

Introduction: 'The preface of what you shall have been'

Philip Armstrong and Jae Emerling



Donald Preziosi in Copenhagen, May 27, 2016, photographed by Henrik Reeh

In celebration of Donald Preziosi's seventy-fifth birthday and as a modest tribute to his profound influence on rethinking the disciplinary and historiographic conditions of art history, this issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* brings together short essays by scholars, colleagues, and former students that contextualize and celebrate his teaching and mentorship, his writings and scholarship, his ability to inspire and his friendship.

A number of salient characteristics emerge from the texts. First, from Binghamton to UCLA and beyond, his former students attest repeatedly to the importance of Preziosi's teaching, specifically his seminars—extraordinary intellectual spaces marked as much by infamous silences and long pauses as

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dialogue and vibrant exchange. Above all, the seminars were a space of questioning, a space in which the task of thinking, translating, and thinking critically foreclosed all attempt at mastery, for both students and teacher. These seminars were intellectual spaces that refused the consignment of knowledge as it passed from generation to generation and beyond. Disturbingly, maddeningly, and often experienced with deep frustration, students found quickly that there was nothing to imitate or appropriate, in the sense of a given body of knowledge that could be learned, reproduced, or (as art historians usually insist) dated and footnoted—those simulacra of knowledge that repeatedly ignore or efface Preziosi's marked insistence on the fictivity of discursive knowledge ('the fictions of factional representation' to recall Hayden White's phrase). This is an insistence on the very artifice of displaying, articulating, and staging phenomena, visual or otherwise: an insistence that characterizes his writings from their beginnings.

In terms of his seminars, one might suggest that Preziosi's lasting legacy—an inheritance, what he transmitted to his students—is the impossibility of any inheritance, which includes the impossibility of imitation on the one hand (there is nothing really to imitate), or mere reaction and resistance on the other (if the work never constitutes an identifiable model or measure, there is nothing established here in turn against which to model or measure any reaction or resistance). Rather, what emerges is more of an ethos, a task of thinking (at least one removed from the piousness that usually attaches to the phrase), a responsibility, or an ethics, a term towards which Preziosi has increasingly turned his attention. In short, a task of (re)writing the terms—at once historical, theoretical, critical, tropological, methodological—in which art history is written.

As we were preparing the volume, Deborah Cibelli recalls that in the acknowledgments to *Rethinking Art History*, Preziosi acknowledged the seminars in which the book began to unfold: 'As the graduate students in my Binghamton seminars will surely understand, this book is a gift to them.' Needless to say, this was a gift that was equally a poison—a true *pharmakon* from the most Socratic of figures—opening onto a task of thinking and writing in and beyond the space of the seminar that remains singular, punctuated by different idioms, and subject to permanent (re)translation—all without proper origin, paternal rights, or an essential and founding legitimacy. One might suggest that this is an impossible inheritance that marks art history as a question of faith, not belief (to recall Derrida's distinction)—not a discipline to believe in ('the enchantments of credulity' as Preziosi will phrase it) but rather, as the seminars proposed, a faith in what art history—what art's history—might be when left open, risked, contaminated, troped, exposed, to come.

Secondly, and as the bibliography included at the end of the volume amply suggests, any attempt to pinpoint the focus of Preziosi's writings is continually confronted with a remarkably wide range of critical interests and scholarly engagements, from Minoan architecture to the Crystal Palace, from slide projectors

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to the Eucharist, from linguistic structures to the Ottoman city. Moreover, his work ranges across historical periods, geopolitical contexts, and art practices. All of this is approached through an innovative semiotic reading of objects as well as discursive statements (we should recall that Preziosi played a prominent role in the introduction of semiotics in the U.S., something discussed in further detail in the interview that accompanies these essays). Beyond even these academic interests, Preziosi extends his critical interest to the most mundane of objects, which become the subject of truly insightful analysis. In correspondence, Melissa Hall recalled for us those 'legendary' seminars at Binghamton back in the early 80s when, as a small group of us sat chain-smoking around the seminar table, he would hand out postcards from the Madonna Inn, the famous California tourist destination in San Luis Obispo that features guest rooms designed around themes such as 'Caveman' and 'Fabulous Fifties', or a stack of evacuation instructions found in seat pockets of an airplane, which were used as prompts for initiating semiotic readings of the visual—'So, what does this all mean?' Or even better, Preziosi would ask: 'How does it mean?' Whatever the subject addressed, the range of scholarly interests and engagements is informed by a consistent set of theoretical concerns and an insistent act of critical questioning that now span nearly fifty years of scholarly presentations and publications. Our hope is that the range of subjects addressed in the texts that follow offers a preliminary and compelling response to the equally wide influence of his writings across different disciplinary contexts and numerous fields of research.

Thirdly, the volume seeks to open up a space of dialogue with Preziosi's writings, a set of exchanges that will undoubtedly be marked, like the seminars, as much by silences and pauses as conversation, colloquy, productive misreading, and disagreement. Preziosi's own exchange with Joel Snyder already provides one example.¹ Hayden White offers another.² In this same context, we are delighted to be able to include Hayden White's unpublished essay, 'Modernism and the Sense of History,' a fitting exergue not just to this volume and the texts that follow but to his exchanges over the years with Preziosi's work.

Finally, to all those who participated in this modest tribute, and to all those who wrote to us encouraging us to put together the volume, we remain extremely grateful.

Donald—a gift for you.

¹ See Donald Preziosi, 'The Question of Art History', Joel Snyder, 'A Response to Donald Preziosi', and Preziosi, 'A Rejoinder to Joel Snyder', in *Critical Inquiry*, 18:2, 1992, 363-386, reprinted in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds, *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 203-40.

² See Hayden White's references to Preziosi's work in his response, 'The Dark Side of Art History,' to Michael Ann Holly's 'The Melancholy Art,' both published in *The Art Bulletin*, 89, 1, 2007, 7-17, 21-26

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