

What has become of the New Art History?

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Are we currently living and operating in a period after the New Art History? Or is this project still underway? Is it just reaching its climax? Where can we (in various parts of Europe and the world) locate ourselves on this axis? These were the questions addressed at the conference “After the ‘New Art History’”¹, organised by the *Journal of Art Historiography* and held at the Barber Art Gallery, University of Birmingham, during the 26th and 27th March 2012.

1.

The New Art History was first discussed under this name (albeit with a question mark)² exactly thirty years ago while summarising the developments that had begun during the 1970s. The fertility and visibility of critical theory, as well as other fundamental changes (such as the increasing involvement of the art of minorities; feminist and postcolonial discourse; disrupting a single dominant narrative; the emergence of micro-histories) that then entered the debates over art history were the very topic of this colloquium.

Already the fact that the event celebrated anniversaries and jubilees in many ways justified looking at the breaks and turns of the last thirty-fourty years (and their consequences). Besides the New Art History’s ‘birthday’, it was exactly ten years since the controversial closure of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, operating at the University of Birmingham. Closing down an institute that had been shaping the whole field of Cultural Studies, the Birmingham School (Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Angela McRobbie, Dick Hebdige etc.)³ that had played a relevant – though perhaps indirect – part in the birth of New Art History was, too, dismantled.

The New Art History as a specific term was rooted with a volume⁴ by the same title from 1986, this time without a question mark already. Some years later Norman Bryson’s

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¹ The conference programme and abstracts are available online: University of Birmingham, www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/lcahm/departments/historyofart/events/2012/after-the-new-art-history.aspx [accessed 20th May 2013].

² Back in 1982, the conference “The New Art History?” was organised by the Middlesex Polytechnic, London, and the magazine of (visual) culture *Block*, published from 1979 to 1989, quickly becoming a certain platform for radical art historians. See also *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*. Eds. George Robertson, Melinda Mash. London, New York: Routledge, 1996.

³ See Norma Schulman, *Conditions of their Own Making: An Intellectual History of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham*. – *Canadian Journal of Communication* 1993, vol. 18, no. 1, <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/717/623> [accessed 19th April 2012].

⁴ *The New Art History*. Eds. A. L. Rees, Frances Borzello. London: Camden Press, 1986.

anthology of French critical thinkers (Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Marin, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes among others),⁵ however, preferred to interpret the New Art History as an umbrella term for critical theory as well as the whole range of turns and shifts within the humanities that also began to shake art history, both internally and externally. In the United States the New Art History has never had quite the same meaning. The last comprehensive attempt to offer an overview of the New Art History as a phenomenon was made by Jonathan Harris in 2001⁶.

The current conference also revealed that even an unequivocal definition of the New Art History produces huge difficulties.

2.

In the light of the subsequent speakers the keynote paper by Griselda Pollock (University of Leeds) turned out to be raising key issues indeed. She claimed to dislike most of the art history produced today, and posed a provocative question: Has anything fundamentally changed over the last thirty or forty years? She argued that in spite of everything, art history is still centered around (white) men, still chronological, colonised, hierarchical, still largely oriented at classifying and labelling. Pollock thus heatedly called into question the actual impact of these allegedly radical reorganisations, or their scope to be more precise. Have the decades of efforts by many art historians really produced nothing but a slight shift in perspective, a mere readjustment of the discipline?



Figure 1 Griselda Pollock (left) in discussion with Claire Farago. Photo by author.

⁵ See *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*. Ed. Norman Bryson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Bryson has also been the editor-in-chief of the monographic series “Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism”, published since 1994.

⁶ See Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001.

For Pollock the New Art History embodied a sort of a U-turn – an absolute redefinition of previous research, owing thanks for this accomplishment to the work of T. J. Clark since the 1970s (whereas in the US similar debates had independently started in the 1960s already). The problem lies in the fact that even a phenomenon as wide and influential as the social history of art (Clark's New Art History is primarily Marxist, while Pollock's is feminist) is often seen as simply another means to diversify the picture. Another speaker from Leeds, who was also concerned with feminism, Joanne Heath, found that the radical feminism of the 1970s has by now become a fully qualified and academic methodological tool, but it is precisely this tendency that was in the focus of what Pollock was warning us about: feminism becoming merely one point of view among many. It is true, much has changed over the decades – the issues raised by radicals back then have largely become obvious to people today. But does this mean that the goals have been achieved? Are these past questions relevant today at all?

As far as Pollock is concerned, reproducing power and difference could by no means be considered accidental side effects of (the writing of) art history. The impact of ideologies is not indirect, nor is the theoretical level avoidable. And yet, according to her, contemporary art history still seems to be primarily engaged in – be it unconscious or (even worse if) conscious – creating idealised depictions of Western culture.

3.

At least partly the roots of such distortions of the original aims have been woven into the project of New Art History from the beginning (or there has possibly been a lack in knowhow in taking full advantage of the challenges⁷ posed to the 'old art history'). Rina Arya (University of Wolverhampton) aptly pointed to the disservice that came with the best intentions of the New Art History – it offered a platform for marginalised groups, but at the same time de-politicised their forms of expression, using categories that in reality amplified difference: feminist art, black art, the art of postcolonial countries etc. This way of bringing these phenomena to the table nothing but promoted labelling, which is now already difficult to leave behind. However, Arya herself fell into the same trap to an extent, also focusing on the single problematic phenomenon of black art.

Arya discussed the criteria by which belonging to (or defining of) these categories occurs – after all, there rarely are clear cut cases: many, if not most artists could only be located at the boundaries of multiple phenomena. Not all black artists automatically and exclusively make 'black art', not to mention the gender or other minorities within each minority group. Could a non-black artist fit that category, under any circumstances? Or does even the audience have to be black for adequate appreciation? Do questions of aesthetics even apply to such types of art, or does it exclusively revolve around identity?

In this context – and in addition to the nation-based self-restraint (i.e. the tendency that researchers frighteningly often focus on the art of their own region/state/nation alone, at least when originating from small nations themselves) – it is not perhaps surprising that even today research on minorities is predominantly carried out by representatives of these same 'minorities': feminists tend to be women, queer studies is often connected with the researcher's own sexual preferences, black art is generally examined by coloured people, postcolonialism primarily by (westernised) representatives of formerly colonised nations etc.

⁷ Such as Linda Nochlin's popular essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971).

It is, of course, no wonder that it was specifically these 'minorities' that first noticed – and pointed to – the contrasts and inclination within the Western university system, rather than those setting or reproducing the standards. It has even been proposed⁸ that the downfall of white male professors' monopoly during the 1970s was a very likely trigger of the 'crisis' of humanities, giving birth to (or at least accelerating) all the subsequent fruitful turns, including the New Art History itself. It was only the outcome of this demographic and administrative shift that difference and diversity suddenly obtained an aura of value as equally interesting objects of research, even if it was mostly among the 'minorities' themselves.

4.

A generation has passed from the 1970s' crisis, now replaced by yet another crisis of the humanities, the points of departure and primary concerns of which have curiously remained quite the same. (Apart from the questions of methodology and self-reflection of the field of art history, it was indeed refreshing to hear some more general thoughts on the current status of the humanities, as expressed by theorists such as Donald Preziosi, Claire Farago, or the conference convenor Matthew Rampley.)

The other keynote speaker Whitney Davis (University of California, Berkeley), however, pertinently pointed out the obvious: it was impossible to preserve the phenomenon of New Art History for the next generation. It was precisely its successful institutionalisation that had liberated the New Art History from the need for endless struggle and constant search for new self-definition. Richard Woodfield (editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Art Historiography*) added that institutionalising this kind of art history and applying its shifted and re-evaluated form as a new standard had been the very objective of the New Art History: in doing so, the new wave of 'avantgardists', having become acknowledged scholars and professors, shamelessly utilised their academic power (an ironic step in the context of the New Art History's own agenda) in a collective and rather self-interested attempt to transform art history into something more suitable for themselves.

Zooming further out, Pollock somewhat pessimistically found that culture as a whole has lost its enlightening mission in society, dealing, instead, with entertainment, commercial attractiveness and seduction in a supermarket of a vast variety of cultural goods. For her, already the shift in popular research topics within the field of art history, turning almost exclusively to contemporary art during the last decades, attests to this. (Woodfield replied by distinguishing an art historian from an art critic based on this same criterion – not the object of research, but the researcher's approach: a critic views a work through the context and reception of his/her own era, while a historian is intrigued by the context of the era of its creation.) Pollock also saw the fact that curatorship has won popularity over academic research as a sign of crisis, even calling art history a 'sinking ship' (from which one should escape?). Admitting the difficulties of finding balance (how flexible and trend-conscious should one be?), she bitterly noted the well-known fact in today's society that one has to consider the (academic) market even when choosing between subjects for scholarly research.

⁸ David A. Bell, *Reimagining the Humanities: Proposals for a New Century*. – *Dissent* 2010, vol. 57, no. 4, p. 72.

5.

The standpoint that the objects of research have remained the same since the rise of New Art History, modifying only the way of looking at them (now through ideology, power relations, context etc., which would indeed mean that the New Art History merely modernised the existing discipline), is still fundamentally different from the idea that in the age of New Art History the actual works of art are overshadowed by their abstract meanings and connotations. As a result of this belittling of the object – taking the main attention away from the works themselves and turning them into simple messengers or intermediaries – a new ‘material turn’ has begun to take shape recently.



Figure 2 Ian Verstegen commenting on Whitney Davis’ (right) paper. Photo by author.

Supporting the former view, Davis claimed that the New Art History itself has remained highly formalist (although rebelling against the form-centered approach). His argument was that the New Art History, too, struggled to create a canon, simply placing new things – even if these were more abstract – on the positions of worship. In his view it is still primarily the objects of art that are in the focus of research, rather than ways of looking and seeing, which (especially the *Bildgeschichte*) Davis personally considers a more fruitful direction. Nonetheless, it seems that most art historians, including Pollock⁹, do not find the Visual Studies to be an answer to the problems evident within the field of art history.

During this long discussion over ‘good’ and ‘bad’, novel and expired approaches or methods Shearer West (Oxford University) suitably reminded that strong opposition to conservatism is a rigid position in itself: setting free academic discussion, research and atmosphere as a goal, it is not perhaps wise to exercise such kind of restrictive attitudes. After all, increasing openness, diversity and tolerance has been the focal point of the enthusiastic search for interdisciplinarity during the past decades.

⁹ Katrin Kivimaa, To Open Up New and Richer Understandings (Interview with Prof. Griselda Pollock). – *kunst.ee* 2001, no. 1, p. 41.

6.

The question of the 'novelty' of Estonian art history was discussed by Krista Kodres (Estonian Academy of Arts) at the conference. While many representatives of more 'peripheric' regions (such as Spain or South Africa) admitted, albeit hesitantly, that the New Art History has not *yet* reached them, Kodres offered an up-to-date historical perspective of the occurrence of New Art History in Estonia.

She noted what is also true of many neighbouring disciplines besides art history: the shifts and turns that had taken place in the humanities in the West by the 1990s (when Estonia regained independence and thus also better intellectual contact with western Europe) were willingly adopted and adapted in this hunger for everything new, but initially with relatively little critical reflection. The irony is that many such adaptations of modern approaches, including the ideas of the New Art History, in reality sought to reinforce the national narrative, thus often missing their essence.¹⁰ In her paper, Kodres endeavored to avoid this kind of wallowing in despair that would indeed only serve to cement the narrative of suffering or belatedness, beginning with a preclusive mention of the concurrence of herself as the researcher and the topic under discussion – i.e. (self-critical) historiography through the eyes of an insider.

For this reason the paper might have left the listeners with an impression of the New Art History as not exactly a successful project in Estonia, but I doubt if this was intentional. I am quite convinced that Kodres – as well as Renja Suominen-Kokkonen (University of Helsinki), who introduced a similar perspective looking at Finland – actually have a much more optimistic view. Even more so, because they themselves have been among the main innovators and educators of the local scene of art history, where the central aims of the New Art History have indeed become the standard during the last couple of decades. Adopting/adapting the New Art History today, when it has reached a crisis and new directions are constantly sought for, of course, continues to raise many questions (and eyebrows).

7.

More sceptical speakers considered the whole project of New Art History a failure, though, even in the context of other major political and global changes that have shaped the recent decades. At best, its productivity was evaluated to have shook and slightly regulated the field, but by no means to have brought with it a genuine turn – despite some visible shifts and exceptions, the mainstream of art history has remained quite the same and students are still being taught in the spirit of decades ago.

The *after* in the title of the colloquium did not certainly stand for a temporal category (alone). Pollock found that the New Art History could not be taken as a finished process. Shearer West delicately described the New Art History as neither out-dated, decaying nor rising, but simply ageing. It is hardly surprising that no clear answers to the question of a possible end of the New Art History were provided, although some tried to offer more or less realistic alternatives (e.g. David Hulks, who somewhat selfishly found that it is about

¹⁰ See Katrin Kivimaa, Andres Kurg, Mari Laanemets, Virve Sarapik, "Uus kunstiajalugu" ja eesti kunstikirjutus [On Implications of New Art History in Estonian Context]. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture* 2008, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 100–101, 108.

time for the New Art History to submit to the World Art Studies, one of the central institutions for which is the University of East Anglia where Hulks himself teaches).

The predominant atmosphere of the conference was not pessimistic, but critical, and constructive criticism is in perfect accordance with the legacy of the New Art History (it was again Pollock who pointed out what has been noticed by many: it is exactly the constant act of questioning and problematising that is the role of intellectuals in today's world).

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