

'I write four times....': A tribute to the work and teaching of Donald Preziosi

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'I write four times here, *around* painting.' So states Jacques Derrida in section four of the first chapter, 'Passe-Partout,' of his book *Truth in Painting*, published in 1978 in French and in 1987 in English (translated brilliantly by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod). At first I had remembered this (strongly) as the first sentence of *Truth in Painting*. But in fact the first sentence of the book, which is also the first sentence of 'Passe-Partout,' reads as follows: 'Someone, not me comes and says the words: "I am interested in the idiom in painting".' Derrida goes on, on the second page, to remind us of where the phrase 'truth in painting' comes from. It is 'signed by Cézanne,' who wrote to his fellow painter and friend Emile Bernard in 1905, 'I OWE YOU THE TRUTH IN PAINTING AND I WILL TELL IT TO YOU.' All of these sentences, but particularly 'I write four times here, *around* painting,' have stayed fresh in my mind for these almost thirty years, along with the last sentence of 'Passe-Partout' (one of my favorites in all poststructuralist theory): 'The internal edges of a passe-partout are often beveled.'¹

Four times. The sides of a frame, which signal the 'inside' of the work of art (its essence) by purporting to divide it from the 'outside' (the 'parergonal,' all that is extrinsic to its essential nature as art). Such is the grounding of aesthetics, which continues to inform our beliefs about this stuff we call 'art.' The four chapters of *Truth in Painting* after the prolegomenous "Passe-Partout" — 1) 'Parergon'; 2) '+R (Into the Bargain)'; 3) 'Cartouches'; 4) 'Restitutions' — parallel this 'writing four times,' and mimic the four sides of a frame. A series of four (of four times), laying out an argument that itself 'frames' (correspondingly: 1) aesthetics and the use of framing to exclude that which is extrinsic to art (with the matte inside the frame, the 'passe-partout,' and its beveled edges); 2) the author and his signature as framing devices; 3) the dilemma that a work of art is always part of a series, and the question of origins; 4) demonstrating the impossibility of returning the work to its 'origin,' via a deconstruction of essays by Martin Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro). Nothing is truly extrinsic to this framing. The framing, it is clear, constitutes that which it presumes to delineate. The frame is thus *part of* the work. Derrida's 'four times' constitute the work (*his* work, deconstructing aesthetics) even as they pose themselves as philosophy, a metadiscourse; his arguments situate art within this broader 'framework.'

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 9, 1, 2, 13.

Drawing on Derrida's insights and his quadrilateral conceit for the rest of this brief piece, I will 'write four times' around my intellectual and pedagogical debt to Donald Preziosi, framing (incompletely) my thoughts and memories; I contain them in this way, but aspects of desire and longing will inevitably seep out, oozing across the beveled edges of the passe-partout (beveled, they lead the eye and the mind from inside to outside, showing us there is no strict dividing line). The desire and longing will be evident in my shifts to 'Donald' from the more formal 'Preziosi,' a choice I make deliberately to dislocate the honorific and to implicate my feelings in my framing operation. In this way I will enact my awareness of the fact that my framing both constitutes and describes four aspects of what I believe to be the most important contributions of the work of Donald Preziosi.

1. I owe you the *Truth in Painting*

Derrida's book structured—or should I write 'framed'—an entire graduate seminar taught by Donald Preziosi in the 1987-88 school year in the Art History Department at UCLA, his second at the university (he was arriving from a previous position at SUNY Binghamton) and my first (as a PhD student, arriving from obtaining my MA in art history at University of Pennsylvania). This seminar blew my mind. It was the best class I had ever had, and would ever have, in art history or any related field. I learned so much in this class, about Derridean theory, about Kantian theory and aesthetics, and—through Donald's method—about thinking, learning, and teaching ... in particular, in relation to pedagogy, about the power of silence.

It was unnerving. He would ask a question, based on the book, and be content (seemingly) to sit quietly, with his owlish gaze, while we sat in silence, squirming uncomfortably. This could go on for some time.

I'm not good with silence. I would occasionally screw up my courage and raise my hand tentatively, attempting an 'answer.' Of which there was none. Donald would never say I (or anyone else) was wrong, that I remember. But if the answer was foolish, off the point, or otherwise irrelevant, he would gently guide the discussion towards more productive ends. We would end up somewhere that was on first glance unexpected, but on closer perusal, the obvious and ultimate destination for the passage and discussion at hand. The genius of his method was that I would feel (and I'm guessing others shared this) that it was my insight or thought process that had led to this now seemingly inevitable endpoint.

And yet at the same time, the 'framing' of discussion was deliberately open ended and ultimately obscure. In order to find answers, we had to sit with ourselves, we had to look at our fears and negotiate them. For hearing and seeing our most cherished assumptions about art and art history—and really of knowledge itself—systematically dismantled by Preziosi channeling Derrida was a sometimes frightening experience. This learning, this profound questioning of the deepest structures of belief shoring up our ideas about art and, ultimately, the very

institutions of art (museums, galleries, art writing, art schools, university departments) in which we hoped to participate, was complicated and difficult. There were no easy answers. There was no chatter-filled accumulation of 'knowledge.' Knowledge had to be accrued bit by bit through hard work, some of which required silence and contemplation. Knowledge was lived.

2. Rethinking art's histories

Preziosi introduced poststructuralism in its most profound variants to art history, in a manner that (if we take the current still defensive and largely reactionary state of the discipline as evidence) has still not been fully understood. He has maintained and expanded a method in which he applies the rigors of critical theory and poststructuralist inquiry, including perhaps most importantly the work of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan (I was finishing my dissertation when he taught his infamous Lacan seminar and so did not take it), to questions central to the study of art's histories.

It is only in writing this piece that I become fully aware of just how indebted I am to Preziosi's work and methods, particularly his sharp attention to what the critical force of poststructuralism can offer to a discipline too often complacent and boundary-guarding in its energies, premises, and claims. When I arrived at UCLA, Donald was in the throes of finishing his epically influential *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, which would be published by Yale University Press in 1989. His seminars were shaped by the profound thinking being done for this volume, which has reshaped the discourse of art history (if sometimes only in its defensive reactions). I now realize that this book also etched itself into my consciousness, conditioning my own approach to addressing the discipline of art history as well as the objects we call 'art,' and the related events and images I have come to address in my work (including performance art works and artifacts, film, and other examples of visual culture). My suggestion to name the book series I co-edit with Marsha Meskimmon at Manchester University Press 'Rethinking Art's Histories' makes this debt clear, and yet I was not consciously aware of how close I was to repeating Donald's very book title.

Rethinking Art History afforded a model, conveyed by Donald in his teaching from 1987 to the 1989 publication of the book and beyond, to interrogate the deepest structures of the discipline through a historically and linguistically erudite framework. Like Derrida, Preziosi has command of numerous languages other than English. Like Derrida, he writes across philosophy, aesthetics, classics, and the (at its best) hybrid discipline of art history. He does this in the book specifically to complicate the much touted concept in the late 1980s of art history as a discipline in crisis, and to remind us of the deeper and longer histories of inquiry informing ideas about visual signs and aesthetic meaning that art history claims as its exclusive domain. Preziosi takes art history apart, showing its continued reliance on

the lamest and least rigorous kind of connoisseurship and authoritarian claims of 'disinterestedness,' while demonstrating that he is the scholar most devoted to its deep and broad historiography.

In *Rethinking Art History*, Preziosi does nothing less than to point out the deep implication of the discipline in 'the very weight of the commodity marketplace and its hierarchies of value and fashion' on which this marketplace relies. The ultimate indictment—completely convincing in the book—is that the 1980s witnessed an 'across-the-board expansion of academic and mercantile attention in a disciplinary machinery that, resonating with economic theory and practice, can only survive by expansion.'² At the same time, by insisting that 'art' as we know it has long been the most extreme and central example of Europe's claims for its progressiveness and superiority in relation to the other parts of the world that European-based cultures were directly colonizing and the subjects they were (and are) ideologically subduing, it was this book that started to prove to me and to many others that art history was (and is) not an arcane and irrelevant discipline but, at its best and in its most critical forms, offers a means for understanding the most basic structures and beliefs of Euro-American modernity.

3. The artfulness of 'art history'

This placement of art history at the core of an understanding of modernity itself has been carried through in the continuing work of Preziosi's esteemed career. Most influentially, his edited anthology *The Art of Art History* (first published in 1998 and republished in a revised edition in 2009) has been assigned in (I'm sure) hundreds of art and art history classes around the English-speaking world and beyond—including my methods classes at University of California, Riverside, University of Manchester (in the UK), and McGill University (in Québec).³ For this book, I believe Donald drew from what he had learned from teaching art historical methods to all of us who count ourselves lucky enough to have been his students, as well as from his broad and deep knowledge of classical aesthetics and history, philosophy, visual theory, art history, and critical theory. There are echoes of discussions we had in seminars in the late 1980s here—including a chapter from Derrida's *Truth in Painting*, D.N. Rodowick's brilliant rumination on Derridean critiques of aesthetics (in his 1994 article 'Impure Mimesis, or the Ends of the Aesthetic'), and texts I engaged with Donald when in 1996 we co-taught a graduate seminar on feminism and art together, a joint class between UCLA and UC Riverside; there are also other texts by Mary Kelly, Jennifer Doyle, María Fernández, and Judith Butler on postcolonial, feminist, antiracist, and queer theoretical themes, texts I remember discussing with Donald over the years.

² Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 10.

³ Donald Preziosi, ed, *The Art of Art History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998/2009.

It is the most remarkable thing to teach with a mentor. And to shape one's own teaching around insights gained in classes with him, as well as teaching *with* him. But in that seminar I was never able to keep silent and wait. I clung to my feminist knowledge base, feeling the need to convey it to class members with passion and excitement. Donald had to have the patience to let me rattle through feminist debates, sitting back with a wry expression on his face. I think on the whole we presented some interesting contrasts—not the least in obvious gender appearance, and by reversing the stereotypical roles of domineering male authority and retiring female acolyte. I owe Donald a sharp awareness of my own power in the classroom, and (directly and indirectly) of the responsibilities attending to this power.

The Art of Art History has become a classic. I assign it in most of my methods-related classes, and art and art history students find it a solid and enlightening introduction to critical thinking about the discipline as well as to thinking and writing about art. The introductions Preziosi provides for each section are gems encapsulating his decades of teaching experience and scholarly work. Here, in concise form, he continues the effort begun in *Rethinking Art History* to expose the connections between theological discourse and the mystifications of art history, as well as the links between the conjoined effects of colonialism/capitalism/imperialism and the idea, meanings, and values of art.

4. Grasping worlds, museum theory

Joining life and professional forces in the late 1990s with the indomitable and equally brilliant scholar of early modern art and theory, Claire Farago, Preziosi published in 2004 an anthology with her entitled *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*: a book as important to its subfield (museum and curatorial studies) as *The Art of Art History* has become to any art or art history program.⁴ Here, as stated in the preface, they seek to provide an 'institutional critique of museology at large, investigating the complexities of the relationships of individual practitioners to structures of power.' As such, the book is presented as an offering to address the 'ethics of academic practice,' furthering the effect of Preziosi's earlier works as activist interventions through scholarship aiming to interrogate and unsettle beliefs and institutional structures relating to art and art history. Even as Derrida's unfolding of his inquiry about the 'truth in painting' provides an ethics to explore the limits and closures of aesthetics, so Preziosi and Farago's *Grasping the World* proffers to the reader an overall argument that provides an ethical framework (four times around the institution...) to understand the colonialist, imperialist, and capitalist foundations of the modern collection, gallery, and museum (both 'art' and 'natural history').

⁴ Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, Burlington, Vermont and Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

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This book has become a classic in museum studies, assigned across the English-speaking world in art history departments and burgeoning MA programs in curatorial studies (such as the one I currently run at Roski School of Art and Design, University of Southern California). From classic essays addressing museums from the point of view of postcolonial and feminist theory (by scholars such as Annie Coombes, Carol Duncan, and Donna Haraway) to essays on early versions of museums and galleries by scholars of the early modern period (Paula Findlen's 1989 'The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy' is excellent), to articles on specific types of collecting practices and museums, the book addresses the key aspects of a critical study of museums.⁵

The reciprocal nature of Preziosi's relationship to his students—his shaping of ways of thinking that echoes down through generations of students (and probably to *our* students as well), along with his generous inclusion of work by former students in these anthologies—is particularly evident in *Grasping the World*. Here, essays by former students from UCLA, including Sandra Esslinger, Jo-Anne Berelowitz, and Andrea Liss round out the collection.

Timothy Mitchell's truly fantastic article 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,' included in *Grasping the World* as well as in Preziosi's *The Art of Art History*, encapsulates what is so powerful about Preziosi's (and Farago's) vision of what matters. Here, Mitchell *reverses* the profoundly Westernized gaze structuring the European exhibitionary order and the museum from concept to building to urban siting. He does this by exploring Egyptian accounts of European cities and expositions rather than (as is commonly done in postcolonial accounts of European art and culture) critiquing Orientalizing European views of other people and cultures from areas colonized by European countries.⁶ This simple reversal portrays the Occident from the point of view of the Orient, describing Europe in Arabic accounts as 'a place of spectacle and visual arrangement,' wherein the West appears as 'a place organized as a system of commodities, values, meanings, and representations, forming signs that reflect one another in a labyrinth without exits.'⁷

Mitchell's simple strategy produces a mind-blowing analysis that exemplifies the way in which a change of 'frame' or point of view allows for a

⁵ This work has been furthered in Preziosi's other extensive publications on museums, collecting, and other institutions relating to art history through substantiating its materialities. His *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, for example, presents a published version of his Slade Lectures at Oxford University, extending his exploration of how art and its institutions are not peripheral to contemporary life but at the base of continuing assumptions about modernity and the progressiveness of European-based cultures. Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

⁶ Timothy Mitchell, 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), reprinted in both *The Art of Art History* (455-72) and *Grasping the World* (442-461).

⁷ Mitchell, 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,' in *Grasping the World*, 451.

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radical rethinking of the deepest structures of power that inform existing institutions and discourses about art, all of which are formed through assumptions initiated in the European early modern period, when 'art' as we know it was invented. Making use of Mitchell's, and Preziosi and Farago's, larger projects, we could argue (as I do in all of my classes) that 'art' as we know it is an effect of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Art is what Europe invented out of medieval concepts of artisanship and religious imagery in order to substantiate its superiority in relation to the cultures it sought to dominate through direct and indirect colonialism.⁸

Mitchell literalizes the shifted point of view that all of Preziosi's work calls for—we (presumptively white, middle class Euro-American art historians) 'see' at least briefly and provisionally from the point of view of Egyptian visitors, who would only perceive how controlling and freakishly narrow European ideas about art and culture are from a broader point of view. The 'we' here can and must then be expanded to include other points of view in art history itself. Taken to its conclusion, the arguments produced in Preziosi's (and Farago's) work would in fact necessitate the diversification of the discipline and its related institutions—it would no longer be possible even to fantasize a unified Euro-American (white, middle- or upper-class, heteronormative) 'we.' This is an exhilarating (for me and I hope my students)—but also for many others frightening—prospect.

The degree to which art history and museology and curatorial studies have *not* taken up the challenge of Preziosi's work testifies to the threat it poses to those who have an interest in maintaining an idea of art as 'special,' 'autonomous,' and untouched by the vicissitudes of capital and the attitudes of colonialism, racism, sexism, and imperialism.⁹ The article by Mitchell points to the way in which

⁸ Here I am indebted not only to Mitchell, and to Preziosi and Farago, but to the important work by William Pietz exploring the deep history of fetishism, a concept invented by Portugal and assigned to the people on the West Coast of Africa Portugal was seeking to colonize and enslave from the fifteenth century onward. For a condensed version of this work, see William Pietz, 'Fetish,' from Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds, *Critical Terms for Art History*, second edition, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003, 306-317. See also my chapter 'Fetishizing the Gaze and the Anamorphic Perversion: 'The Other is You',' in *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual*, New York and London: Routledge, 2012, 63-116; and my article 'The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish,' in Henry Rogers and Aaron Williamson, eds, *Art Becomes You! Parody, Pastiche and the Politics of Art. Materiality in a Post-Material Paradigm*, Birmingham: Article Press, 2006, 132-150.

⁹ My work has, I hope, consistently followed through Preziosi's challenge by insistently calling for a critical historical approach to art and its theories and institutions, while integrating this approach with a rigorous attention to feminist, queer, and anti-racist concerns. My books and articles have all sought to uncover attitudes, resistances, and sites of power as these inform arguments made about art broadly construed (including performance art and visual culture more broadly). In particular, my most recent single-authored book, *Seeing Differently*, interrogates the erasure of the effects and pressures of identity politics in

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Preziosi's call for a deep questioning of the frames of art history is absolutely essential to its relevance, its ethics, and its profound challenge to the discipline. This is a questioning that, in Preziosi's work, involves an acknowledgment that the 'passe-partout is always beveled': in our attempt to make meaning out of art, there is always leakage from the outside of art history to its supposedly sacrosanct interior, always bias determining supposedly 'disinterested' judgment, always historically, economic, and socially contingent forces (including colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism) informing art, its interpretations, its histories. Most profoundly Donald has taught me—and teaches his readers—that the critical history of art history is its most serious and important charge. Without a historical understanding of where the structures of belief framing the discipline come from, we are just repeating ideology, aligning ourselves with the power structures we think we are critiquing (as most art critics, curators, and historians of contemporary art tend to do).

I close the frame here. It is not secure, but continues to leak. The 'truth in painting' (or in art broadly construed) is that it has no inherent truth. Art is what we make of it. Preziosi's career has been artful (full of art) indeed, even as it has questioned the very notion of art.

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the history of art, as well as tracing an intellectual history of how identity politics movements have shaped and informed art discourse since WWII.