Art History after Aesthetics: A Provocative Introduction

Robert Zwijnenberg and Claire Farago

The discipline of art history has always aimed to do justice to the complexity of works of art in their compelling visuality, taking the relationship between particular works of art and their individual beholders as the field's primary object of investigation. In this respect, this book is no different from any traditional art historical inquiry. The following essays, however, articulate questions that contemporary art historians generally dismiss as ahistorical or anachronistic or—worse yet—philosophical, implying that "anything goes" when a work of art is approached "philosophically." In her contribution to this volume, Michael Ann Holly cogently articulates the conundrum at the core of our enterprise: "The very materiality of objects with which we deal presents historians of art with an interpretive paradox absent in other historical inquiries, for works of art are both lost and found, both present and past, at the same time." According to Holly, the typical art historical enterprise is characterized by "a compulsion to recover a certain something long since forgotten or lost," that is, things such as provenance, individual intentions, physical settings, and so on. More pointedly, she asks: "Are these the only kind of questions that art historians should be asking: Whodunnit? Or whatisit?"

These essays address some of the "other" questions. We invited our contributors to write about what they actually see, touch, and experience when confronted with a "historical" work of art—that is, to focus on their particular experience of one of those peculiar objects of historical inquiry that, in seeming defiance of time itself, is still with us today. An
intrinsic part of every work of art is that it can still be seen and touched. We conventionally understand works of art as objects whose significance transcends the historical circumstances of their making partly for this reason. Precisely and paradoxically, it is the materiality of the object—its "compelling visuality," to cite Holly once again—that is at once affected and (miraculously) unaffected by time. To this compelling presence, visual and otherwise, the discipline of art history has offered no answer—and certainly no sustained critique—other than to retreat to conventional forms of historical inquiry: art historians value the same things as historians concerned with past events. We investigate what is no longer here and no longer seen, such as provenance, the artists' and the patrons' intentions, and the physical setting in which a given work was formerly displayed. In this anthology, documentation of historical production and historical reception are not the primary objectives. Instead, philosophers with interests in art and art historians with an interest in philosophical problems explore the implications of their own firsthand experiences as beholders. The variety of perspectives is enhanced by the fact that the contributors to this volume come from different disciplines (art history, philosophy, comparative literature, and history) and from various countries with different intellectual traditions (the United States, Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands).

Our insistence on these facts of difference points to an acute problem that we faced in the process of articulating certain ideas in an interdisciplinary framework. Ideas are, of course, expressed in words, which are concrete entities with histories of their own: to cite a significant example of a problematic word, does the English "reality" refer to the field of social relations, to the external world of appearances, or to the existent or actual in a strictly conceptual sense? The word "reality" used without further explanation ignores epistemological slippages that occur between the seams of various disciplinary formations and across languages.

For example: in his contribution to this volume, native Dutch-speaking philosopher Frank Ankersmit uses the English word "reality," which for him is intellectually rooted in a Dutch word, in circulation since the fourteenth century, that has a German cognate but does not exist in the English language. That word is werkelijkheid, equivalent to the German word die Wirklichkeit. The Dutch word realiteit, on the other hand, was borrowed from the French réalité (derived from the Latin realitas, the root of which is res, meaning "thing") only at the end of the seventh century. In modern garden-variety Dutch, realiteit and werkelijkheid are synonymous, although the conceptual differences between them are audible in philosophical texts such as Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1781), where Kant describes Wirklichkeit as "Was mit den materiellen Bedingungen der Erfahrung (der Empfindung) zusammenhängt." [What is related to the material conditions of experience (sensation)]. Realität, according to Kant, is "das, was einer Empfindung überhaupt korrespondiert" [that which corresponds to a perception in any way]. Without doubt, these nuances inform Eric Auerbach's choice of Wirklichkeit in the subtitle to his internationally influential work Mimesis, dargestelle Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur (1946; translated as The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, 1947). For Auerbach, as for Ankersmit, there is no Wirklichkeit outside literary or artistic representations, and no representation is transparent or comprehensive. For this reason, infinite representations of reality are possible. But the distinction between Wirklichkeit and Realität is problematic in English because the word "reality" is the only translation for both the Germanic equivalents and the Latinate cognates. We need to mention that the original Dutch connotation of werkelijkheid, meaning to take an active interest in worldly values as opposed to a theological interest in spiritual values, is completely lost in translation.

Epistemological slippages owing to the history of various languages, and to customary usage recognized within but not across various disciplines, are only the beginning of the problem. Certain ideas, couched in words such as "reality," as a variety of twentieth-century thinkers have noticed, are epistemologically complex and in need of unpacking for other reasons—such as being philosophically unclear, or inextricable from certain historically specific worldviews. The initial Dutch connotations of werkelijkheid are a case in point.

The notion that die Wirklichkeit does not exist outside representation is modern—as Heidegger most famously proposed in his essay about modernity ushering in the age of the world as picture, that is, of "reality" as a human construct that renders the world accessible, transparent, and controllable. In some quarters today, such as the ever widening circles of Lacanian studies, the philosophical ambiguities implied today in the Enlightenment concept of reality that Heidegger critiqued are the site of a complex theoretical discussion—as the Lacanian distinction between "the real" and "reality," meaning the field of social relations,
immediately signals. Of course, there is no consensus even among Lacanians, let alone among a more general intellectual audience, on the exact nature of either the real or reality—in fact, their respective natures are the main subject of investigation in a variety of intellectual arenas inside and outside the field of psychoanalysis.

The contributors to the present volume are by no means all Lacanians, though some are to some degree. None of us could, however, make do with a Lacanian notion of “reality” as the represented world of social relations for one basic, indisputable reason: our subject of investigation is not the direct representation of social or political reality (some would add, were such a thing possible) but rather the role of artistic representation—and the mediated relationship between the two “symbolic orders” of artistic and political or social representation, to use the Lacanian term for representation, is our object of investigation. In other words, we cannot import psychoanalytic theory wholesale—Lacan’s semiotic explanation of the formation of the self developed on the basis of Freud, or any other theory about social reality—into the study of material culture. How such theory is applicable or adaptable to the study of works of art is the intellectual labor to be undertaken if we choose to use social theory at all.

As difficult as the conscientious translation of words and terms can quickly become, the problems raised in the process of editing this volume of essays also provided us with an intellectual breath of fresh air, so to speak, that we hope to share with our readers. The dialogue that emerged between the editors and with our contributors heightened everyone’s awareness of some egregious disciplinary blind spots—by which we mean arbitrary assumptions rooted in disciplinary conventions (such as the use of the word “reality”) that merit attention and careful consideration, especially when ideas are developed in an inter-, intra-, or, better, post-disciplinary context.

To return to the core argument of this introduction—the theme of this volume: what happens when the presence of a given work of art in a given contemporary viewer’s experience is theorized as part of a historical interpretation? That is, what happens if instead of denying or discounting the materiality of the work, we take our experience of it explicitly into account? Our response to a given painting, for example, is directed by who and what we are, what we know, and where we situate ourselves in society. In this volume, nine scholars make their personal experience and involvement an active element of interpretation. A sculpture or painting is defined or demarcated not only by knowledge of who made it, when and why, and for what purpose, external or internal, or even within which historical, intellectual, and economic context, but also—and not least—by its significance or value to us, contemporary beholders. The meaning of the work of art can only be known in a confrontation with a beholder who is “enthusiastic” in the ancient Greek sense of the word: in a moment of enthusiasm, we lower our defenses, allowing the work of art to touch or even overwhelm us. As conscientious historians, how can this initial moment of enthusiasm function as an impetus to, and guideline for, interpreting the possible meaning of the work of art?

Of course, art historians are well aware that a work of art is more than its reconstructed history. We would not want this volume to suggest otherwise—and several contributions testify to the self-reflexive capacity of art historical inquiry. Everybody “knows” that what we call a work of art is a work of art because it provokes a special subjective experience that we usually call an aesthetic experience. A number of art historians have testified eloquently to the ways in which they have been moved by the presence of an object in the midst of their historical labors. It is not at all common practice, however, to acknowledge the formative role of this personal experience in art historical methodology and the analysis of works of art. We treat descriptions of an aesthetic experience as an excursus that informs us about the author and adds color to his or her text. Unlike essayists of earlier generations such as Walter Pater, or connoisseurs past and present working in the tradition of Bernard Berenson (whose expertise serves the explicit purpose of assigning value to the object), most scholars today deny or refuse to recognize that their engaged, embodied responses constitute an intrinsic and necessary part of scholarly investigation. In this anthology, we question this attitude by treating the personal response of the beholding scholar as intrinsic to the sequence of analysis that results in an interpretation.

So what do we gain from making our personal, subjective responses part of the argument? The nine essays included here address this question in widely different ways. However, before reading them, it might be useful to ponder the concept of “personal response” a bit further. In our view, to regard personal response as a constitutive element of interpretation does not necessarily lead to unrestrained or undocumentedable
interpretation. The act of representation creates its own conditions of reception that deserve to be acknowledged and respected in the interpretative act. This entails recognizing that no subject position exists outside the historical continuum: the work of art and the successive generations of interpreters exist in the same dynamic flow of time. Therefore, the form of the interpretation—its method and style of presentation—must be suited to these circumstances. It follows that a deductive method, a methode universals, is not appropriate. The most important consequence of acknowledging our contingent position as viewing subjects (and it is the central thesis of this volume) is that the interpretation of a work of art, which is by definition a concrete, individual object, requires a methode particularis. This means that the choice of theoretical instruments and the vocabulary of interpretation are more or less (or as far as possible) motivated by the work of art.

The interpreter should also make clear why the given work of art necessitates the method of interpretation chosen. Mutatis mutandis, if an interpreter deploys her or his personal response as an element of the argument, this response also needs to be justified in and by the interpretation. As Parnesky articulated his hermeneutic method (in an essay that has in turn been criticized for privileging texts as the ground of interpretation), an initial personal response to a painting or other work of art can prove incorrect for any number of reasons, and thus response is directed (and corrected) by historical knowledge. However, if we want to talk sensibly about a work of art of the Renaissance or Baroque period, for example, then—in addition to researching the historical data—we must also understand our personal perceptual and affective response in a way that allows for scholarly refutation. For example, Renée van de Vall, in her essay on Rembrandt’s self-portraits included here, demonstrates that the known fact that Rembrandt painted his own face inevitably affects our response. But we may also wonder, with her, if our response can ever be adequate when the sitter’s identity is in doubt. Thus van de Vall runs up against a difficulty that Parnesky clearly saw but could not solve in a satisfactory way: what is the value of our personal response, if we must admit that our response can always be refuted by historical data as yet unknown to us? Van de Vall tries to resolve this difficulty by analyzing her initial response to the faces that Rembrandt painted. Her ensuing investigation transforms the historical and textual evidence that Rembrandt’s paintings are self-portraits from a premise into an open question.

As van de Vall’s essay suggests, the interpretative role played by the historian’s personal experience with the work of art, situated in his or her own cultural milieu, is our common theme. Georges Didi-Huberman discusses the inevitability of anachronism in art historical research by showing that his own description of Fra Angelico’s frescoes at San Marco is grounded in his knowledge of Jackson Pollock’s paintings. In a similar vein, Mieke Bal demonstrates that contemporary understandings of Bernini’s sculpture of Saint Theresa depend on an understanding of modern sculpture. Both Didi-Huberman and Bal produce interpretations that are anachronistic in essence (thus challenging art historians’ fears of anachronism) without placing themselves outside the historical continuum. Their innovative methods also permit historically grounded refutations to be made. In other words, their subjective experience does not produce a purely subjective interpretation.

The same can be said of the other authors, who in most cases turn to contemporary philosophical theories and ideas to verbalize their response to concrete works of art—whether pleasurable or unsettling. Claire Farago, who describes her approach to Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks as the converse of Bal’s, considers the contemporary historian’s subjective experience to better understand how the object framed historical beholders’ experience of it, and thereby to address the larger question of how objects constitute their subjects. She maintains that the second-order objective, exponentially more complex but part of the same continuum, is to understand the socially constructed nature of the contemporary investigator’s experience as it is expressed in and by the study.

How the historian establishes distance (or difference of any kind) from his or her object of study is one of the leading threads running through this volume. We encourage our readers to ask how this distance or difference then operates in the text, and how the difference established by the text constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. Mieke Bal makes use of Benjamin’s notions of translation; Renée van de Vall refers to Levinas’s philosophical discussion of the Other; Robert Zwijnenberg relies on Herder to explain his unease with the bodily presence of Leonardo’s Saint John; Michael Ann Holly remembers Heidegger’s essay
on van Gogh's shoes and Derrida's response to elucidate her fascination with the underdrawing of a Van Eyck painting. Frank Ankersmit, on the other hand, inverts the relationship between personal experience and philosophy by making his childhood experience of boredom into a powerful heuristic instrument in his discussion of rococo ornament. But because all the authors conceptualize their initial, felt responses, they are able to integrate their personal aesthetic experience into the sequence of argument that results in a historically grounded interpretation. By "performing" their roles as beholders, the authors construct the context of the work in relation to their own subject positions. The voice of the interpreter is explicitly located, rather than hovering nebulously outside the framework of interpretation.

In all nine essays, personal response is both object and subject of an interpretation that communicates something about the interpreter and about the work of art. The authors demonstrate that scholarly interpretation is necessarily entangled with personal involvement with the work of art. Every interpretation is, by extension, a self-reflexive act in which the beholder is not neutral but actively involved bodily and intellectually. All the essays are therefore also theoretical meditations on issues such as the relationship between a work of art and its beholders, the subjectivity of the interpreter at the center of interpretation, the inevitable use of anachronism in all historical interpretation, the relationship between material presence and historical absence in a work of art, the coexistence of multiple valid interpretations, and the difference between description and interpretation. In the penultimate essay, by Oskar Batschmann, these themes are taken up in the guise of describing the process of interpreting a painting by Poussin. We can read Batschmann's essay as a critical evaluation of theoretical themes important to our experiment as a whole.

The final essay, by Donald Preziosi, serves as an epilogue to the volume. Preziosi treats Soane's early-nineteenth-century house museum as the work of art Soane saw it as, which was, in accord with the aims of many earlier humanists and collectors from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century, an instrument of contemplation and reflection. But Soane's project was framed by the larger enterprise of Freemasonry and its concern with shaping spatial experience as an agent for shaping character in the modern world. Preziosi understands Soane's Museum as a transitional institution between older humanist practices of the self and the interests of modern museology and art history as instruments of modernizing nation-states.

All the essays in this book are experiments that suggest possible ways of reshaping art history. We urge readers to use this anthology not merely as a collection of independent chapters but as texts dialogically engaged with one another in an ongoing discussion about the value and importance of personal response as an element of interpretation. Our expectation is that, taken as a whole, these essays demonstrate the importance (and, even more fundamentally, the possibility) of making the material presence of works created at other moments in time an intrinsic feature of historical writing. We hope the volume will provoke further critiques of the unique challenges and opportunities that works of art and other forms of material culture offer to the problematic of historical inquiry.

The aim of this anthology is more ambitious than demonstrating that art history is no longer a unified field of study or even the sole parent discipline for analyzing visual images, or that the theoretical inspiration of art historical practitioners is both diverse and eclectic. Our starting point is the class of historical objects that we have, since the eighteenth century but not earlier, called works of fine art, and that comprise a great diversity of material objects. As art historians, we recognize styles and periods in the history of art, but our labels and classificatory schemes are not intrinsic characteristics of particular objects—rather, they are extrinsically imposed in and through the act of interpretation. It is our contention that, to do justice to the differences between individual works of art, we need to consider our present-day personal responses to them rigorously.

We offer, therefore, not a cross section of modern strategies of interpretation but rather an experiment (or series of experiments) in interdisciplinary practice, focused on European art of the early modern period that shaped the category “fine art” and the activity of aesthetic contemplation. Objects and activities that are conventionally identified with Renaissance and Baroque styles, therefore, become the basis for an anthropological study turned inward, on the history of our own society, for the purpose of locating “art” as both a historical category and a dynamic ritual that today maintains collective memory in diverse cultural settings around the globe.
CHAPTER ONE

Ecstatic Aesthetics:
Metaphoring Bernini

Mieke Bal

While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”

The image of a royal robe with ample folds cannot today but evoke that historical aesthetic and its contemporary counterpart that we associate with Gilles Deleuze (1993), with the idea of the fold. The image is thoroughly baroque. Walter Benjamin, whose work on German baroque drama has inspired extensive philosophical commentary on the baroqueness of his thought as exemplary of modernity in general, is here speaking not about art but about language. Comparing the task of the translator with that of the poet, Benjamin creates a powerful image of the translator’s product as both rich (royal) and encompassing (ample), expansive yet enveloping.

His essay on translation, in line with his more straightforwardly philosophical musings on language, takes an explicit position against the idea of translation as derivative. Instead it proposes a philosophy of language in which the translation serves not the original but the liberation and release of its potential, which he calls “translatability” and which is located in that which resists translation. Although his essay—somewhat embarrassingly to our postmodern taste—abounds in organic metaphors, essentialism, and a terminology of purity, the gist of his philosophy of language through translation can be seen, retrospectively, as a critique