

Art history and its machines

Daniel Bridgman

Daidalos, perhaps related to δαιδάλλω,
"to work artfully; to work up."¹

In honor of Donald Preziosi's 75th year, I offer this small contribution in the spirit of a toast. I do so by thinking about (and maybe a bit beyond) his book, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, which was published just as I was finishing my studies at UCLA.²

First things first

When I think about Donald as professor, a seminar conducted at the bitter end of the 1980s comes most often to mind. Catalog copy advertised the course as an appraisal of art historical research inflected by archaeology. And Donald did indeed coax our small group into thinking about the epistemic and ethical implications of artifact-based history. This was back in the day when studying art history meant reckoning with the relationship of Marxism to what academic humanists then called 'theory.' Yet what struck me then, and again now, so many decades later, was the range of machine and machinic metaphors and phrases that Donald engaged. Not surprisingly there was Foucault on Bentham, but we also heard locutions of this sort: machinery of, ancillary devices, disciplinary apparatus, discursive frameworks, servo-mechanisms, and exegetical filters; there was even a 'mainframe of aesthetic praxis.' Since Donald's rhetorical figures were never decorative, these phrases gave me pause—especially as a student of ancient Roman sculpture.

Archaeology might well take pride in its machines and the interpretive projects they have enabled. The principal machines art history commanded in those days, however, were wheezy slide projectors, ill-tempered word processors, index-and photo-files and, for my part of the discipline, a few building hoists, pointing, and mythic wonder-machines of Greek and Roman antiquity. Given the palsy that

¹ R.S.P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. Leiden: Brill, 2009, 296. The earliest literary incidence of Daedalus' proper name is *Iliad* (XVIII, 590-594), where Daedalus dubiously figures as the exemplar or archetype for Hephaistos 'making a dancing circle (*khoron*), broad as the circle Daidalos once laid out on Cnossos' spacious fields for fair-haired Ariadne, where young men and women danced...gripping each other's wrists.' The Greek χορός leaves ambiguous whether it is the dance or the place where the dance takes place that Daedalus creates—perhaps both.

² All factual errors are my own—with gratitude to Dana Leibsohn, for her editorial fortitude and forbearance. I also wish to thank Barbara Kellum for her scholarly generosity and patience.

seemed to have struck art history's *sensus communis* in the late 1980s, it was not hard to grasp why Donald thought we should re-invent and re-equip ourselves.³ Yet as I remember the affect of the seminar, Donald's technological rhetoric often darkened our souls, conjuring (at least for some of us) an unwelcome premonition about where art history was headed. By and large, we were an earnest group but we weren't quite clear why ancient art history might benefit from servo-motors.

Donald could be reticent, although he was never shy when it came to confounding the Enlightenment verities annealed in art history as it was customarily practiced. Even so, 'the way forward' — which is what I thought we graduate students were carrying a lantern for in those days — remained more than a little obscure. He (and we) understood why one might want to reverse engineer deterministic conceptual mechanisms like 'context.' We also understood that people we knew and admired were reading both Karl Marx and Michel Foucault's post-marxist remediations. This latter project nevertheless seemed treacherous for those of us studying why pre-moderns made and offered cult to the paintings, effigies, and buildings nestled into the hillsides of Roman Italy, the ancient Aegean, and the Levant.⁴ In those days, especially for ancient art history, positivist empiricism still reigned with a steely hand (indeed, for more than a few working scholars, I'm pretty certain it still does).

It would be easy to say — as some folks have — that Donald's anxiety-inducing memos arrived late in the humanities game. To be sure, much of what we were rehearsing in the seminar had begun exerting its sway twenty years earlier in the wake of the political and intellectual dissent unleashed in Paris in 1968, and other urbane places not long after. It seems rather quaint now, but those of us steeped in the quest for pre-modernity, and the 'best' exegesis of its history, still had a lot to learn late in the 80s.

If Donald unsettled us, he was also generous and, often, inspiring. On more than one occasion he chided me to read more broadly. For him (and consequently, for me) the 'great masters of rigor' in Roman art history — and especially the philologically obsessive Germans — were not the only ones whose work I should study; theirs was not the only dialect, or dialectic, in which to be conversant.⁵ Along with that gift, I want to thank Donald for his work on André Leroi-Gourhan, which finally shook me loose from the odd relationship I'd developed with an early, but

³ This was a moment of historical 'clearing' that pivoted on the fall of the Berlin Wall. Given the hefty weight of Marxian thinking in the Art History Department at UCLA during the 1980s, this event hardly went un-noticed.

⁴ On cult, see Gregory Nagy's once contentious *The Best of the Achaeans*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, where a structuralist-inflected definition of cult affords ongoing 'marked action in sacred [metaphysical] space.' This is how cult, Latin *cultus*, is construed, as a special, ongoing, mode of care.

⁵ Among the others he chided me to consider were the psychoanalytic *Ecrits* of Jacques Lacan and Ian Hodder's post-structural archaeological writings, i.e., *The Meaning of Things. One World Archaeology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

unhelpfully Rieglian, permutation of structuralism.

As I remember it, Donald still argued for the methodological relevancy of Bronze Age semiotic studies back then. He may have been keen on nineteenth-century penitentiary designs, but he also attended to the fabric of Minoan palaces. Yet one could sense his commitments shifting. It was as if archeology's data-intensive methods and the questions they were designed to answer had reached their tenable shelf-life. Donald never said so in class, but we could smell things turning a bit sour—his attention always more quickly piqued by the 'meta' than the 'applied.' Memories can deceive; so I might have this wrong, but that pedagogic experience seems to have been a trial run of what would soon surface in *Rethinking Art History*, Donald's treatise on the workings of the discipline. And we may have been forewarned, but the book still hit us with a head-turning splash.⁶

Timing may not be everything, but it can be telling. And Donald's book pressed its readers to reckon with the paradigmatic machinery of art history just as academia and daily life were being remapped by the subject-altering work of technologies both insistent and insidious. Here I am thinking of the 'efficiencies' sought by administrators, which unleashed an array of pitiless machinations—many with an economic scorpion sting. With more stealth and greater promise, mice and screens, and other objects fabricated of brushed, knife-edged aluminum became nearly as essential and ubiquitous in academia as oxygen. For good or ill (maybe, good and ill) professors learned to track how often each student logged onto a class website and researchers learned to share images with incredible fluency. It is no longer strange to read digital facsimiles of documents at home at midnight. But this is not utopia. The haves and have-nots stand on opposite rims of an increasingly cavernous abyss, and this part of the late modern condition seems to be something its machinery cannot redress.⁷

I think about the implications of such things with frequency. For my primary professional path answered the call for "humanities technicians," a song that lured more than a few PhDs, and especially those who found traditional academic routes less gratifying than they initially imagined. I suspect my decision to spend more time pondering the artifices of Internet architecture than ancient architectural ruins was not precisely the career path Donald imagined for his students. Yet none of us could have known how intense the gold rush for digital artifacts would become, nor how strong the desire to disambiguate these simulacra. From my vantage in the 2010s, Donald's sense of the rise in scopic ambition seems prescient. He did not put it quite in these words, but one thing I got from him was the seed of this aperçu: if machines, virtual and actual, matter, it is because what they generate, materially

⁶ It was initially quite a challenge for graduate students of my ilk, who'd worked more than a few unpaid museum internships and scrounged for Teaching Assistantships, to see past Donald's rebuke of the institutional hands that (ambivalently) fed us.

⁷ The ambitions of MOOC developers and enterprises such as Khan Academy <www.khanacademy.org> notwithstanding.

and ethically, is almost never what we expect. In a curious way, then, studying with Donald actually did prepare me for the present.

Daedalus Architekton

Rethinking Art History concludes at the Athenian Acropolis, summoning anamorphic evocations of Pallas Athena. Yet for my ‘post-everything’ generation, it is not the goddess of collective and reasoned political identity—the Athena, for example, of Thucydidean Athens—that seems most compelling. Nor do her anamorphs seem quite as wondrous. Rather, it is Daedalus, the ethically dubious artist-engineer, who catches the eye. The quickener of craft-thinking or *technê*, Daedalus calculates and incubates opportunity. And in commemorating what Donald taught me, I wish to uncoil a skein of words to capture some bits of this ancient figure’s cunning.

The dossier on Daedalus may be well rehearsed, but it has been teased from a resistant knot of hoary fable, mythography, and rite.⁸ From the writing that survives, it seems safe to say that Daedalus made remarkable things—big iridescent flying machines, woven sailcraft, and miraculous ‘living’ statuary of wood, precious metal and articulated hinges. In turn, he was known and indeed remade by his own machines.⁹ Daedalus sought to collude with what Pindar dubbed ‘crafty time.’ His method of creating, if one can dignify it as such, embodied danger and wily skill. We sense this from his early days in Athens. There, the trickster-artisan served as both contract labor and demiurge for that which ancient cosmopolitans tagged emblems of ‘the good life’: chests of fine carpentry, exquisitely decorated vessels, ultra sheer cloth, and so the tale is told. Viewed through the lens of cultural anthropology, this aspect of Daedalus invites us to consider the praxis and philosophy of technical fabrication.

Daedalus also harbored a shady side. When taunted by the ingenuity of

⁸ Daedalus was a mythic embodiment of extreme skill, a historical/legendary artist to whom works were attributed, or some mix of both. Conviction that he was an historical actor peaked in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and persisted, shifting with evolving archives, conceptions of mythic discourse. Etymological, literary, and archeological evidence is exhaustively reviewed in Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Dédale. Mythologie de l’artisan en Grèce ancienne*, Paris: Maspero, 1975; Sara Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

⁹ Machine, from the Greek *mekhos*, hence *mekhanê*, retains the connotation of trickery, contrivance, something ingenious and even cunning. Writing during the Hadrianic age of Rome, more than six centuries after Daedalus’ legendary floruit in and around Athens, Pausanias described works by the Greek master still extant on the Acropolis. Along with his autopsy of a folding wooden chair, Pausanias and other ancient commentators (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.198) cite carpenter’s squares, iron saws, drills, ship’s masts, water works, synthetic honeycomb, all invented by Daedalus. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* ii.4.5. Pausanias listed existing works that were attributed to Daedalus in the second century AD, *Description* ix.40.3. This assemblage highlights the recursive process by calling attention to machines-that-make-other-machines.

Talos,¹⁰ a nephew of precocious resourcefulness, the elder craftsman murdered the youth, spilling his tech-savvy body over the precipice of Athena's sacred rock. In the wake of this murder, the machines invented by Talos devolved (as so much blood-stained spolia) to uncle Daedalus, who converted them into propellant for his own career. As legend has it, this kind of familial aggression did not much appeal to Athenians. Daedalus was tried and condemned to death, and so, from Athens, he fled.

This set the opportunist off to wander the Mediterranean, building and creating for whomever would pay. In Crete, Daedalus accepted the patronage of King Minos, a bond that fueled a series of 'creative escapades' which furthered the fame (and infamy) of both. The trail I wish to trace picks up with the seductive, prosthetic bovine Daedalus invented for the local sorceress-queen. When maneuvered into Minos' pasture and parked amongst its grazing herd, this creation—a mimetic, bestial, sexually-dissimulatory machine—invited a convulsive union that begat the monstrous (hybrid) Minotaur.¹¹

If Daedalus' technical ingenuity produced wonder, it was of the transgressive sort, for as ancient texts make clear, the Minotaur had needs that were not easy to sate.¹² And so to contain the beast, Daedalus invented an enigmatic labyrinth-trap. Filching building elements from a plethora of archetypes, including nature's invaginating receptacles (bird's nests, beehives, nautilus shells), Daedalus turned architect.¹³ He set his labyrinth slightly beneath grade, both sculpting and mirroring an undulating Cretan landscape. His work was less an artificial imposition on nature than complementary prosthetic joinery. In this we see the glimmer of a familiar trope from Hellenic dramaturgy, wherein each machination demands further, ever more extraordinary, compensating artifice. Axially oriented and open to the sky, the labyrinth exposed both twisting, visceral passageways and

¹⁰ Pausanias' orthography is 'Calos,' based on tomb epigraphy visible(?) in the Hadrianic era-I, 21, 4). The Latin name for Talos/Talus is Circinus (round compass), which Ovid avers was one of Talus' inventions, along with the potter's wheel, which Diodorus Siculus, IV, 76, and others, report were works expropriated by Daedalus. See J. P. Vernant 'Some Remarks on Technological Thinking', *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984, 313-320.

¹¹ Asterion, or 'starry lord,' was the proper name given to the Minotaur by his parents, Pasiphaë and Minos. This name bears his perpetual relation to the heavens, via his maternal line, Pasiphaë, daughter of the sun god, Helios.

¹² Whether Asterion, the Minotaur, consumed flesh of Athenian *aristoi*, i.e., practiced cannibalism, or effectively cannibalized their free stature by subjecting them to slavery remained contentious. Athenian sources favor literal anthropophagy, whereas Cretan sources leaned toward slavery. Either way, his needs transgressed and deformed Greek societal taboos.

¹³ Hesychius, (late fourth, early fifth-century A.D.) of Alexandria, glosses in his *Lexicon* the labyrinth as a place shaped like a shell: the conch or nautilus shell, which Greeks called *labúrinthoi*.

its monstrous prisoner to the heavens.¹⁴ The contraption became a kind of anti-edifice whose onto-logic remained perpetually open. According to some accounts, Daedalus himself, finite mortal that he was, knew not the ground plan.

For all its openness, the labyrinth was still a trap, a prison, a cage. As such, it coiled the terror of containment with the bliss of release. The labyrinth also became one of antiquity's most prolific generative creations. In modern times, it piqued the imagination of Sir Arthur Evans and inspired his reconstruction of Knossos; in turn, linguistic research on Linear B has attempted to anchor Daedalus and his constructions deep in the past, even in Bronze Age Antiquity.¹⁵ This kind of empirical effort—some of it now blemished by the colonialist critique of archaeology—hints at the labyrinth's generative vigor. Coming from another angle, Edward Said's critique of Orientalism opened ancient scholarship to a spectrum of alternative perspectives. For instance, Martin Bernal, who argued for the labyrinth's covert African origins.¹⁶ Tapping another vein, architectural theorists like Alberto Perez-Gomez and Marco Frascari have explored phenomenological and metaphysical facets of labyrinths.¹⁷ And in popular culture, the work of the

¹⁴ The labyrinth is associated with a fallow zone, or *choros*, that (traditionally) held the agora, hearth of political life. Plato (*Timaeus* 48e4) recounts the peculiar ontology of *khōra* (the outer container), its status as a receptacle of the 'third kind' [*triton genos*]; On the *khōra* see: Jacques Derrida, 'Khōra', *On the Name*, translated by Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, 89-127, dedicated to Jean-Pierre Vernant. See also, Kenneth R. Olwig 'Choros, chora and the question of landscape', in Stephen Daniels, Dydia DeLyser, J. Nicholas Entrain, and Douglas Richardson, eds, *Envisioning Landscape, Making Worlds: Geography and the Humanities*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 44-54, where *choros/chora* is discussed in relation to Carl Sauer's 'chorography' or 'thick' place narration (e.g., Homer, Herodotus, Strabo). David Cosgrove traces it to perspectival illusionism, spatial-depth effects, pioneered by the Alexandrian mathematician-geographer, Claudius Ptolemy, in 'Introduction', *Envisioning Landscape*, 46.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Arthur J. Evans, 'Crete: Systems of Writing', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. XXX (Series III), 90, 1900. "Da-da-re-jo-de," a Linear B hapax legomenon, meaning *Daidaleionde*—'towards' or 'into the Daidaleion,' was first linked to a sanctuary at Knossos by the Hungarian scholar Károly Kerényi in his article in *Atti e memorie del primo congresso internazionale del micenologia*, 1967, vol. II, Rome, 1968), proposing that the place name refers to the *choros* created by Daedalus.

¹⁶ Citing an ancient Egyptian 'winding wall,' Bernal alleges that serial biconsonantals (mr, mn, and nm) are onomatopoeic bovine sounds, and so not only was Minos' labyrinth of African origin, but its function was preserved in classical myth. See Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, wherein the author asserts that through a labyrinthine intellectual ruse, Greek civilization and philosophy cunningly 'stole' Egyptian cultural achievements. For the refutation/response, see, for instance, Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How 'Afrocentrism' Became An Excuse To Teach Myth As History*. New York: Basic Books, 1996. Their debate grew acrimonious.

¹⁷ See, for example, Alberto Perez-Gomez *Myth of Daedalus*, Architecture Association, Files, No. 10, Autumn 1985, and Marco Frascari *Monsters of Architecture: Anthromorphism in*

labyrinth is even more expansive. Under its sign thrive Jorge Luis Borges' tales, as well as myriad mystical healing societies, maze park and garden rituals (and, little surprise, a movie with David Bowie). Which is not even to broach the multicursal labyrinths of European Baroque imagination or the rhizomes of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

There exists another, less-obvious thread that I think is worth pulling from antiquity into our own time. Central here is the fact that Daedalus' *techné* was wordless: his skill mechanical enchainment, its effect that of spectacle (thaumaturgy). With this in mind, the mythic animus of the labyrinth can be traced through rites performed by Theseus and Ariadne at Delos, and through cultic performance events across centuries. In the *geranos*, or Crane Dance, line dancers moved as a winding, intersecting parade across open space commemorating the entrapment but also the defeat of the Minotaur, and evoking as they went both the labyrinth and its undoing.¹⁸ Although credit accrued to Daedalus for creating the original labyrinth (the *arché*), as well as the key to its undoing, the dance rites and their enframing—performed time and time again—became generators of affect. As Hubert Damisch observed, this affective register spanned the full range, from Apollonian oracular prescience to Dionysian frenzied annihilation.¹⁹ Such dance mnemonics, of course, did not go unchallenged. There were also talkers and poets and other lovers of the word, equally invested in the production of cultural memory techniques. Sophists, Platonic Academicians, and Peripatetic dialecticians contested with Daedalus' machines in their discourses on truth, art, and political power. Geranos—with its investment in the lived experience of event-making memory—was mocked; ancient sceptics saw in it superstition and subversion. Yet classical Greek *paideia* and, mutatis mutandis, its latter-day German counterpart, *Bildung*, as well as present day education theories still struggle to reckon with mimetic performativity.

With this we enter the arena of cultural ideals and their inculcation. So it is notable that so much of Daedalus' dossier involves a machine-maker who fades

Architectural Theory, Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991, especially 77-83 on modern architecture's labyrinths, *mostri*, and ambivalence to myth.

¹⁸ See note 14 above on *khora* space. *Geranos*' animal mimicry of high-stepping water fowl and their triangular flight formations; legendary prudence (*phronesis*) ascribed to cranes, as legend held that they carried pebbles aloft to plumb whether flying over land, or water. Otherwise, cranes interlaced linear and sinuous movement as they navigated extreme, open expanses—the opalescent conch of the sky ... nesting in Ethiopia in winter, travelling to Scythia, in summer, Marcel Detienne *The Writings of Orpheus*, Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, 97-98. The criss-crossing of the split line-dance (or *dressage* when performed on horseback, as in the *lusus troiae*) hinges on lines of dancers that emerge/converge to stage an onto-genesis of labyrinthine complexity; see Giovanni Mariotti 'From Labyrinth to Labyrinth', 45-196, in Franco Maria Ricci, ed, *Labyrinths*, New York, Paris, London: Rizzoli 2013.

¹⁹ Hubert Damisch "La danse de Thésée," *Tel Quel*, 71, 1966, 60-68; also: Hubert Damisch, 'La danse de Thésée', in *Ruptures Cultures*, Paris: Minuit, 1976, 163-175.

from view as his creations click into operation. He wields the manipulative secrets of the *archi-tekton* (master woodworker) but his apparatuses siphon vitality from their maker-subject. Once configured, his allo-poietic inventions become auto-poietic. Daedalus becomes little more than crutch, a bit player in the drama until another creation is required.²⁰ This bears a familiar ring, for considerable ink has been spilled on mechanics, subjects, and recursion, wherein agents are substitutionally translocated by their creations, not the other way around.

Art history, however, has shown tenacious apathy to this stratum of machinic reflection. It has long acknowledged its need for machines in order to support and display its evidentiary claims, but their recursiveness has often been met with cultivated indifference (Aby Warburg's research apparatus notwithstanding). This is true, I would proffer, even for mythological and subjectivity machines alluded to by Claude Levi Strauss and Jacques Lacan, which sought—albeit in quite different ways—to bind machinery to symbolic and imaginary processes. Indifference can be a paralytic. Indifference can also be generative. The persistence of indifference to recursion is one reason, perhaps, *Rethinking Art History* warrants re-reading. Of course Donald has moved on to other matters (indeed, it's probably fair to say we have all re-engineered ourselves). For him, the critique of the museum—with its own labyrinthine formations—has loomed large. Yet I think his early work still begs a pair of important questions: if art history is a machine, is it not also a contraption forever soliciting adaptive repair, new parts for old? And if so, is this one of its most generative (creative) qualities?

It may seem perverse to answer in the affirmative, but Donald, this I learned from you. Salud on your 75th!

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²⁰ Although this runs counter to art history's fixation on artists and creators, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne argue for this; Marcel Detienne, Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. First published as *Les ruses d'intelligence: La Mètis des Grecs*, Paris: Flammarion, 1974; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*. New York: Zone Books, MIT Press, 2006, especially 'Some Remarks on the Forms and Limitations of Technological Thought among the Greeks', 299-318.