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PREFACE

One of the primary obstacles to rethinking the discipline of art history has been the segmentation of our archives. The sheer volume of studies that pre-date the current turn of attention toward identity formation and away from essentialising myths of identity is daunting. In practice, the prospect of training future generations to think differently is hindered because amassing expertise in even one of the longstanding specialisations requires many years of study. Further, yet even more fundamental, obstacles are the epistemological structures that underpin our vast storehouses of knowledge. How to introduce students and general readers to the primary sources without also passing on values that may no longer be tenable? This is an intractable problem unless we frame our inherited texts differently, unless we listen to every voice – contemporary and historical – with an ear open to the position from which they speak. As studies of gender, and of gendering processes, first insisted, all positions are partial and all perspectives are strategic and vested, including the preface you are reading now. There is no escape from the individual responsibility to think critically about all forms of received knowledge. Celebration of past scholarship and veneration of primary sources has never been enough in any open society.

If, on the other hand, the highest form of respect is critical engagement with our inheritance, then the present volume of key primary and secondary sources offers an important contribution in encouraging well-informed, intelligent questioning. And one of its key strategies is mixing periods, texts and cultural histories to emphasise interconnections across the internal boundaries that informed the field of art history in the nineteenth century. It would be shortsighted, in any case, to throw the baby out with the bathwater. For not only would we lose sight of a rich European cultural heritage for writing about and making art, deeply problematic as its configurations might have become in certain respects today, but without an understanding of what makes this inherited discourse troubling, future generations will only reproduce the same problems in displaced form.
If a central aim of the humanities in general has been to shape individual moral character derived from values within the western tradition, then, in today's world, the educational responsibility is to raise awareness of what it means to behave ethically regarding everyone's cultural legacy. In the present volume, critical introductions frame each of the fifty selections ranging from ancient accounts with long European histories to contemporary voices interrogating that same legacy. Considered together, these layered texts that interlace generations of thinkers take a pluralistic approach to the knotted problem of teaching and transforming our archives.

An interesting inversion of institutional authority results from practising an anti-canonical approach to canonical texts. The emphasis in this volume is on contemporary writers, although a few examples representing the construction of the pre-modern western tradition of writing about art are included. Other than organising the selections chronologically, the editors make no attempt to synthesise the voices within into one coherent narrative - the disruptions of style, content and stance result from the way in which participating authors were given freedom to choose their own texts and critical strategies. Some, such as the essay introducing Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's classic intervention into the 'patriarchie' of art history, offer a short historical overview. Others, such as the essays introducing Deleuze and Guattari's Thousand Plateaus (1980), and Wöllflin's Principles of Art History (1915), offer summaries of the authors' strategies and conceptual framework. Juxtaposing texts written for such different times invites productive comparisons.

Many of the sampled texts originate outside the field of art history but are essential reading for anyone wishing to understand its historical premises for the sake of writing and thinking differently today. And for the future of a practice that seeks to undermine the historically European division of labour into writing about art and making art, it is significant how many of the contributing authors are both artists and critics/historians of art: Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland might have been in the vanguard, but today's artists are expected also to verbally articulate a critical position. And the same might be anticipated of art historians in the future. This volume is especially relevant for contemplating such a doubled engagement with art and art history.

Professor Claire Farago

INTRODUCTION

Art histories, art theories and the ‘post-canonical’

The initial aim for Fifty Key Texts in Art History is to provide a companion volume for Art History: The Basics (Pooke and Newall 2008). The earlier book had various aspirations, the principal of which was to provide an accessible and academically grounded art history primer for new discipline communities. The text introduced and explored both past and more recent theoretical approaches to the subject, for the student - of art history or art practice - or interested general reader. Fifty Key Texts in Art History is an anthology of critical commentaries on a spectrum of art historical theories and texts, introducing the reader to an extensive range of primary and secondary sources across the discipline - from the classical period to the cusp of the twenty-first century. A corresponding volume of critical commentaries on photography edited by Mark Durden, Fifty Key Texts on Photography, will be appearing shortly.

In the last few decades, anthologies of art historical texts and commentaries have been influential in providing wider access to some of the theories and issues which inform and situate contemporary art historical discourse. Although any selection of texts will inevitably have a certain contingency, we believe that their strength and resonance is in bringing together accessible introductions to a range of themes, issues and debates within art history. This anthology contains evaluative and critical commentaries on texts which have been chosen and written by thirty-two contributors. The selection includes some recent interventions as well as others which have been overlooked in terms of earlier coverage, have been influential on the development of the discipline or have been subject to more recent scholarly attention and re-interpretation. In particular, there was a perception of a need for an anthology which attempted to reflect some of the emerging priorities and themes within art history, especially in the context of globalisation, postcolonialism and contemporary ideas on the instabilities of gender and identity.