

In Gratitude

Paul Eli Ivey

I arrived at SUNY-Binghamton as a master's degree student in art history in the fall of 1984. Binghamton's reputation as a department of diverse methodological and theoretical approaches to studying art history attracted me from the great plains of Oklahoma. Donald Preziosi and his seminars on art historical methodology and historiography inspired my MA thesis, entitled *Carl Andre: A Positioning of Perception*, completed in 1986 under his supervision. His superb, patient teaching and guidance, and his magisterial scholarly output have continued to inform and challenge my scholarship and that of my graduate students for over twenty-five years. After settling at the University of Arizona in Tucson as an assistant professor, during the 1990s I had the opportunity to write critical art reviews of regional, national, and even international exhibitions for *THE magazine*, published in Santa Fe, New Mexico by Guy Cross. Don's influence marked these reviews, as I attempted to translate the insights I received from his seminars and books to Santa Fe's art publics. Following are three revised critical reflections from *THE magazine*, punctuated by short notes from Don's seminars, dedicated as a humble tribute to and celebration of Donald Preziosi's enduring inspiration in my intellectual and professional life.

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'All perceptual activity is a species of enframing, of creating logical frameworks within which things by contiguity or similarity are meaningful.'

Ivey notes from Donald Preziosi's seminar, fall semester 1985, SUNY Binghamton

Beuys and Archigram, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1994

This summer the Centre George Pompidou, the focus of contemporary art in Paris, features influential German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys. Also featured is the British artists' collaborative Archigram. Both shows are centrally about matter being transformed into structure, into active spiritual essences, in the case of Beuys, or into dynamic architecture as site for the projection of imaging technologies, in the case of Archigram. Both exhibitions suggest utopias – Beuys wanted to spiritualize and transform modern society, which he characterized as an impersonal machine; Archigram celebrated a grandiose architecture of new materials where technology would liberate humanity. Beuys sought natural essences in materials; Archigram

dissolved them and projected utopias reminiscent of Paolo Soleri. Both represented art as architectonic – relating it directly to architecture in form and structure.

Not so ironically, these notions are juxtaposed in a fascinating building, rising at the edge of the Marais district, the Centres George Pompidou, designed by Piano and Rogers in the early 70s. The tubular superstructure and exterior systems of Beaubourg are increasingly dirty. The structure, with an over-emphasis of its own technology, reads today more like a building out of Terry Gilliam's movie *Brazil* than a utopian ideal, and is falling prey to the pollution of the metropolis. The residue that now sullies the building's colorful façade reminds us of the pollution created by our reliance on technology – even our most modern and innovative architectures cannot escape its gravity. To bring the building back to its original state will cost the French millions of francs, and has been the subject of lively debate.

This larger framework cannot help but inform this viewer's opinion about the shows, since Beuys, Archigram, and even the Pompidou are all utopian in their architectonic visions. Beuys acutely criticized society and its forms, preferring to seek organic metaphors for art, though these were often couched in a scientific rhetoric. Beuys was interested in the dynamic processes of nature, particularly those that perfected forms – from crystals to bee colonies – and these processes inspired his social critique of institutions and capitalism.

Joseph Beuys' chief concern was to create an opening in the art world and society at large for what he termed humanity's revolutionary progress. His ideas were informed by some of the more esoteric teachings that emerged in Modernism, particularly from Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, which emphasized that the earth, including humanity, was a living dynamic being, constantly growing, changing, and perfectible. Art became crucial for Beuys in the production of progressive spiritual unfoldment. This was manifested in his shamanistic performances, and in the alchemical and magical objects he fabricated, not as ends in themselves, but as compelling remnants of human creativity in nature. Sculptural pieces that he called 'Social Sculpture' were purposeful because Beuys felt they harnessed chaos and created what he called 'balance, reintegration, and flexible flow between areas of thinking, feeling, and will.'¹ Beuys' overall oeuvre could even be characterized as a pseudo-scientific architectonic, where inert and often uncommon materials, such as fat and felt, are juxtaposed to or transformed into geometric shapes. His famous *Fat Chair (Fettstuhl)*, reworked many times in his career, sets up one such juxtaposition. It is interpreted by Beuys to be warm against cold, chaos against order, connoting 'chair' as well as 'feces.'

The position of the artist within his vision of society was a space of critique – to break down political and social barriers to what Beuys believed was the need for unity in society. His work, poignantly positioned in a Germany divided, suggested that a harmonious state of affairs was indeed possible, and that all that was divided

¹ Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979, 72.

must be overcome through an aestheticization, where material and spiritual, analytic and intuitive meet.

The show itself, unfortunately, lacks this sensibility – all of these ideas have been transferred to the Centre Georges Pompidou itself as architecture, plaza, library, and museum. It is really the Archigram show, which suggests that architecture should be an ‘event’ filled with activity that foregrounds this institutionalization of art. The Pompidou acts much like an Archigram project – it is one of the most dynamic spots in Paris. Beuys is now one of its occupants, but his highly individual and anti-institutional stance has been appropriated and objectified. And now the Pompidou projects its own future, where its overwrought technological look will once again gleam colorfully in the Parisian skyline.

The exhibitions now being featured suggest that art is always somehow about the transformation of inert material into some dynamic site. Certainly this sensibility is particularly important now to the Pompidou as it prepares to clean itself. After all, the museum is finally the framework for the meanings of art – it is itself what Michel Foucault called a heterotopia – gathering all utopias to itself and keeping them *dans la vrai* (within the true).

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‘The artist and his work are seen as “homogenius.” This art history is a form of theology, with an echo of God and man as the same substance. Art is the trace of homogeneous selfhood.’

Ivey notes from Donald Preziosi’s seminar, spring semester 1985, SUNY Binghamton

Mark Rothko, *The Spirit of Myth*, University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, 1995

The Spirit of Myth is a small traveling show of paintings executed by the late Mark Rothko (1903-1970) in the 1930s and ‘40s. It was organized by the National Gallery of Art, which received a large bequest of paintings from the Mark Rothko Foundation in 1986. The duties of the foundation, which included protecting and displaying the works, were taken over by the museum. This exhibition is an example of the pedagogic mission of the museum to expose the public to Rothko’s seminal ideas and images, and functions as a point of departure for further reflection on his career.

The University of Arizona Museum of Art exhibits the show of more than twenty works in half of its main gallery. The paintings are smaller than Rothko’s later Color Field works, include much biomorphic and abstract imagery, and are presented in a rather crowded way. *The Spirit of Myth* suggests that these often-mutated paintings describe or even create myth. But the museum itself creates its myths as well.

The show, then, is an important stage upon which Rothko's later Color Field paintings are shown to resonate or emanate with earlier artistic ideas. This division of an artist's overall oeuvre has always been a strategy of art history, which establishes the 'mature' in terms of the 'early' or even 'adolescent' parts of an artists' career. Within the logic of this biological metaphor, the artist is like the acorn, in which the entire oak tree (mature style) is fully encoded from the very beginning. It is also linked to the theological idea that the whole of creation unfolds in the fullness of time. In this schema, the artist/creator progressively reveals an artistic essence through creative growth.

This unfoldment is viewed as necessary, because the artist must work through certain artistic and even spiritual problems on the way to the full realization of artistic ends. Rothko's career has been codified in this hagiographic way, through tracing his contact with other similarly gifted artists of this period. Few have written about the competitive urban environment artists faced between the World Wars. Attention to the art market and Rothko's attempts to infiltrate it are viewed as too contextual to be of much interest. In other words, the specificity of history is often ignored in art historical accounts. Curators continue to cite predecessors in artistic styles, establishing a genealogy of influence, which produces the 'master' painter. And certainly Rothko's canvases are suggestive of other artists. In fact, the early work exhibited in this show is of great curatorial interest because of these influences.

Rothko depicted urban life in paintings reminiscent of the works by *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*) from pre-war World War I Germany. Many of these scenes, several of them depicting the New York subway, remind us of the German Expressionists' belief that a return to so-called primitive sources and naive painting styles would usher in new possibilities for actual social relationships. But rather than utopian, Rothko's works are viewed as dystopian and caught up in the American experience of the metropolis of the 1930s, marked by Depression and xenophobia. His works are said to 'reflect' the alienation felt by many in the urban environment. Rothko, like the members of *The Bridge*, turned to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche for inspiration. Nietzsche's theory of myth had a great impact on Rothko. He began to search out images of tragedy from Greek theater to represent universal symbols of the human predicament.

Another source for significant symbols was found in the arts of the ancients. This archaic art embodied Nietzsche's ideas of eternal human characteristics, including the visceral potential for creativity, war, and tragedy, all of which well up from what he called the Dionysian principle. This principle was to be held in check by the workings of Apollo, who structured and ordered this sometimes irrational and cruel side of the human spirit. Rothko believed that his work could unlock and illustrate these forces and reveal humankind's great need for harmony and transcendence in order to construct a balance between chaos and order.

Nietzsche's concepts seem to parallel the development of another technique designed to explore the inner workings of the human psyche called automatism.

Automatism was an invention of the surrealists, and it is also cited as an influence on Rothko in the 1930s and '40s – a time when many French surrealists were fleeing Europe and settling in New York. While inspired by a loose reading of Sigmund Freud, the surrealists had picked up on an idea that would have much currency in New York in the '40s. This concept, explored in the writings of psychologist Carl Jung, suggested that we all share a collective unconscious. Rothko's search for universalizable symbols and myths is viewed as revealing recognizable archetypes from this collective unconscious.

The Spirit of Myth reveals much about how an artist conceives of his work in terms of the work of others. But its overarching design is to lead viewers through the early career of Rothko in order to construct a logic of identity for the artist himself, which is fully realized in his great Color Field canvases of the late 1950s and '60s. Clearly the museum operates as a theophanic framework, celebrating the visible arrival and representation of eternal human emotions seen, even if only darkly, in these earlier mythic and symbolic pictures.

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'Museology, (Panopticing) – chicken or egg question. Which came first, art or museums? But there really is no pre-museum art. Museums were universalized in the nineteenth century. Art, then, becomes self-referential. We find whole countries in museums.'

Ivey notes from Donald Preziosi's seminar, spring semester 1985, SUNY Binghamton

The Position of Culture: *Documenta* and Venice *Biennale*, 1997

It was particularly exciting for me, as a contemporary art historian, to be able to attend and compare the Venice *Biennale* and the Kassel *Documenta* in the same summer. The themes for the exhibitions were also intriguing: 'Future, Present, Part' was Italian curator Germano Celant's focus for the *Biennale*. French curator Catherine David wrote in the introduction to the exhibition's *Short Guide* that she intended for *Documenta X* to be 'a critical confrontation with the present in the framework of an institution that over the past twenty years has become a Mecca for tourism and cultural consumption.'²

Historically, both the Venice *Biennale* and the Kassel *Documenta* were formed to claim a superior position for Western art. The *Biennale* was originally established by the communal government of Venice in 1895. Early in the twentieth century, participating countries were invited to erect pavilions as exhibition spaces in the Giardini di Castello, southeast of St. Mark's Square. Modern art began to be

² http://universes-in-universe.de/doc/e_press.htm

exhibited in the 1920s, and during the fascist regime, the Italian government took over support for the art show, adding music, theater, and cinema. By the end of World War II, the *Biennale* was the major international venue for the shaping of contemporary art tastes and had become a space for a rereading of modern art by Italian curators.

Recently the *Biennale* has been supported by corporate funding, due to decreased state support for the arts. This year, Volkswagen's forthcoming Beetle and kiosks featuring Omega's new advertising campaign with supermodel Cindy Crawford were exhibited next to artwork from Egypt and Poland.

Very little painting was presented at either the *Biennale* or *Documenta* – video and installation works are definitely the new mainstay. Call me old fashioned, but viewing video-loops that are not synched to one another, that are projected in dark and often stuffy rooms, did not facilitate an art interaction for me or, apparently, for many of the attendees. At both venues, most of the video rooms were empty. But it was a very hot summer. Nonetheless, the strongest work in the *Biennale* evoked images of contemporary national identity regardless of media.

Documenta was formed in the mid-1950s and has always had a propagandistic mission. Located in a rebuilt city near the border with Eastern Germany, early shows emphasized the cultural hegemony of the West, and featured the abstraction then becoming popular in the United States. *Documenta* served as a cultural showcase of the Marshall Plan, and attempted to recover modern art as central to the project of European cultural reconstruction, particularly in light of the Nazis' rejection of modern art. By the 1960s, *Documenta* eclipsed the Venice *Biennale* in size and influence among contemporary artists.

The work of Joseph Beuys, until this year, had always had an important presence in the *Documenta*, as it underpinned a faith in art's redemptive capacities. This year, with some controversy, Catherine David decided to reframe many of the utopian artistic propositions of past *Documentas*, particularly from the 1960s, as a way of offering a cultural critique of the West. Featuring mainly documentary photography, city planning schemes, a wide-ranging series of video works, and installations, *Documenta X* suggests an equally therapeutic focus for contemporary art: as a space for post-communist 'de-Europeanization.'

Utopian architectural projections by Alison and Peter Smithson and Archigram were juxtaposed with documentary photographs by Walker Evans and Gary Winogrand. The mixture of war, violence, and the erotic in works on paper by Nancy Spero was just as powerful as it was in 1968. Marcel Broodthaer's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* from 1968-1972, continued to question the status of the art object within institutionalized spaces. In this work, viewers are confronted with hundreds of representations of eagles from disparate historical sources, and encouraged to consider how meaning is produced through such comparisons in the museum.

Documenta X was, hands down, the best-organized exhibition I have ever attended. Once off the ICE train, viewers were led to the beginning of the exhibition

and moved, sometimes like cattle, through its intricacies. Extensive maps, short guide commentaries, catalogues, and T-shirts were all marked by the visually arresting *Documenta X* insignia, which represented both the tenth *Documenta* and a critical ‘crossing out’ or ‘erasure’ of the show. The symbol was also featured on large posters in virtually every Deutsche Bahn station in Germany. Many locomotives also sported the symbol. No wonder – the Deutsche Bahn was the leading corporate sponsor of *Documenta X*.

Sponsorship was clearly important to the organizers. Hans Haacke’s work underlined this priority. He contributed an official large-scale poster, which was displayed on at least two over-scaled public kiosks. Entitled *Standortkultur (Where culture stands)*, the poster explored the hidden agendas of corporate support for the arts, a project Haacke has been working on since the early 1970s. His institutional critiques are quite powerful, but are always fraught with irony. After all, they criticize the very institutions that show and support his art practice. This was true of the *Documenta X* piece, which included short texts on the topic. However, the beautifully colored design work hid these messages from our quick image-byte attention span. Nonetheless, one of the texts, from a Deutsche Bank official, revealed the underlying current evident at both *Documenta X* and the *Venice Biennale*: ‘Wer das Geld gibt, kontrolliert’ or ‘Who gives the money, controls.’

Paul Eli Ivey is Professor of Art History at the University of Arizona. He researches the built environments and compounds of alternative and esoteric religions and communal groups in the United States. He is author of *Radiance from Halcyon, A Utopian Experiment in Religion and Science* (Minnesota, 2013), concerning a turn of the twentieth century theosophical intentional community in California, and *Prayers in Stone: Christian Science Architecture in the United States, 1894 – 1930* (Illinois, 1999).

While a new assistant professor at the University of Arizona, Paul Ivey had the opportunity to write critical reviews of regional, national, and even international art exhibitions for *THE magazine*, published in Santa Fe, New Mexico by Guy Cross. Donald Preziosi’s influence marked these reviews, as Ivey attempted to translate the insights from Preziosi’s seminars and books to Santa Fe’s art publics. Reviews of *Beuys* and *Archigram* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1994), Mark Rothko, *The Spirit of Myth* (University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, 1995), and the 1997 *Documenta* and *Venice Biennale* are slightly revised critical reflections from *THE magazine*, punctuated by short notes from Don’s seminars, dedicated as a humble tribute to and celebration of Donald Preziosi’s enduring inspiration in Ivey’s intellectual and professional life.

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