

How Close Can We Come To Admitting We're Really Writing Mostly About Ourselves?
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Lecture, 20 minutes
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Last year I was teaching an historiography class. The first few weeks I was often interrupted by a very articulate, extremely well-read but somewhat inscrutable Portuguese student named Pedro Paixão. He spoke in a diffident, abstract fashion, and it took me a while to understand that what he was essentially trying to do was deny the possibility of history itself. He had grown up reading Fernando Pessoa, Walter Benjamin, and Paul Celan, and he was deeply unconvinced that history is recoverable in any systematic or reliable fashion. Pedro is a filmmaker, not an art historian, and so he allowed himself to take the last step that Pessoa, Benjamin, and Celan all rigorously denied to themselves: he claimed that an art historical text only gives information about its author and its reader, and not its subject. For him, that was a melancholy position, but one that opened possibilities for speaking about art history that were denied to me and to the other members of the class—all of whom believed, in some fashion, that art history includes things true of the past that are effectively if not purely independent of our own interpretive desires. When his intentions became clear, I told him his position was arguable, but the class wasn't designed to address it; and I asked him why he had decided to take the class in the first place. He looked at me and said, in a very serious tone of voice, "To kill the teacher."

I'm going to let that anecdote hang in the air for a while: I'll return to it at the end. The title of my paper—that is, "How close can we come to admitting we're really writing mostly about ourselves?"—is meant to be a little less intractable than Pedro's comment. What I'd like to do is show that it is the question raised most acutely by social art history, or to put it the other way around, it's the question social art history is best equipped to answer. First I'll say some things about the old social art history; then I'll give my answer to Marc's question, and say where I think the old social art history has gone; and I'll end by saying why the newer forms of social art history point so clearly in the treacherous directions of my title and of Pedro's indulgent philosophy.

1. "Old" social art history.

First, as we all know, it is possible to write social art history in such a way that it seems dated: for example art history done with a forthright Marxist purpose, or with notions of society borrowed from Frederick Antal or Arnold Hauser. The various forms of the older social art history aren't my subject at the moment, but I'll note that it was

(and still is) a divided practice: half the time the historian is attending to the art “itself,” however that is construed, and the other half the time to the cultural surroundings. The two forms of attention inevitably—and sometimes painfully—come to appear as a separate undertakings.

The reason is simple, though it tends to be elided in the writing. Art historians are drawn to works for all sorts of reasons, and they’re seldom the reasons that they’re drawn to politics. In a typical mixture, an historian may love a painting because it reminds her of Giverny or some other place she’s been, or because she is in possession of some special information about the painting that no one else knows. At the same time, and in an entirely different part of her mind, she may also love socialism or feminism. Those loves may not have deep connections, and one of the hardest challenges for social art historians—and for the larger project of modernism itself—has been to try to fuse them into a unified account.

I don’t mean to say that most people’s politics aren’t deeply confused with their sense of self, and it has been argued that the impossibility of melting talk of politics into talk of painting is an essential indicator of modernism—in which case social art history is only following along, matching symptom to symptom. All I mean to indicate here is that social art historians have been especially beset by the problem of mismatched loves because it has been incumbent on them to knit their disparate desires into plausible patterns. The more determined the writer’s politics, the more those politics need to be fussed and finessed to ensure they remain of a piece with what seems to matter in the art. It is not a problem that can be solved.

2. “New” social art history.

With that first observation, I’ll turn to Marc’s question about what happened to such writing. The last ten or fifteen years have seen the growth of another social art history, one that I think is now really nothing other than the preeminent interpretive strategy in the discipline. It still doesn’t have a name, but it’s recognizable under the rubrics of media studies, visual studies, cultural studies, and visual rhetoric.

The old social art history is continuous with these new enterprises. And its continuity has some interesting, and even suspicious, hallmarks. Like the old social art history, the new visual studies are taken to be the optimal mode of speaking about art’s situation in a wider cultural setting. And like the old social art history, the newer practices rely on a stable of theorists: for the sake of a list, I’ll name Foucault, Bakhtin, Peirce, Warburg, Riegl, Bhabha, Zizek, De Man, and of course Hegel. The presiding genius is without doubt Walter Benjamin. I don’t want to expand on this roster except to observe that these writers tend to be cited as authority figures: they are quoted, but they not argued with; and most important, they are seldom related to their own social contexts. That creates—and I know I am being a little impolite here—fragile texts, where carefully contextualized interpretations of artworks are suddenly, unceremoniously interlarded with quotations from writers who might well have startled the artists who are being studied. Reading such texts, I often find myself wondering why the authors—that is, the contemporary ones, the heirs of social art history—don’t think it’s a problem that they could hardly begin to conceive what Manet could have said to De Man, or Morisot to Warburg. I’m sure some of you remember Leo Steinberg’s clever parting shot at the CAA several years ago, when he said something like: “I’ll close with a passage from the

most quotable writer I know: not Walter Benjamin but St. Augustine.” The subject was Michelangelo’s *Doni tondo*, so Steinberg’s choice would at least have had the virtue of not alarming the artist in question.

I’m not at all sure that we’re doing Benjamin any good by citing him so frequently, and for so many purposes, and by letting our citations imply that we’re sure what he was about. I don’t think it is at all clear what the “dialectical image” was for Benjamin, or how he understood melancholy in relation to collecting or allegory. Those are difficult, obscure questions, as the sprawling literature on Benjamin attests. So when Benjamin’s terms are used by art historians, they are apt to serve radically decontextualized purposes that are, at times, effectively independent of anything I can understand of Benjamin’s intent. And I often suspect that Benjamin serves more as a mine for quotations than a source that’s genuinely encountered. (There’s a simple way to gauge this, by the way, though it smacks a bit of C. P. Snow’s rude question about the Second Law of Thermodynamics: we could just take an exit survey of everyone in this room, and see how many have actually read the *Passagen-Werk*—even now that it’s out in a one-thousand-page English edition.) The same argument about quotations can be made in regard to art historians’ readings of Riegl (who stands, in part, for new subject-matter beyond painting, sculpture, and architecture) and of Warburg (who has stood at times for a renewed and radicalized subjectivity); and the argument could easily be extended to Bhabha, where a number of different passages, with widely differing purposes, have been pressed into service to underwrite claims of irremediable cultural hybridity.

So I’d say visual studies is the old social art history, in a new coat. It has its differences, and its bibliography is wholly refurbished. But like the old Marxist-feminist social art history, it is the open-ended study of art’s relation to the society, prodded and supported by a mixed group of past theorists. And why cite so many authorities? I think the usual reason would be that art historians look at more kinds of artifacts than ever before: but I wonder, in context of what I’ve been saying, if it isn’t also to escape the tyranny of the single authority—Marx. The newer practices sometimes buy an exhilarating eclecticism at the price of an evasiveness about theoretical models. At least in the older Marxist-feminist practices, the relation of art and society was clear: now, it is often the most deeply occluded subject in the whole project of writing art history.

3. Social art history is both unsurpassably true and very quickly dated.

I don’t want to be either anecdotal or hectoring about this, and I couldn’t claim the dual interest in art and politics, or the nomadic citations, are characteristics exclusive to social art history, old or new. But they bear a special significance in social art history that they don’t have in, say, semiotic or psychoanalytically inflected writing, and this is where I get to my main point.

Of all the interpretive tools in art history, social analyses are the most attentive to the texture of the artists’ lives—their countries and places, their senses of the ambient politics, their daily routines, their families and friends, and even their accustomed turns of speech. So when social art history strays from those very careful findings and lurches toward foreign theorists, it does more damage to itself—to its own writing—than other interpretive methods that already have one foot in the camp of ahistorical philosophy and theory. That damage, in turn, raises the question of the historian’s place in history. What

kind of author is it, I find myself asking, who can feel so at home in the Paris of the 1860s that she can argue with the newspapers and mount sophisticated critiques of the current art, but remain somehow dependent on, and weirdly reverent about, certain doctrines of literary theory invented a hundred years later? Or, to put it as a question of voice: what kind of author is it who can take glancing references to Bakhtin, Warburg, Benjamin, or Hegel as adequate explanations of her own relation to the historical material at hand?

It's possible to construct a pocket history of social art history, by noting how much of a given text can be read as a projection of the historian's personal interests. Thus (for example) Alfred Barr is now taken as a symptom of high modernism, and certainly not as a reliable source for the history of movements. In the historiography of mannerism, Dvorak and Friedlaender seem clearly of their time; and I think it is possible to argue the same for Shearman. (The argument, I think, could employ a parallel between Shearman's interest in an intellectual, untortured, "silver-tongued" *maniera*, and pop art, which was contemporaneous with his first essays.) Some social art historians even launch this kind of critique in order to get their own accounts started, by way of mildly discrediting their forbears. Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art*, for instance, begins with a social analysis of Riegl and Semper, before it even adumbrates the social history of artworks.

It's even possible to tell the history of an entire nation's art historical scholarship in this fashion, by explaining historians' interests as projections of their own social contexts: Hans Belting has written an excellent book proposing a story like that for the history of German art history from the Renaissance onward.

I'm arguing that social art history is both unsurpassably true and very quickly dated. What's curious about this is that the method of adjudication—the method by which we weigh the efforts of our predecessors—largely *is* social art history. How else would we know that Barr's milieu is relevant to his writing? How else would we know about Dvorak's, or Friedlaender's, politics? Social art history provides the best test for historical veracity, but it has no autoimmunity—and that, I think, is a very strange situation.

Any historical writing is also, eventually, and sometimes from the moment it appears, writing about the writer. Social art history is different only because its texts trumpet the very connections between artists and their society that are used by historiographers to date older texts. They call for their own destruction more plangently than other kinds of writing.

4. A philosophic thought-experiment.

Let me put it as a philosophic thought-experiment. For several decades now, there has been a critique of social art history available, which some people continue to take as an adequate characterization or definition of social art history. It goes like this. A social art historian must choose among three alternatives:

(a) First, she can try explaining the artworks in terms of their surrounding society, so that works are illuminated by contemporaneous politics and ideologies. In that scheme, artworks are the unknown terms, and society is the given. The historian's work can seem like it's only a matter of studying "social constructions of the artist," rather than actual artists.

(b) Or she can do the opposite, and write about the society as it is influenced by the presence of artworks, making society the unknown, and artworks more-or-less known, or self-evident, or automatically interpretable quantities.

(c) And third, she can forswear either of those options, and write as if the artwork and its society are inextricable members of a single enterprise, which has then to be called “culture” or maybe just “meaning.”

Some of the best social art historians have drifted, in past decades, from the first option to the third, though it should be said the third is also a cover for writers who just aren’t interested in working out exactly how meaning travels between works and society.

This third possibility has been thoroughly investigated in literary criticism. The best example, I think, is Steven Knapp’s critique of New Historicism, in which Knapp argues that aesthetics bears upon social meaning. He takes note of the fact that critics tend to make amalgams out of the artwork and the society, and that those hybrids lose the founding interest of social history, which has always been what the artworks and their contexts might say about current social practices. “An interest in the-Tudor-state-as-suggested-by-the-theater,” Knapp says (and the phrase, “the-Tudor-state-as-suggested-by-the-theater,” is all hyphenated), “is no longer very clearly an interest in the state.” (Knapp, *Literary Interest: On the Limits of Anti-Formalism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 105—and I thank Martin Donougho for that reference.) In other words, there are severe problems inherent in the third option, which threaten to dissolve it into an evasive enterprise, freed of any strong claims about meaning, politics, or explanation—the historian simply writes about culture as she sees fit, without coming to terms with what seems to need explanation, and why it needs it, and how an adequate explanation can proceed.

In outline, that is the three-stage explanation of social art history. What I want to know is this. Given that the three choices still appear to bound the field regardless of how they are adjusted or compounded by qualifications, where is the account itself in terms of our historical awareness? Wouldn’t it be interesting to place *it* somewhere in history? (Somewhere more specific than Hegel’s philosophy of history? Somewhere around the debates on structuralism in the 1960’s?) And once we’ve done that—I mean to say this is something someone should do—*then* where will social art history be?

That is the real fourth step in the explanation, the one that makes the thought-experiment interesting and potentially viable as a model for social art history.

5. The concluding exhortation.

So, in conclusion: I really do think we are all writing mostly about ourselves, and if I needed to prove that, I would just unfurl one of those long cartoon scrolls, inscribed with the endless list of names of art historians who are no longer read by people who want to know about the past. No one reads Winckelmann to learn about the Greeks. Vasari is read, but as a document of his own times: no one takes him seriously as a historian of Roman and medieval art. No one reads Rumohr to find out about the Renaissance. And so on.

As a general rule, only two kinds of art historical texts seem to be infused with truth: those written in the last three decades or so, and those written back in the time of the artists we’re studying. Most of us don’t read sources more than thirty years old to find out about our subjects. Renaissance art historians, for example, don’t care what art

historians said about Michelangelo in 1910. (People who study the nineteenth century are more likely to use the full range of sources from the time of Manet, say, to the present, but even in that case there are large and growing lacunae—for instance much of German scholarship, and work done outside western Europe. Those gaps in our bibliographies, which tend to be seen as matters of culture and language, are really just the beginnings of voids in the scholarship that will only open wider as artists like Manet recede into the more distant past.)

Like a chameleon, older art history takes on the colors and patterns of its surroundings. Soon enough after this conference is over, we are all going to be read—if we're read at all—as evidence of the art world of the late 1990s. The historical truth will bleed out of our essays, and they will become pale records of our lives and times—pale in part because their life's blood is the delusion that they need not speak about the relation between our lives and our subjects' lives.

That's my pessimistic conclusion, and I'll draw three morals from it: one for art history in general, another for social art historians, and a third for artists like Pedro.

First, as art historians in general, we might consider becoming more reflective about our writing. There is no escaping the fact that our books and essays will disappear among the endless unread publications that academia produces each year. It is possible that a few texts written by people in this room may be consulted in thirty years' time, but I doubt it. There is no escape from the oblivion that greets every effort in this discipline. Luckily, though, there is still plenty of room to work at our writing, making it richer, more engaged and expressive, and less susceptible to the hemorrhage of historical truth. I don't mean there should be more first-person narratives: it is not necessary to compromise the serious tone that needs to be adopted to counter the tide of loose art writing. Rather we need to reflect on our capacities as authors and on our sense of art history's purpose. It's our writing that needs to become deeper and better if we hope to survive beyond that thirty-year mark.

Second, as social art historians, we might consider trying to take advantage of what often counts as the razor's edge of veracity. A text that speaks with confidence about a given class configuration (for example, the bourgeoisie and the rise of the modernist avant-garde), can only seem odd when it refuses to broach the issue of the author's class situation. Again I don't mean that historical accounts should be interrupted by confessions. But a reader who follows an argument about the dissemination of the avant-garde and the economy of kitsch, a history which often depends on a partial lack of awareness on the part of artists and consumers, will necessarily be led to wonder how the author could achieve an adequate awareness of the history as a whole. How has the author escaped the various false consciousnesses that pin her subjects onto the grid of bourgeois history? An answer to that kind of question might well come from a social analysis that reaches up to, and encompasses, the author's own place in art and history. In that fashion social art history could deepen and strengthen itself, instead of providing the instruments for its own dismemberment.

And one last moral, for artists like Pedro: consider, I'd say, that it is easier to kill the teacher than come to terms with how we're all caught in the snares of historical awareness.