

## Art is not what you think it is (but we can approach it through the Art Matrix)

Review of:

Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, *Art is Not What You Think It Is*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 171 pp. ISBN-10: 1405192402. ISBN-13: 978-1405192408.

This slim volume is smart and fun. It is both sophisticated theory with interludes in historical and contemporary art that ring true. Because of its incisive reflection on the contemporary global art world, it could be taken for a mere critique. For example, the discussions of the artists Yinka Shonibare in Great Britain and Richard Bell in Australia, the former of Nigerian parents and the latter of Aboriginal descent, and their irresistible pull into 'complicit self-canonization' (34) could be understood as elaborations of Fredric Jameson's third-world 'national allegory'. But there is more to this book, namely its 'art matrix' and other semiotic reflections that raise it into both account of the present and sophisticated tool. Indeed, Preziosi and Farago repeatedly note that they not only can portray events but in laying bare the art matrix, or 'topological web of relations', that motivate art today, it can also be changed. This makes the book a powerful intervention in contemporary theory.

The art matrix is a triad of principles to 'think systematically about art', and these are: (1) the *work* itself, (2) the *agent(s)* or *force(s)* responsible for it, and (3) the *functions* to which it may be put. Each of these categories can be related in numerous ways in terms of number (e.g. distributed agency) and cause and effect (prior intention, co-creation, etc.). The complexity of the matrix shows that the configuration taken for granted today, favoring a sole, organic agent, producing works, for an autonomous function is precisely 'circumstantial rather than natural' (p. 79). As I will discuss at the end of the review, this simple analytic move is precisely what most theorists of visual studies are fearful of doing.

The book, as a manifesto, is divided into 'incursions' rather than chapters. As they develop distinct points, the structure has a text-book quality to it. In the first incursion, 'Artistry and Authorship', the authors begin by scanning the contemporary art world in which huge sums are paid for works of art. In an attempt to find how we have gotten to this point, they begin with the idea 'of the artist considered as the primary agent or cause of the artwork'. The sole agency of the maker is a requirement for our contemporary idea of art. The rise of the autonomous artist is predicated on a number of factors, including the separation of the artist from manual execution and development of sensate judgment. It was Leonardo da Vinci who pushed the medieval status quo of artist reflecting the divine source of artistic ideas, claiming the artist divined the appearances of nature. The Renaissance began

translating ontological issues in rhetorical terms and the issue about the relation of prototype to referent in the image was shifted to the maker of the image, who became a 'meta-signifier'.

The second incursion, 'The Dangers of Art and the Trap of the Visual', moves on to note the fragility of the matrix just described. It starts out by showing how the post-Renaissance system continued to impose decorum on the artist as a matter of artifice, submerging ontology, while paradoxically recognizing more than ever the artist as the source of art. Academic art precisely institutionalized the learning of sense experience, shielded from extravagance. Conversely, bastardizations of this order of cognition in the practices of savage races justified their condemnation. Played forward, we are still in the grip of the dual particularizing gaze of the Enlightenment, describing difference, and its universalistic pretensions, using art as a universally human category.

The third incursion, 'To See the Frame that Blinds Us', continues with this act of violence where the western aesthetic is universalized, in the process reifying properties of the non-western tradition that it must appropriate. Here, Preziosi and Farago review their field work in Australia, untangling aboriginal traditions of art making and those bent toward western markets. In exhibits like that at the Musée du Quai Branly that they study, modes of presentation document and even guarantee the spiritual presence contained in authentic works of art. The authors use the case study of the famous artist, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, who attained great fame but on the conditions that her modernist-style art was framed within the model of the genius artist, but crucially one step behind more recent developments, reinforcing the Australian Aboriginal's backwardness in the evolutionary scheme of art. Furthermore, the inscription within a modernist aesthetic of her work insures that she cannot participate in any later, deconstructive artistic gestures that could problematize the relationship between native artist and art world. In the end, the Aboriginal artist within the art matrix has a 'compromised agency'.

The third incursion ends with a hope for a 'third space', and the fourth incursion, 'Deconstructing the Agencies of Art' makes gestures toward it by first deconstructing the default matrix of art in effect today. The authors begin with a circumcision ceremony in Yilpara, Australia. The ceremony takes hours and includes painting of the boys by the men, which mark their clan and relation to ancestral spirits, accompanied by singing and the actual genital alteration. In such a context, although a 'painting' is produced, there is no clear way in which the painter had sole agency. Rather, it was made via a 'shared causality or distributed responsibility' (p. 77). Discussing Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', attention is given to the new forms of collaboration that are consensual and transformative.

'Intersections of the Local and the Global', the fifth incursion, begins to deliver these forms by further complicating the standard account of a single agent, producing a single object in time (cause and effect). Using the influential books by

Alfred Gell and David Summers – *Art and Agency* and *Real Spaces*, respectively – as a foil we see the advantages of using a sophisticated notion of the sign. The idea of *imputed* signs, or those that ‘re-code or transform prior signifying relationships’ (p. 99) is introduced without much fanfare but is a major revision to the Peircian triad of sign, symbol and index, which was made by Preziosi in earlier publications.<sup>1</sup> The authors criticize Summers for the singularity of his system and Gell for his conflation of actual and imputed contiguity. Prying these apart, we find a model of alternative agency within the European tradition itself. The relic, for example, has imputed contiguity emanating from God. The work of art can have a *double* indexicality, both from the artist and God. From this point only can we begin to talk about the work’s ‘agency’.

This incursion repeatedly stresses the dangers of the shifting terms in the matrix and in the sixth incursion, ‘Into the Breach of Art and Religion’, discussion continues with religion to further reflect on categories of public and private, and inner thoughts and external manifestations of them. Using the example of the uproar over representations of Muhammad in a Danish newspaper in 2005, Preziosi and Farago show how what was active in that case was a Muslim belief that acts carried agency to their source, indexically, while the western, secular approach (for whom the drawings were covered by ‘free speech’) were actually protected by a Christian belief that one truly sins in *thought*. Thus, for the Danish the *intention* of the artist could be progressive but the outcome for the Muslim was a direct violation. After a discussion of Plato and his Republic’s aesthetic fundamentalism, the authors formulate that, ‘artistry and theology are more clearly revealed as each other’s shadow: contrary yet co-determined answers to the question of the (im)possibility of the representation of the real’ (pp. 137-138).

The final incursion, ‘The Art of Commodifying Artistry’, ends on an appropriately institutional note, working through the way in which museums represent cultures. Noting the impasse of ‘hybridism’ and ‘progressive essentialism’ in giving voice to groups for their representation within the museum, Preziosi and Farago note that both models are essentialist. The only alternative, which they highlight through the exhibition *Embrace!* At the Denver Art Museum, is to acknowledge that, ‘individuals and groups can have several identities simultaneously’ (p. 150). In the end, it is necessary to reveal artifice, but only if this activity occurs within the whole ‘topological matrix of other co-present functions’ (p. 159).

In my summaries, I have focused on the matrix and overlooked many enlightening discussions of artists and theorists. For me, the main point that Preziosi and Farago make concerns the matrix and unfinished business regarding the

<sup>1</sup> See Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth’s Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (The 2001 Oxford Slade Lectures), Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

theology that is modernity's 'historical substrate' (p. 158). The Christian ontology of images is still in effect today but 'not yet accounted for;' it is an 'evacuated theology' (p. 158). And that is precisely why the volume is so timely. It addresses contemporary issues of the life and agency of the work of art that have become pressing in visual studies.

Crucially, the authors present their model, amidst its brilliant insights on art, aesthetics, the contemporary art world, as a workable methodology of history and politics based on *semiotics*. Part and parcel of the turn toward postmodernism in art historical theory in the work of Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson (and indeed in Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History*) was semiotics, which seems however to have been eclipsed.<sup>2</sup> This state of affairs is of some interest and warrants further reflection.

James Elkins in 2011 in the Introduction to his volume, *What is an Image*, points to the suppression of semiotics in the sessions and states frankly that the work of Göran Sonesson, one of the most talented visual semioticians (who took a degree in Paris with A. J. Greimas), 'is excluded from these seminars'.<sup>3</sup> Elkins continues with his personal belief that semiotics cannot be reconciled with recent interests, like those of W. J. T. Mitchell ('what do images want?') or Marie-Jose Mondzain ('Can images kill?').<sup>4</sup> The image with agency, a voice or life precisely seems in Elkins' view and the larger community of visual studies to be unable to deal with such questions.

It is not clear, at least to me, exactly how to change the register of the conversation when talk goes from a picture's structure, or even its politics, to its agency, its voice, its life. Moving back and forth between those perspectives, as the talk in this book often does, produces the kind of dissonance that is heard, but not analyzed, by a number of the participants.<sup>5</sup>

Elkins seems to be reflecting some kind of latent postmodern resignation in standing back and watching the whole affair indifferently.

If we cannot reconcile the living and naturalized image, historical actors certainly have no problem with it. Jas Elsner precisely notes how Pausanias can move back and forth between cult and aesthetic responses, and we might add Vasari

<sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *Art Bulletin* 73, 1991, 174-208; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> James Elkins, 'Introduction', in James Elkins and Maja Naef, eds., *What is an Image*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011, 4. By Sonesson, see *Pictorial Concepts: Inquiries into the Semiotic Heritage and Its Relevance for the Analysis of the Visual World*, Lund: ARIS/Lund University Press, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Marie-Jose Mondzain, 'Can Images Kill?' *Critical Inquiry*, 36(1), 2009, 20-51.

<sup>5</sup> James Elkins, 'Introduction', in James Elkins and Maja Naef, eds., *What is an Image*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011, 4. By Sonesson, see *Pictorial Concepts: Inquiries into the Semiotic Heritage and Its Relevance for the Analysis of the Visual World*, Lund: ARIS/Lund University Press, 1989.

could do the same 1,300 years later.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Preziosi and Farago's whole effort was precisely trying to figure out how this negotiation takes place. As they show, semiotics can and does deal with such notions that are above and beyond a 'picture's structure'. The post-Tridentine Eucharistic doctrine was not a way of inhering presence it was literal presence itself, what Carlo Ginzburg called 'super-presence' and Preziosi and Farago call 'a self-indexing index, a sign only of itself...a showing or *ostensification* of Christ. A pure *monstrance*' (p. 113).<sup>7</sup>

Art theorists are still searching for ways to make positive, yet fallible, statements about art of the past and present, and also convincing themselves that they may analyze without destroying. I believe that Preziosi and Farago provide a model with the self-reflexivity to examine its own constructedness without becoming a totalizing apparatus and further provide a model to understand the living work of art – with all its problematic connotations for imputed being – without deferring to its pure ineffability.

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<sup>6</sup> Jas Elsner, 'Between Mimesis and Divine Power. Visuality in the Greco-Roman World', in Robert S. Nelson, ed., *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 52-69; and Fredrika Jacobs, 'Rethinking the Divide: Cult Images and the Cult of Images', in James Elkins and Robert Williams, eds., *Renaissance Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 95-114

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, 'Representation: The Word, the Idea, the Thing', in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 77.