

To betray art history

Jae Emerling

We seek
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,
Everything
– Wallace Stevens, 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'

To write has no other function: to be a flux which combines with other fluxes – all the minority-becomings of the world. A flux is something intensive, instantaneous and mutant – between a creation and a destruction ... Making an event – however small – is the most delicate thing in the world: the opposite of making a drama or making a story. Loving those who are like this: when they enter a room they are not persons, characters or subjects, but an atmospheric variation, a change of hue, an imperceptible molecule, a discrete population, a fog or a cloud of droplets. Everything has really changed.

– Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II*

The work of Donald Preziosi represents one of the most sustained and often brilliant attempts to betray the modern discipline of art history by exposing its skillful shell game: precisely how and why it substitutes artifice, poetry, and representational schemes for putative facticity and objectivity (that desirous and yet ever elusive *Kunstwissenschaft* that art historians prattle on about). This attempt is inseparable from a sinuous, witty, involutive writing style that meanders between steely insight and coy suggestions of how art history could be performed otherwise. Preziosi's *writes* art history. In doing so he betrays its disciplinary desires. It is this event of betrayal that has made his work so exciting to some, so troubling to others. For him, art history has no salvageable, intact past; instead, he desires only to expose it as a multiplicity, as a promise that must remain open to any and all sorts of becomings from within and from without of the discipline itself. These becomings are what Gilles Deleuze calls 'lines of flight' because 'we betray the fixed powers which try to hold us back' by decreating (destroying *and* creating) the state of things.¹ Preziosi's

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London and New York: Continuum, 2006, 30. I am appropriating and redefining

vocation has been to decreate art history by betraying its disciplinary rules. It is this desire that has led him to experiment with art historical writing, which has led him to a singular form of exegesis by which artworks are complicated and deframed in order to touch an outside rather than explicated clearly and authoritatively (what Preziosi has called art history's 'priestly function').² He understands implicitly, as all of his work demonstrates, that to betray art history means nothing other than to create a new way of writing art history. In doing so he accepted that betrayal demands losing 'one's identity, one's face...one has to disappear, to become unknown' because there is simply no other way to become an event.³

For me, Preziosi is no 'petty trickster' or enfant terrible – that's only a way to disregard or oversimplify a body of work that takes risks, experiments, and deconstructs the presuppositions that bind us to the epistemological, historiographic, and ethical rules of the art historical game. One who betrays is radically different from a trickster figure. Here is Deleuze again: 'A traitor to the world of dominant significations, and to the established order. This is quite different from the trickster: for the trickster claims to take possession of fixed properties...or even to introduce a new order. The trickster has plenty of future, but no becoming whatsoever.'⁴ Only the traitor partakes of becoming because 'the experimenter is a traitor.' A trickster figure has plenty of future because he or she cunningly knows how to ridicule and mimic whatever current discourse, game, or momentary excitement. To betray, on the other hand, is an infinitive verb that remains untimely, never quite aligned with sequential, linear time, but always partaking of a series of becomings that have their own oblique, immanent temporality. Infinitive verbs are

the concept of 'decreation' that I first encountered in Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* (1947), where she argues that 'art has its origin in religion.' It is a concept at once theological, aesthetic, and historiographic. See Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, especially the chapter 'Decreation', 32-9. Decreation is also quite insightful for understanding the discourse of modern art (Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian) and literature, including Wallace Stevens. I have been working on Stevens' 1951 lecture entitled 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting' in which he takes Weil's decreation as a starting point. Moreover, it has become evident to me through both conversations with him and through close readings of his texts that Giorgio Agamben's writings on art, which include essays on Twombly, Melville, Kafka, Walser, and others, stem from Weil's concept of decreation. Weil is certainly a 'hidden figure' in Agamben's entire philosophy, which posits decreation as 'the paradigm of a politics to come.' See Agamben, 'In this Exile (Italian Diary, 1992-94)', *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 121-142.

² See Preziosi, 'That Obscure Object of Desire: The Art of Art History', *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 21-53, especially 31.

³ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 33.

⁴ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 31.

the true semiotic of an event, as Deleuze reminds us.⁵ An event always precedes and yet remains to come. If we read two passages from Preziosi's work, we can remind ourselves of his critical acumen and sense how his work becomes an event – a curious fold of past-future. Perhaps it is this past-future temporality that accounts for how his work inspires and confounds, liberates and frustrates.

In 1998 Preziosi wrote a preface to the first edition of his now canonical anthology *The Art of Art History*. In it he lays bare the disciplinary conceits and problematics of the discipline:

Art history is one of a network of interrelated institutions and professions whose overall function has been to fabricate a historical past that could be placed under systematic observation for use in the present. As with its allied fields – art criticism, aesthetic philosophy, art practice, connoisseurship, the art market, museology, tourism, commodity fashion systems, and the heritage industry – the art historical discipline incorporated an amalgam of analytic methods, theoretical perspectives, rhetorical and discursive protocols, and epistemological technologies of diverse ages and origins...Nevertheless, wherever art history was professionalized, it took the problem of *causality* as its general area of concern, construing its objects of study – individual works of art, however defined – as *evidential* in nature. It was routinely guided by the hypothesis that an artwork is reflective, emblematic, or generally *representative* of its original time, place, and circumstances of production.⁶

It is difficult for any art historian, regardless of the specificities of his or her practice, not to feel challenged by this statement, especially as it forces one to think critically and self-reflexively about the unchecked assumptions and epistemological blind spots that structure one's practice. The problematic trinity of causality-evidence-representation is nearly inescapable for most of the historical and contemporary discipline of art history. Disciplinary anxiety and tension is only increased when one recalls how Preziosi ends his 1998 preface, foregrounding the mediality and historiographic consequences of this problematic enabling limit of the discipline itself.

He concludes by addressing the art object and the art histories that are comprised to give an order to these uncanny things. The requisite demand for a coherent, teleological history of art serves only to domesticate feral art objects into

⁵ See Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 263-265.

⁶ Preziosi, 'Art History: Making the Visible Legible', *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 7.

artworks, that is, works that do the work of a belabored art history. Thus Preziosi contends:

The most pervasive theory of the art object in art history as well as in conventional aesthetic philosophies was its conception as a *medium* of communication or expression. The object was construed within its communicational or linguistic paradigm as a 'vehicle' by means of which the intentions, values, attitudes, ideas, political or other messages, or the emotional state(s) of the maker—or by extension the maker's social and historical contexts—were conveyed, by design or chance, to targeted (or circumstantial) beholders...From its beginnings, and in concert with its allied professions, art history worked to make the past synoptically visible so that it might function in and upon the present; so that the present might be seen as the demonstrable *product* of a particular past; and so that the past so staged might be framed as an *object of historical desire*: figured as that from which a modern citizen might desire descent.⁷

It is this complication of an artwork as a means of individual, cultural, or national expression *and* the construal of the history of art as a synecdochal fiction that motivates Preziosi's critique as well as his own intellectual interests. His remarkable essay on Sir John Soane's Museum in London, his longstanding interest in the Great Exposition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, museology, the margins of architectural practice, the semiotics of religion, and other visual practices of cultural geography are all lines of research radiating from the passages cited above. In other words, Preziosi betrays the inherent, enabling limit of the discourse of art history by creating other tangential, anamorphic, metaphorical readings of cultural history in order to present the sheer ficticity and fabricatedness (two of his favorite terms) of an art historical modernity that is far too often taken as a given or as factual. This is the 'the art of art history' that Preziosi illuminates by simultaneously creating other lines of thought and other modes of writing about art objects, temporality, and identity. His writing takes place along the fold between art history as it is imagined and art history as it is (nothing other than 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction').

Hence it is far from coincidental that he first coined the phrase 'the art of art history' in his flashpoint book *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (1989) by citing the poet Wallace Stevens: 'The art of art history, to echo Wallace Stevens, is "the palm at the end of the mind."' ⁸ Meaning the ultimate desire of art

⁷ Preziosi, 'Art History: Making the Visible Legible', 9, 11.

⁸ Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 34. One should also note that T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) takes its title from a line by Stevens from 'The Auroras of Autumn'. Clark's use of Stevens focuses on the very idea of modernism surviving its putative demise. Thus we read in Stevens: 'Farewell to an idea...The cancellings,/The negations are never final.'

history's artifice is a very Platonic claim to grasp and to encounter the thing itself, without the 'intricate evasions of as' (as Stevens puts it), without such poetic or dry language or any other contingency.⁹ It is for this reason that Preziosi's writing is so indirect, so replete with 'perambulations', 'parentheses', and 'incursions' as he calls them. In fact, he refuses to even suggest that his writing, let alone his perceptions, will ever grasp the thing itself in its pure reality. He refers to this unrelenting art historical desire as a religious, messianic parousia: a desire for fulfilling an original intention, for encountering the transcendent artwork.¹⁰ However, following Stevens, Preziosi understands that decreation is neither simple return to an origin nor is it a melancholic longing for the fulfilled past; rather, it is a desire for clarity, for a 'visibility of thought' that exposes art history not as a single idea with a single premise but rather delimits the very idea of art history as a multiplicity, the event of which will have been (Preziosi's penchant for the future anterior is nothing other than the past-future temporality of an event) a vocation worthy of the contemporary socio-political world.

Preziosi's use of Stevens in *Rethinking Art History* is reiterated in his last book *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity* (2014), where Stevens same poem, 'The Palm at the End of My Mind', is evoked as an instance of artistic decreative anarchy, as an attempt to step beyond human understanding and temporality.¹¹ This is curious because Stevens' poem was initially wielded to reveal a disciplinary conceit that Preziosi intended to critique. The latest use and interpretation of the Stevens' poem suggests something altogether different, an acknowledgement of the originary power of artistic creation. We see this shift in the 2008 preface to *The Art of Art History* anthology as well.

Written a decade later, Preziosi ends that preface by acknowledging the singularities of art practice, that is, its always already feral potentiality to decreate the world and to be socially and politically troubling. He writes:

The very *fact* of art (however defined) has long been seen as a fundamental challenge to our most cherished beliefs about the nature of reality; indeed to our very *being* as human. Despite the largely modernity-specific reification and fetishization of fine art, the world created by artistry is not some marginal "second (aesthetic) world" alongside the everyday world in which we live; the world of art or artifice *is* that very world. If what we may still wish to term "art history" is to have not only academic but broader critical relevance and social force at the present time, it will be in its capacity to reckon with the challenge and promise of art in all that it does, in all the

⁹ James Elkins' discusses Preziosi's work in *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹⁰ See Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

¹¹ Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia*, 60-1.

ways it does so in human societies around the world now and in the past.¹²

I have to confess that it is this futural promise that has always been implicit, if at times silently so, within Preziosi's work. More than anything else, it is this futural promise that motivated and challenged me as a graduate student and as his colleague today. It was his writing—its maddening reticence and illuminating salvos, its bitter sense of humor and its linguistic evasiveness—that consigned me to the vocation of being an art historian. But it was a vocation plagued with doubt, questioning, and a professional unease about what it means to enact a fidelity to one's own discipline. It is Preziosi's conclusion to the 2008 preface that made that vocation, in all its complexity, transparent to me.

During many of our conversations over the years, I have asked him about art's ontological, ethical, and political promise—the ways in which we must conceive of art as an event rather than as a signified object or let alone a mere thing—and he responded with only more questions about my ideas. But those exchanges, for me, the most memorable of which occurred as we walked slowly through the Soane Museum, had an effect on both of us.¹³ All of this reminds me of a passage that Giorgio Agamben wrote in an early text that I always wanted to share with Donald. In a short passage entitled 'The Idea of Vocation', Agamben speaks of tradition and fidelity, of vocation and memory. He concludes: 'Fidelity to that which cannot be thematized, nor simply passed over in silence, is a betrayal of a sacred kind, in which memory, spinning suddenly like a whirlwind, uncovers the hoary forehead of oblivion. This attitude, this reverse embrace of memory and forgetting which holds intact the identity of the unrecalled and the unforgettable, is vocation.'¹⁴ It is this mode of betrayal that Donald has taught us. One that paradoxically enacts a fidelity to the very open, promise of art as an event; one that enacts a fidelity to an art history to come that begins with the premise Stevens' confides to us in the concluding lines of 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven': 'It is not in the premise that reality/Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses/A dust, a force that traverses a shade.'

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¹² Preziosi, 'Introduction', *The Art of Art History*, 6.

¹³ See Emerling and Preziosi, 'Kunstgriff: Art as Event, Not Commodity', *Esse: Arts + Opinions* special volume *Taking a Stance*, 85, Fall 2015: 7-11.

¹⁴ Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, translated by Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt, Albany: State University of New York, 1995, 45.

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Architecture (2013) and *Bergson and The Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film* (2013).

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