. Courtesy of Marlborough, Madrid.
- Plate 12. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Gift of the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier.
- Plate 13a. Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe or Man in the Time Machine (El hombre controlador del universo o El hombre en la máquina del tiempo)*, 1934. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.
- Plate 13b. *The figure of Lenin (detail)*.
- Plate 14. Childe Hassam, *Avenue of the Allies*, 1917. Bequest of Elizabeth Millar Bullard, 1942. Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia.
- Plate 15. Dean Mitchell, *The Citizen*, 1998. Watercolor. Courtesy of the artist and Bryant Galleries, New Orleans.
- Plate 16. Unknown artist, *Administration of State Patrimony and Protocol A.R.*, Auction of the Goods Previously Belonging to Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu. Courtesy of the author.
- Plate 17. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Thérèse* (undated). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal.

- Plate 18. Anonymous artist. Examples of modern painting offered at art-liquidation.com. Numbers 383, 390, 391. Courtesy of Art Liquidation.
- Plate 19. Marcel Duchamp, *Apropos of Little Sister*, October 1911. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
- Plate 20. Pierre Bonnard, *Salle à manger à la campagne* (Dining Room in the Country), 1913. The John R. Van Derlip Fund. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
- Plate 21. Ettore Fico, *Porta rossa: Omaggio a Reycead*, 1977.
- Plate 22. René Magritte, *L'assassin menacé* (The Menaced Assassin), 1926. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Plate 23. Ernst Matthes, *Inn Park*, 1909. Private collection, Germany.

Series Preface

There is a gap in accounts of modern art. Some of the best historical work has been done by scholars who have not wanted to contribute to the large-scale questions of what modernism might be, or how nineteenth-century art might fit in the lineages that lead to postmodernism. That is one side of the gap. On the other is a common pedagogic literature intended to introduce modernism to beginning students; it is generally not written by the scholars whose work is central to the developing discipline, and it is not often cited. Between these two extremes there should be a kind of writing that is at once attentive to the fine grain of history and responsive to the different and often contentious accounts of modernism as a whole. Such writing is rare, for a variety of reasons — some of which are embedded in the ways modernism itself has been understood. So far there have only been a few exceptions, notably T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* and the multiply-authored *Art Since 1900*. Aside from those two enormous, contentious, and problematic texts, there is almost nothing between the sides.

In this series major scholars in the field consider the shape of the twentieth century: its essential and marginal moments, its optimal narratives, the strengths and weaknesses of its self-descriptions. I hope that the series as a whole will be helpful for those who find, as I do, that it can be revealing to put a little pressure on the assumptions that are made in everyday scholarship regarding what is, and isn't, crucial to an understanding of twentieth-century art. There is a growing scholarship, for example, on surrealism and its afterlife. In what ways does that scholarship imply that a version of surrealism is central to a description of some contemporary art? Or to take another example: How does cubism sit with accounts that rely on modernism's political aspirations? Where is Greenberg, his ghosts or avatars, in current historiography?

Large questions like these are the subject of this series. If we do not try to assemble the best theories, winnow the worst, and prepare a clear collation, then what does it mean to continue to write art history in an age of increasing pluralism? I hope it means more than playing in an era that is happily "after the history of art," in Arthur Danto's phrase.

I have mixed hopes for this series. On the one hand I doubt the ideas these authors set out will comprise a consensus, or even a satisfactory survey. On the other hand I believe that there is not an indefinitely large number of cogent, informed, and committed versions of how the century went: on the contrary, I think only a handful of separate and simultaneous conversations

sustain our sense of what modernism was, or is, and it is possible to gather and compare them.

A parallel might be made to physics here: physics turns on what are called GUTs (grand unified theories) and TOEs (theories of everything), in the sense that physicists work with those possibilities always in mind, so that the smallest theoretical demonstration or technical innovation gains significance by its potential connection to the literally larger questions. In the event, many things may happen to physics before the small-scale result can ever effect its ideal theoretical impetus, but that does not vitiate the fact that in physics it is absolutely crucial that large-scale theories exist to drive local inquiries. Art history is different in many ways, not least in that art historians need not think of large-scale problems at all. Yet in art history, reticence regarding larger problems is sometimes taken as a virtue, and that, I think, is questionable. It is as if the most prominent physicists—the Steven Weinbergs or the Stephen Hawkings—were silent about the basic laws of physics. Or as if the most active and creative physicists were committed to looking only at specialized phenomena, leaving the form of the physical world, and the direction of physics, to others as a matter of speculation. What I mean to suggest is that there is a point beyond which attention to the fine structure of historical events is no longer the necessary virtue of good historical work, but rather becomes a strategy of avoidance that can threaten the coherence of the enterprise as a whole. In that sense “larger” questions are not

unhelpfully large or irrelevantly large, as they tend to be taken to be, but crucially large.

The risks of avoiding going on the record about larger questions of twentieth-century art are nicely illustrated by a recent exchange involving the English critic Julian Bell, the American art historian Michael Fried, and the nineteenth-century German realist painter Adolf Menzel. In the *London Times Literary Supplement*, Bell reviewed Fried's book on Menzel, praising Fried's readings of individual works and his rigor, but remarking that it is unfortunate Fried chose not to connect this book, his first on a German artist, with his decades of work on the French tradition. How is Menzel linked, Bell wonders, to the sequences of French painters that Fried has studied in the past? How is modernism affected, if at all, by this alternate genealogy? They are good questions, hastily posed but essentially accurate. Menzel is not, cannot be, an isolated figure somehow beyond the streams of modernism, if only because the critical terms Fried has brought to bear on modernism figure throughout his book on Menzel, driving Fried's inquiries and informing his judgments. It is the aim of this series to provide a space where challenges like Bell's can be taken seriously without becoming either ephemeral polemics or floating generalizations of the sort most useful to first-year students.

The books in this series were originally lectures, each given on two successive evenings, at the University College Cork, Ireland, over a period of three years from 2004 to 2006. Each pair of

lectures was followed by a seminar discussion, part of which is included in each book. The authors were encouraged to respond to previous efforts: the notion was that the series might grow to resemble a protracted exchange, in which each person has months or years to consider how to respond to what has been said. That speed seems entirely appropriate to a subject as intricate, and as prone to overly quick assertions, as this.

I wrote the first book in order to provide a preliminary survey of the field, although I avoided describing the work of the authors in the series. That absence shouldn't be taken as a lack of interest (the opposite is true): it is meant to provide a fruitful starting place for meditations I hope will follow. Readers may begin the series with any book, but taken as a whole, and read in sequence, the series is intended as perhaps the world's slowest, and I hope best-pondered, conversation on modernism.

— J.E.

Introduction

In surveying the vast number of publications written by James Elkins, one cannot avoid feeling awed or even bewildered by the staggering variety of subjects that he has addressed with such passion. From seemingly banal or ordinary objects (e.g., maps of the London Underground, educational picture boards) to arcane or difficult bodies of knowledge (e.g., spider web formations, crystallography), to traditional art historical subjects (e.g., Michelangelo, Jan Van Eyck), nothing appears to have escaped his hungry eye or astute analysis. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to envision Elkins perfectly at ease in a seventeenth-century Wunderkammer complete with a stuffed alligator suspended from the ceiling, lush oil paintings on the wall, and cabinets stocked with treasure troves of ancient coins, maps, rare gems and fossils, skeletons and anatomical specimens of all varieties, early optical instruments, alchemical treatises, and the like. I am

not suggesting that Elkins delights in eclectic wonders for their own sake, but I argue that his scholarly work, like the work by some of the individuals who assembled early modern Wunderkammern, has been consistently devoted to exploring the spaces that lie between diverse and even far-flung fields of study. From this interstitial perspective, he examines the relationships and productive encounters (or clashes) between disciplines in a truly imaginative manner. What unifies his diverse range of inquiry is the desire to understand how these disciplines intersect (or diverge from) art historical conventions and practices — including the traditions of making and interpreting images. Above all, his inquiries are made timely and relevant because they are inflected by a sustained familiarity with major philosophical and cultural discourses from the early modern era through the present age. Within this context, he poses challenging and fundamentally pragmatic questions about the nature of art history: What are the unique traditions of the discipline and where do they come from? What are its blind spots and its most valuable contributions to the hermeneutic enterprise? And finally, how do the respective strengths and shortcomings of art history inform the way we practice and teach it today?

When Elkins attended graduate school in the 1980s, fundamental questions of historiography and especially pedagogy in art history were decidedly unfashionable subjects

in most art history departments in the United States.¹ To be sure, there was (and there still is) a great deal of interest in methodology and hermeneutics from outside the discipline. Literary scholars in particular provided art historians with exciting models of analysis from the fields of semiotics, deconstruction, Marxism, anthropology, feminism, and psychoanalysis, to name but a few of the primary examples. Art history embarked on a journey that entailed not only an expansion of its boundaries and procedures of study but also a profound and often self-flagellating critique of its methodological assumptions. It was a decade of tremendous excitement and inner turmoil: art history was undergoing a “crisis.”²

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By the close of the 1980s, there were calls to sharply revise or entirely abandon what were seen as old-fashioned tenets of connoisseurship, monograph writing, iconography, and stylistic analysis. In short, the object and methodologies of art history were considered to be too mired in positivistic thinking and rigid, historicist frameworks to accommodate productive

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1. Prior to 1985 there were very few books in the English language devoted to the historiography of art. A few exceptions that come to mind include the classic work by W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History: An Anthology of 20th-Century Writings on the Visual Arts* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); and Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).
 2. An entire issue of *Art Journal* was devoted to this crisis in 1982. See Henri Zerner, “The Crisis in the Discipline,” *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 279–325.

self-scrutiny.³ A corresponding quandary developed for those scholars engaged in pure theoretical activity as they increasingly exhibited discomfort before the object of art. In essence, the discipline of art history seemed to be suspended awkwardly between an artificial either–or dilemma — either one worked with art objects within a matrix of established methods or one “did” theory.

As a recipient of a freshly minted master’s of fine arts in painting, Elkins entered into graduate studies in art history acutely aware of the tensions that exist between the objects that art historians study and the texts that they write about them. The critical debates about the failures of art history’s methods clearly interested him, but he was as devoted to the critiques of art historical procedures as he was to understanding the historical context that framed those procedures in the first place. It seemed inadequate to denounce the assumptions of a field without probing the history of those assumptions or analyzing

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3. Some exemplary critiques from the late 1980s include Norman Bryson’s introductory essay in *Calligram: Essays in the New Art History from France* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Here Bryson targeted perceptualist accounts (exemplified in the work of E.H. Gombrich) and Social Art History for their respective occlusion or oversimplification of power as a discursive force. Also from this same time period is Donald Preziosi’s *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, which provided an extended critique of art history’s legacy of avoiding rigorous self-scrutiny. From a different perspective, Hans Belting’s 1987 book *The End of the History of Art?* (originally published in German in 1983) offered influential critiques of art history by focusing on the divisions within the discipline rather than on its separation from other hermeneutic practices in the humanities and social sciences. Belting defined this internal division as the breach between modern art and historical art, and he argued that these two areas of inquiry endangered themselves by operating under distinct and often contradictory paradigms; *The End of the History of Art?* trans. Christopher Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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their broader philosophic and hermeneutic applications. While still a graduate student, he published the provocative 1988 essay “Art History without Theory” in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. In this essay, Elkins examined the Hegelian theories that shape most art historical narratives and the empirical methods that define much of art historical practice. The value of his examination is the articulation of a third position located alongside the vexed dichotomy between theory and praxis. In this schema, theory and praxis are submitted to productive scrutiny and examined in relation to one another rather than in antagonistic opposition. As such, Elkins defined these two elements as engaged in a delicate act of complementarity and contradiction as they define each other’s boundaries in art historical scholarship. This delicate relationship constitutes a veritable conundrum: “theory seeks to engulf practice by denying that practice advances as it accumulates facts; and practice denies the constraints that theory would apply to it.”⁴ Theory, Elkins concluded, is not so much replaced in art history by practice as it is displaced: the two do not intertwine but rather tend to exist in separate yet interdependent zones in the majority of art historical texts.

Although “Art History without Theory” is an early work, it encapsulates many of the analytical strategies and themes of Elkins’s later work. First and foremost, it displays his passion for dissecting ideas or hermeneutic problems. In this case, he has performed an

4. James Elkins, “Art History without Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1988): 357.

anatomy lesson of sorts to expose the relationship between theory and praxis in art history. This lesson is performed as an opportunity to examine closely a problem rather than offer clear-cut judicative pronouncements or solutions to the problem.⁵ There is a tone of detached amusement as he ponders the truly curious nature of art history — it is a uniquely hybrid discipline positioned between aesthetic objects and historicist ideals and practices. These stubborn idiosyncrasies and the wonderful strangeness of art history continue to fascinate Elkins, and much of his subsequent work has been devoted to examining and challenging them in detail.

In the decade and a half since the publication of this 1988 essay, there has been a sharp increase in the number of books and articles devoted to the historiography and methodologies of art history. Never before have art historians been more intensely aware of their disciplinary traditions, their methods, their shortcomings, and, perhaps only more recently, their strengths. Given the abundance of voices on these matters, how can we characterize Elkins's unique contribution? For starters, he has forced those of us engaged in the activity of interpreting pictures to confront subjects that have been either overlooked or deemed too unwieldy, difficult, or simply embarrassing. He is only too happy to articulate our deepest anxieties or failures with respect

5. Elkins makes reference to the useful language of anatomists for describing this particular form of analysis. He explains that the term prosection is a dissection procedure that exposes the organ but leaves it intact, as opposed to an excision or resection that removes the organ in whole or in part; "Art History without Theory," 368.

to the elusiveness of art objects or regarding some of the fragile but well-intended ambitions that have informed recent attempts to update “normal” art history (a term he uses to define mainstream art historical practice).

Elkins has described himself as a “hobblor of narratives” and, as such, he likes to throw a wrench into the interpretative process. Nowhere is this characterization more evident than when he invokes the ineffable yet inescapably physical conditions of art making — painterly blobs or “sticky goo” (an expression one of his students coined to describe the feeling between his ears when he paints), for instance, have a tendency to disrupt hermeneutic models of analysis because they cannot be easily translated into terms that are compatible with those models. To drive his point home, he thrusts his readers into the artist’s studio, a space that Elkins characterizes as

the place most feared and excluded by visual theory and art history: it has virtually no part in philosophic accounts of art, and it has only a limited role in art history. ... There are both historical and philosophical reasons for that exclusion: studio practice is difficult to connect to historical themes, since the personal and largely inarticulate discoveries made in the studio do not seem applicable to finished works that exist in history; and studio talk is riven by ungrammatical arguments, illogic, and nonverbal communication by gestures and marks that conspire to make it nearly illegible to philosophic inquiry.⁶

6. James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000 [1997]), 47.

Even for art historians who teach in studio art departments (such as me) and have spent considerable time in and around studios, there are moments when it feels as if artists inhabit a parallel and distinctly “other” universe (the feeling is mutual, of course!). I might share their passion for an art object, but our respective reasons for doing so and the language with which we express those passions seldom intersect. These differences are typically amplified when one turns to the activity of interpretation — the very impulse to interpret is often considered alien or contrived by some of my studio colleagues. As I see it, Elkins does not intend simply to hobble academic inquiry of art works by invoking the artist’s studio; he also wants us to consider why so many of our interpretative models need to function outside this space. In accepting Elkins’s challenge to enter this space and take into account the seemingly quirky or inarticulate practices of the studio, we ultimately gain an attempt to understand — or better yet, savor — those moments when theory and praxis are at loggerheads.

It is precisely in this zone of conflict and contradiction where Elkins wants us to linger. His efforts to slow down the interpretative process are driven by the desire to engage and appreciate the difficulty and complexity of this process. In his book *Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, for example, he warned,

Too often, reading the art historical literature, it can seem as if pictures are relatively easy to write about, to put into words. Certainly interpretations might be hard to come by, and it can be trying to arrange

the evidence in a convincing manner, but it appears as if pictures themselves present no problems: everyone knows how to apply theories to them, how to describe them, and how to pose and solve problems about what they mean. What gets lost here is the picture as picture, as a mute collection of funny-looking smears and shapes that somehow lends itself to practically endless streams of eloquent historical writing. This book is an attempt to make pictures more difficult.⁷

In “making pictures more difficult” and hobbling our smooth, interpretative narratives, Elkins creates skillful digressions designed to provoke thoughtful scrutiny or the sheer pleasure of contemplating objects with their incoherent or elegant surfaces and marks. These digressions are purposeful “meanderings” that delight in the “muddle, the tangle of crossing paths” of conflicting interpretive arguments.⁸

Many of Elkins’s meandering analyses lead us face-to-face with the idiosyncratic traces, splatterings, or blurs of a picture’s surface. By getting up close and personal, we are once again in that zone where theories of art seem to buckle or fade before the materiality of the picture, and, consequently, according to Elkins, we are in a much more interesting place. Consider, for example, his discussion of the inherent difficulty in isolating individual marks of a picture and determining their relation and function to surrounding marks and surfaces. He deploys the term *exfoliate* to describe the process and appearance of a mark’s

7. James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xi.

8. Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, 176.

fluctuating status: “Marks exfoliate ... by drawing attention to their boundaries, so that the boundaries become outlines in their own right: and when that happens, the boundaries themselves can be perceived as marks, turning both the original mark and the original surface into surfaces.”⁹ By closely examining the instability of the mark, Elkins points to a fundamental incompatibility between written signs and painted or drawn marks and thereby challenges some of the basic assumptions that underlie the semiotic analysis of pictures:

Unlike written signs, drawn and painted marks are insecurely linked to their grounds, and the same is true at the level of the figure — a fact that has to be suspended in order to get on with art historical interpretations that treat figures as if they were signs detachable from their grounds.¹⁰

Despite Elkins’s lingering, close-up examinations of marks, he does not perform a wholesale dismissal of visual semiotics; rather, he insists that we confront the moments of contradiction and difficulty that can arise from looking at — but not necessarily fully understanding — pictures. Just as semiotic analyses upended certain self-assured empiricist claims in art history, Elkins wants to momentarily arrest semiotic readings of pictures that are at times equally self-assured.

Elkins has clearly relished playing the devil’s advocate by insisting that interpreters of pictures take a closer look

9. Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, 26.

10. *Ibid.*, 43.

at studio practice or at pictorial marks. But his impish provocations are not always launched from an up close material perspective. He frequently zooms in and out from the object to reposition his argument from a more distant perspective by examining the trajectories of a particular philosophic discourse, scientific theory, or complex issue in historiography. In other words, his analyses can be simultaneously astringent and capacious in their focus, and these shifting registers have gotten Elkins into trouble on occasion and provoked conflicting critical responses to his work. How many scholars, after all, have been characterized as being too historical, transhistorical, nonhistorical, and ahistorical at the same time?¹¹

The vertical register of Elkins's scholarship is matched in intensity by the horizontal range of his subjects — prehistoric artifacts, Renaissance drawings, Ancient Chinese bronze vessels, and contemporary paintings, for example, have all been submitted to intense analysis from near and far. Although his

11. By his own admission, Elkins refers to the problematic occasioned by his own “conditional release” from history in some of his analyses. James Herbert, for example, described the fundamental nonhistorical framework in *The Domain of Images* that put into play “the difference between intermittently historical, nonhistorical, and ahistorical”; personal communication recorded by James Elkins in his review of *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, by David Summers, *Art Bulletin* 86 no. 2 (June 2004): 380, n. 26. Robert Williams is more troubled by Elkins's release from history, stating that “historicity of art is essential to its interest” and that “any fully-developed, intellectually rigorous approach to art must be fundamentally and not incidentally historical”; Robert Williams, “Sticky Goo,” *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002): 102. Mieke Bal takes quite a different stand, referring to art history's “naive historical dogmatism” and obsession with origins, but she also accuses Elkins of being “transhistorical.” See her “Semiotic Elements in Academic Practices,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 587, 589.

capacity to analyze a problem or an object from a multitude of positions makes it difficult to pin him down methodologically and ideologically, this kind of mobility makes him uniquely qualified as a kind of cartographer of ideas and hermeneutic practices. Recently, he has deployed this unique skill to map the range of interpretative strategies that have been put into practice in art history over the years. In this map he traces the broad contours of these strategies and their specific textures to create a useful tool for analysis. In *Stories of Art*, for example, he takes on one of the most permanent fixtures of art historical teaching: the art history survey textbook. In what I consider to be a typical gesture in Elkins's work, he does not simply enumerate the myriad approaches employed by textbooks; he maps the different shapes of their narratives. Ideas are no longer abstract claims but tangible positions that can be mapped for close examination and situated relationally within a broader matrix of narratives. As in the case of the cherished crystals mentioned in a number of Elkins's writings,¹² determining their complex patterns and structures provides a means of classification, but this activity is equally useful for comparative analysis. And here I might add that he has not shortchanged us on the range of sampling for this analysis — not only do we encounter the well-documented art

12. See, for example, Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 13–30; and *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 83–86.

historical narratives (Vasari, Gombrich, Gardner, Stokstad) but we also are provided with one of the first comparative analyses of non-European narratives including Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Egyptian, and Turkish art history survey textbooks.

Stories of Art, however, is by no means a dispassionate map of classifications and topographic comparisons. Elkins deftly penetrates these wide-ranging narratives and momentarily inhabits them to parse their respective merits and flaws. Above all, the entire enterprise is designed to generate serious discussion about the very reasons we teach art history and why we consider it to be a valuable contribution to a liberal arts education. In this sense his text serves as a kind of calculated irritant because it brings to the fore some of the compromises or illusions that we have had to embrace in the attempt to broaden the standard art history survey text.¹³ By interjecting sections on non-Western art, women, and minority artists, he argues, we do not fundamentally alter the standard Western-oriented narrative. Elkins is certainly not the first individual to make this critique, but he is certainly far more unflinchingly direct when he enumerates the primary reasons for this failure: (1) “art historians do not really want multiculturalism,” (2) “multiculturalism, even in theory, is impossible anyway,” and (3) “art history, as an enterprise — an activity that generates jobs and fills seats in

13. Elkins refers to a kind of acid test to determine the strength of a given model. Inevitably the softer models erode with this kind of test. See “Nine Modes of Interdisciplinarity for Visual Studies,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 2 (August 2003): 236.

classrooms — is irremediably Western.”¹⁴ Although he follows up these points with further discussion and examples to solidify his argument, he is keenly aware that a number of readers will disagree with him — but this does not distract from his overall goal of ensuring that we remain somewhat unsatisfied with the provisional alternatives that we have created. Moreover, he encourages us to continue interrogating art history’s limits and our motivations when we craft a story of art.

A similarly provocative tone animates his subsequent book *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*. As in *Stories of Art*, he provides a useful map of definitions and practices in visual studies and visual culture. Throughout the entire text an eclectic array of photographs punctuates his discussion and segues into independent meditations on a staggering range of visual subjects and phenomena. Taken separately, these images constitute a sizable catalog of potential subjects for visual studies. If this book is skeptical about visual studies, the skepticism is not aimed at this discipline’s rich potential; rather, it aims squarely at the formulaic and often rushed interpretation of images that defines much of mainstream practice (although he is careful to acknowledge individuals who have invigorated the discourse). As in his earlier works, Elkins seeks to hobble standard interpretative frameworks, and he is particularly successful in doing so in the chapter “Ten Ways to Make Visual Studies More Difficult.”

14. Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 147.

In this chapter, which forms the cornerstone to the book, he repeatedly urges his readers to not shortchange themselves in the practice of visual studies by resorting to the same interpretative texts and the same repertoire of subject matter. Although each of the ten ways offers inspired prescriptions, I am particularly struck by the last one, titled “The Case of the Writing Itself: The Challenge of Writing Ambitiously,” where he encourages writers and especially students considering the field of visual studies to “know the entire field or as much as you can manage” and to “read absolutely everything.” Most revealing, however, is the plea to engage with the reading: “Do your sources the favor of a concerted encounter. Compare your thoughts to everyone’s.”¹⁵

In his nonconformist spirit and ambitious program of rigorous engaged reading, Elkins possesses a similar kind of scholarly commitment as that of Barbara Stafford, one of his mentors at the University of Chicago. Elkins has paid tribute to Stafford’s pioneering scholarship in a number of his texts,¹⁶ but her influence on his work has not been thematic or strategic but rather a case of influence by example — or influence as a source of inspiration. Like Stafford, Elkins exhibits an unwavering passion to become not only well

15. Elkins, *Visual Studies*, 120, 121.

16. See, for example, Elkins’s sensitive review of Barbara Stafford’s 1991 book: *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, by Barbara Stafford, *Art Bulletin* 74, no. 3 (September 1992): 517–20. More recently, he cited Stafford’s writings as a bold example of interdisciplinary scholarship in “Nine Modes of Interdisciplinarity for Visual Studies,” 235–36.

informed but also deeply informed on all subjects that intersect his scholarly project. There are no shortcuts to this kind of research program, but the rewards are great because one can genuinely reorient prevailing scholarly discourse to new and exciting terrain. More important, with this kind of depth and breadth of knowledge, Stafford and Elkins have developed the useful ability to speak with a double voice — one voice speaks from within art history, where it offers incisive and pragmatic critiques of the discipline; the other addresses academic disciplines outside of art history and articulates brilliant defenses of art history's unique contributions to understanding the place and function of images within early modern and contemporary cultures.

I also identify in Elkins's scholarship the critical spirit of engagement that typifies some of W.J.T. Mitchell's work or, more broadly, that of *Critical Inquiry*. It was *Critical Inquiry*, after all, that published the infamous series of critiques and ripostes generated by Steven Knapp and Michael Benn Michaels's essay "Against Theory" at a time when Elkins was just beginning his own inquiries into the role of theory in art history.¹⁷ Here again, I am not attempting to trace any kind of direct influence on Elkins's thought but rather attempting to provide a framework for understanding some of the

17. These classic essays were subsequently published in a single volume in 1985; W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

intellectual ambitions for initiating productive provocation in one's scholarship. In publishing "Against Theory," the editors of *Critical Inquiry* were interested not in endorsing a particular view of theory or in embracing a comfortable position of theoretical pluralism but in unsettling positions that were at risk of rapidly becoming settled. Provocation, then, has the merit of triggering rigorous debate and, in its better moments, as Mitchell observes, "an articulation of unsuspected insights."¹⁸

Provocation and spirited dialogue are at the heart of Elkins's present text. *Master Narratives and Their Discontents* is designed as a catalyst for "an extremely protracted exchange" and, ideally, the "best-pondered conversation" on modernism and postmodernism. Elkins has once again deployed his familiar strategy of slowing us down to dissect seriously the internal contradictions or the unexamined assumptions that have long framed the discourse on modernism and its shape of twentieth-century art. As such, his inaugural lecture begins with a deceptively self-evident problem: Why are there so few theories in art historical literature to account for the history of twentieth-century art? And why are art historians so reluctant to deviate from these few theories?

Unlike recent arguments in literary, historical, and philosophical scholarship that seek to reframe the classical theories of

"The" is not part of title elsewhere in book, so I deleted here. Correct?

18. Ibid., 3.

modernism in terms of modernity, autonomy, or the problem of aesthetic experience,¹⁹ Elkins is resolutely focused on the primary narratives that have determined the canon of artworks inscribed in the history of twentieth-century art. In other words, he finds it genuinely perplexing that despite the existence of different models to account for this history, the essential list of important works remains more or less the same. Significantly, as Elkins points out, those few narratives that do radically alter the prevailing models for twentieth-century art are, by and large, located outside academic or pedagogic literature — such as gallery exhibition brochures, newspaper reviews, and basic promotional literature. As a consequence, his catholic embrace of such a surprising range of sources in this inaugural lecture offers unorthodox juxtapositions: Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois's *Formless: A User's Guide* figures prominently in his discussion, as do newspaper reviews from the Sunday *New York Times* or ephemeral information gleaned from commercial art Web sites.

19. Vanessa Schwartz and Jeannene Przyblyski, for instance, proposed that “modernity” rather than “modernism” is a more useful way of examining the major developments in modern visual culture in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). “Modernity” rather than “modernism” is also the preferred rubric in an art history symposium sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh, “Modernity and Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture after the 20th Century,” featuring such influential theorists of modernism as Rosalind Krauss, Fredric Jameson, and Geeta Kapur, among others. For the renewed interest in the problem of autonomy and aesthetic experience, see Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy,” *New Left Review* 14 (March–April 2002): 133–51; and Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), esp. 173–78.

In navigating such eclectic sources, Elkins's seasoned cartographic skills become especially useful: despite the plethora of material, he maps coherently the primary narratives of twentieth-century art into four basic categories: (1) Modernisms, (2) Postmodernisms, (3) Politics, and (4) The Importance of Skill. These categories function essentially as broad guidelines or descriptions rather than extended evaluations or critical judgments. This strategy is deliberate. In the series preface he explains that he hoped to establish a "preliminary survey of the field" to "provide a fruitful starting place for meditations." In this sense, the lecture series and the resulting volumes are genuinely unique in that they capture an ongoing dialogue and critique of this initial map as well as the subsequent responses generated by it. In other words, the *Lectures in the Theory of Modern and Postmodern Art* is not a collection of lectures by individual scholars over time (such as the *Mellon Lectures*), and it is not a collection of one-time meditations on subjects chosen by a selected honorary lecturer (such as the *Norton Lectures*). Instead, we are confronted with a series of lectures by select scholars responding to a common problem. This common problem is subsequently refracted and "thrown into relief" by the specific textures of individual scholars and their respective ideologies and methodologies. The desired outcome of this series is not a universal synthesis or consensus of opinion but rather a map that encompasses the invigorating course of genuine argumentation.

Much of Elkins's career has been a testimony to stimulating conversation and argumentation on fundamental issues within a variety of contexts. His commitment to this ideal is evident in the nature of his publication record — he is a scholar who has produced provocative publications for the general public (*Pictures and Tears*; *What Painting Is*) and for academic specialists. In this latter category I am struck by the variety of disciplines he has addressed outside the field of art history: his articles have appeared in journals as diverse as *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, *Computer Graphics*, and *Current Anthropology*, to name but a few examples. I mention this achievement as a way not only to celebrate his productivity but also to underscore his genuine dedication to engaging a broad and diverse readership — and to do so in the form of exchange. In light of this goal of critical engagement, I might add that several of his publications are rhetorically poised as invitational arguments and framed as questions: “Who Owns Images: Science or Art?” or *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Most important, however, is the fact that many of his writings have been sparked initially by his response to the work of other scholars. He is stimulated by works that are powerful yet somehow incomplete or perhaps overly assured. As a consequence, he wants to revisit those moments of oversight as a means to expand analysis of a particular problem rather than offer a simple correction. He is equally inspired, as he is in this present lecture, when existing scholarship is silent on a particular issue. Whatever gaps or deficiencies are identified

by Elkins, he critiques them not in a spirit of one-upmanship but in hope of engaging present and future readers in thoughtful and spirited conversation.

Hans Aarsleff once characterized conversation between individuals as central to the German romantic enterprise.²⁰ Novalis, for example, apparently made little distinction between speaking and thinking — conversation was the primary source that fueled his creativity. Although I certainly do not align Novalis's romantic idealism with Elkins's current project, I do think that Elkins's earnest desire to encourage conversation between scholars (and between disciplines) is genuinely motivated by the sheer love of (and need for) exchange, and ideally an exchange that leads to a transformation of prevailing frameworks. This kind of productive conversation values the art of argumentation as a fundamentally creative endeavor. As such, arguments assume distinct shapes and become far more compelling when they are formed by the push and pull of exchange.

Having made allusion to a creative process that implies collectivity and partnership, I do not believe that Elkins envisions the forthcoming conversations to be overly polite, subdued affairs. My guess is that he looks forward to difficult yet engaged encounters — especially those that propose to meander in unexpected terrain.

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20. Hans Aarsleff, "After the Fall," *The New Republic*, December 31, 1990, 41.

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Master Narratives and Their Discontents

Let me propose that the history of writing on twentieth-century art presents a special kind of disorder, formed by the imperfect confluence of two discourses: art historical scholarship, mainly produced in universities in Europe and North America; and the uncounted number of reviews, brochures, and pamphlets produced worldwide. That second writing is a kind of wilderness, scattered with ephemeral exhibition catalogs and brief notices in local newspapers and haunted by the nearly invisible but increasingly oppressive presence of tens of thousands of artists' Web sites. The first kind of writing is concentrated on the principal artists in North America and western Europe; the second includes artists around the world, as well as minor, commercial, and regional artists within Europe and North America. It is a signal fact of the historiography of twentieth-century art that many countries are primarily represented by the second kind of literature: countries such as Paraguay, Cambodia, Macau, Egypt, and Uzbekistan have no tradition of university scholarship in art

history, and the history of their modernist art exists only in art criticism. (Or to say it the other way around: for much of the world, journalistic art criticism is art history.)

Given the outlandish proliferation of texts of both kinds, and their many hybrids inside and outside the university, it might be a reasonable assumption that there are any number of theories regarding which works, artists, concepts, and moments matter most. So it seems. But I have found surprisingly few accounts of twentieth-century art that do not reduce to several basic models. There are, first of all, the strains of modernism: some that still retain the flavor of anarchist or socialist hopes, others gnawed at by capitalist doubts, still others antipolitical or apparently apolitical. Against them, often, are the species of postmodern resistance or expansion: some generous and inclusive, others revisionist. The art historical literature is mainly informed by different instances of that particular disagreement. Outside of academic writing there are several more accounts of twentieth-century painting: one that is prevalent in newspapers and magazines has it that manual skill is the primary criterion for good painting, and another, just as widely disseminated in the mass media, depends on the assumption that painting, like all art, should have a moral or ethical purpose. Those two theories lead to very different senses of twentieth-century painting than either modernist or postmodernist arguments.

There are few competitors to those four approaches and their variants, and that is one of the mysteries of the current

state of writing on twentieth-century painting. Why shouldn't such a contested field generate more accounts of the shape of the century's achievements? Given the animus that was provoked in particular by Clement Greenberg's version of high modernism, and later by postmodern writing in and around the journal *October*, why haven't there been more efforts to come up with workable alternatives? Why hasn't the cumulative work of art historians, critics, and gallerists given rise to a proliferation of theories?

What I have in mind here is a preliminary accounting of these four major strategies for accounting for modern art: modernisms, postmodernisms, the valorization of skill, and the stress on politics. I am not contemplating a history, because that would require a book many times this size, and at least initially I am not thinking of a critical approach, because that would make it difficult to set out the basic claims. History and criticism have their places, but it seems to me there is so little writing that steps back and looks at differing versions of the century as a whole that it is important just to outline the salient approaches and make their differences as clear as possible. At the same time I have not tried to write an account that is wholly disengaged from the issues at hand. The accounts I give here are partial and occasionally partisan, because this text is also intended as a sounding board for further discussion.

Art historians and critics are normally preoccupied with the work at hand, and there is little writing on larger

questions. The exercise I have in mind involves changing the ordinary focus of day-to-day research to ask about the indispensable moments and works of twentieth-century art. What objects and ideas should count as essential? Which are overrated, mistakenly privileged, or otherwise marginal? I am interested in the principal answers that have been given to such questions, because they illuminate the theories that drive judgments of quality and judgments against quality. (And, in the inevitable sequel, judgments against judgment.) My double subject here is therefore the theories and the strange fact that there are so few of them.

A word, before I begin, about the odd word theory. There are theories of art: Panofsky had one, although he did not follow it when he wrote; Heinrich Wölfflin had one; even Bernard Berenson had one. There have been theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis in art; of Peircean semiotics; of Russian formalism; of deconstruction, reception theory, narratology, and many others. Such theories are intended, broadly speaking, to organize historical research, help direct interpretation, and provide criteria for the assessment of art historical knowledge. The changeable sum of theories has constituted a common concern of the discipline since the 1960s, and it constitutes a traditionally contentious definition of the discipline. Theory, in that strong sense, is not quite all of what I want to capture here. When I introduced the word in the second paragraph, I quickly substituted accounts, models, strains, and species. The word in my title is narratives.

By slipping from one word to another I do not mean to elide the problem of fixing what it is I am trying to describe. Rather it is a matter of allowing the named theories into this text when they are relevant but not needing to depend on them when the practices I am concerned with are more diffuse or ill-defined. Much of art writing has precious little to do with anything as formative or ambitious as theories. Art criticism can be structured more by whims, stances, proclivities, and other ephemeral choices, and art history can be written by scholars deeply absorbed in their material and incognizant of any structuring principles that might be given names.¹ The notion here is to capture the widest possible range of ideas about the shape of twentieth-century art. Some of those are theories, and others are better described in other ways. The crucial feature of each is that it is a kind of talking, or a way of writing, that gives the century's art a shape, an overall structure, a form.

This criterion, too, might seem strange. I am aware that by concentrating on writing that has changed the way the century appears to have been structured, I might be taken to be opening a discussion about exactly those theories I have just named. What, after all, has changed the way historians and critics think about the past more than gender studies, identity theory, or the several strains

1. The difference between stands, positions, and stances in art criticism is a subject of my *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2003). The absorptive side of art history is a subject of my *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

of feminism? Who has made a deeper impression on the very idea of historical writing than such theorists as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan? Theories, so it seems, must be at the heart of any inquiry that proposes to sort out the principal perspectives on the modernist past. If I omit theories in this account it is not from a sense that they are dispensable to the project of art history: the exact opposite is the case, and I doubt art history would be a recognizable, or even a very interesting, enterprise without these and other theories. But I find that theories have had, in the end, remarkably little effect on what I am calling the shape of the century: its main movements and isms; its indispensable artists, works, and moments; and even its guiding concepts and what used to be called ruling metaphors.

I cannot defend this approach at length in this context, but here are the main reasons I think that theories have had little effect on received models of twentieth-century art. First, theories have contributed many readings of individual works but have not yet been used to rethink the relative places of entire movements and schools. Semiotics, for example, has helped several generations of art historians rethink their objects, but it has not shifted the roster of artists who receive the preponderance of scholarly attention, or affected the list of movements and styles that continue to articulate modernism at the college and professional levels, or even altered the balance of North American and European interests in postwar art. Feminisms, literary theories, and psychoanalysis have led historians to look at any number of

previously ignored or marginal artists and artworks, but so far at least those new works have only adjusted, and not replaced, the canons of art history.²

Second, theories have not yet had measurable effects on the development of newer college-level textbooks. That is important because entry-level texts anticipate college-level pedagogy, which in turn guide students' interests as they go on to graduate study and professional-level work. It matters that theories do not play a part in introductory texts, and it is a good sign that new configurations of undergraduate curricula, and new fields such as visual studies, tend to mix expositions of theory with introductory historical material. At the same time it is important not to be sanguine about the apparently rapid development of the discipline of art history. One of my reasons for writing this book is to point to the ongoing importance of the broadest and, in some senses, least interesting models of twentieth-century art. They are the unnoticed foundation of our more alluring projects.³

In a longer format, I would argue that theories have affected the interpretation of art, but not enough of the art that is chosen, for interpretation to make a difference in the principal narratives of the century. Theories have had an effect at an

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2. This argument is continued and expanded in my *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120–23. On canons see my “Canon and Globalization in Art History,” in *Canons in Art History*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming). I thank Ian Patterson for his comments on this point.
 3. For these two reasons this argument is different from the one set out in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

entirely different level from the slow winnowing and settling of judgments concerning major movements and periods. The named theories, as they might be called, are a different kind of object than the one I am pursuing here: they will appear in this book but in mixed and fitful ways.