

Is art history still a coy science?

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In 1989 Donald Preziosi called art history a coy science, by which he meant that it was reserved and even concealing of its means of operation.¹ One of Preziosi's objects of attack was a compulsion toward interpretation, which, he argued, 'is established as the supreme critical-historical activity.'² Is art history still a coy science? To answer this question, we might say that whenever the work of interpretation goes on apace, unproblematically, we can expect that the answer would be 'yes.' Indeed, we often find today that the usual reflexive qualifications are given in any number of art history texts and then the author launches in for yet another interpretation.

One thing today that makes us more susceptible to coyness is the bifurcation of theory and history, where theory becomes a critical lateral discipline existing to hold empirical art history in judgment. This does not solve the problem of coyness – it may even make it worse – because coyness is about 'normal' art history and its institutions, about its actual operation and products. That art history should stall into introspection was never Preziosi's intent as I read him, for even if he himself has produced a weighty theoretical library, he never abandoned empirical art history. Thus, it appears his aim was reflexive practice: theory and history in a mutually beneficial dialectic.

Somehow, Preziosi articulated his own reflexive point of view for thoughtful, empirical art history. Nevertheless, I think his solution has been difficult for the discipline to understand. It seems that in place of true understanding, a number of substitutes or add-ons have been devised – theoretical enrichment, contemporary relevance, political concern – that don't really cut to the heart of the matter. This note is devoted to sketching out the primary misreading of Preziosi's point, with a view to the future.

Preziosi's critique of traditional art history

In *Rethinking Art History* and in later writings, Preziosi has built up an elaborated critique of traditional art history. Perhaps most pithily in *Brain of the Earth's Body*, he remarked: 'Art history has been grounded in the repression of the impossibility of

¹ Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

² Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 83.

representation.³ Frankly, I do not believe that most art historians have quite understood the significance of this pronouncement. We have focused almost exclusively on the actual act of interpretation and called it impossible, rather than on the possibility of representation, leaving Preziosi's radical critique unexamined. Art history still exists as a stable genre of writing in which the art historian retrieves (destabilized) meanings from objects that (we deep down believe) are intended for meaning.⁴

One of the most important debates today lies in the epistemic status of art historical methods. There is a deep difficulty in coming to terms with the perspective afforded by connoisseurship, philology, textual criticism, object conservation, and the like, in comparison to the 'emic,' or indigenous ontology of past peoples. Faced with this asymmetric dilemma, the main strategy adopted has been to undercut the historian's viewpoint, placing the insights of the author in an uneasy limbo of mutual respect with that studied culture. The overwhelming response, then, has been to state the contingency of the results.

As a consequence, art history remains infatuated with constructionism and mistakes the contingency of the art historical conclusion with the contingency of the discipline itself. We have developed a natural inclination to note our resistance to 'global, totalizing' theories and we never search after 'final interpretations.' If a historical fact can be stated without conviction, it somehow can serve to critique the whole discipline. Epistemology is politicized. This constitutes a tacit performative contradiction between what the art historian says and what she does, something we put up with in art history.

Yet in Preziosi's reckoning, art historical knowledge is still possible. How it is that we have had such a difficult time with this? Although Preziosi does not mention it explicitly, his diagnosis implicitly shows that art history does not suitably distinguish the 'context of discovery' from the 'context of justification' in research. It does not separate the posing of a question from the truth of an answer. We may have an ocean of correct or warranted facts about art history, but we have said little about how those facts came to be the right facts to be seeking, or whether they are valuable or not. Running these together as pragmatist philosophy of science does, allows for fudging of the question. Separating them puts the question of art history itself into stark relief.

If facts can be ascertained, the context of discovery is what is really at issue. How did art history come to propose problems? Faced with such a question, our instinct is to trace out a 'genealogy.' However, even genealogies of thought cannot account for art history. In the genealogical approach, art history gets compared to its neighbors. But what about art history itself as a form or modernity or, as Preziosi

³ Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 149.

⁴ For a personal formulation of current issues in art history, see *A Realist Theory of Art History*, London: Routledge, 2013.

shows, helping to initiate modernity itself?⁵ Then we have to think about a specialized disciplining of knowledge that is a response to historical developments. Notice that even the proviso that ‘art history is in the service of the art market’ does not offer much insight.⁶

To get to what Preziosi has been saying all these years, we have to begin with, and move beyond, his initial observation that of the various functions of images, only one – communicated meaning – was privileged above others. Of course this favored the dominant iconological program but his point was much deeper. It is not that the work of art should have meaning, but that *all* objects should have meaning for us. This is the consequence of the panopticon, where the past exists as a storehouse for contemporary judgments.⁷ It is not the contingency of the interpretation that is at issue but the contingency of the vantage point itself. The main trouble of art history, then, is that *it doesn't question its own right to exist*.

In the past twenty-five years, art historians have investigated different modes of being of a work of art. The most important has been the work of art that *shows* rather than *tells*, which has aided a move away from ‘symptomatic’ readings of work of art.⁸ These revelations are useful but they still don’t question the issue of showing *for us*. We are still the art history community reading retrospectively about these different modes of being of works of art. They still exist in history *for us*. Art history is still taken for granted as an unexamined discipline with every right to exist.

As an example, take Hans Belting’s history of images. In the elaborations of his fine *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages* and particularly *Likeness and Presence*, he wrote the history of the image ‘before the era of art.’⁹ In that era, the

⁵ See Donald Preziosi, ‘Art History: Making the Visible Legible’, in Donald Preziosi, ed, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998: ‘The principal product of art history has thus been modernity itself’; *Brain of the Earth's Body*, 14: ‘Art history and museology have been paradigmatic modes of knowledge production not only in our modernity but as engines of modernity as such.’

⁶ For Preziosi this is simply presumed and is no major revelation; Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity*, New York: Routledge, 2013: ‘Pay attention, please: The “History of Art” is the *history of capital*. End of story.’

⁷ Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 54-79.

⁸ See representation and the ‘spectacular’ in Louis Marin, *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001; narration and ‘monstration’ in André Gaudreault, *From Plato To Lumière: Narration And Monstration In Literature And Cinema*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009; and Preziosi himself on ‘ostensification’ in *Brain of the Earth's Body*. For the move away from symptomatic reading, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, in *The Way We Read Now*, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, eds, special issue of *Representations*, 108, 2009, 1–21.

⁹ Hans Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, translated by Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer, New Rochelle NY: Aristide D. Caratzas Publisher, 1990; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

image is a substitute for a person, not a detached idea, or work of art. In subsequent writings, Belting has elaborated this model of the image as requiring some medium, through which it re-presents what is absent.¹⁰ When Belting writes (somewhat questionably) that ‘Semiology...does not allow images to exist beyond the controllable territory of signs, signals, and communication,’ he is responding to Preziosi’s point that the work of art should not only be approached for the recoverable message contained within it.¹¹ Instead, he has posited ‘presences’ to be discussed.

In his system, *all* images require a medium, and the body is the most common medium. A picture is merely ‘the image with a medium.’ Pictures as we understand them are not special, new, or unusual in any way. In his critique of Jean-Paul Vernant, Belting shows himself to be eager to downplay the historicist interpretation of terms relating to ancient Greek image culture, whereby the *eidolon* changes in meaning.¹² For Belting, the modern ‘picture’ inaugurated in the classical period is only a *medium of remembrance*, not a *medium of embodiment*.¹³ His further attempt to equalize all forms of image, internal or external, has the effect of minimizing historical variation.

It seems that Belting’s gambit was to push as far as possible from the logocentrism of traditional art history, toward ‘anthropological’ territory. However, instead of erasing the work of art that was only a product of discursive elaboration, he ended up creating the work that is *only* a product of iconic elaboration.¹⁴ For Belting, *all* works of art are memories of absent people; in the move to be more anthropological, he has thus smuggled back in an interesting naturalistic presumption into his theory (works of art must necessarily re-present). In simply occupying the opposite terrain of logocentrism with a more ‘materialist’ solution, he confirms Preziosi’s point that materialism is merely another form of artifice.¹⁵

In returning to the foundational root of all art in a very democratizing gesture, Belting has also made his system curiously static. His belief that semiotics is only about communicated meanings does not allow him to conceptualize evolving semiotic capacities. Thus his elaborations of contemporary art do not reflect the dizzying layers of reference that typifies a postmodern aesthetic but rather a return to an originary approach to the image.

¹⁰ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, translated by Thomas Dunlap, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

¹¹ Hans Belting, ‘Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology’, *Critical Inquiry*, 31, 2005, 302-19; see also Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 11.

¹² Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Figures, Idoles, Masques*, Paris: Julliard, 1990.

¹³ Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*, 108.

¹⁴ See further Christopher Wood’s review of the German edition, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), *Art Bulletin*, 86, 2004, 370-373.

¹⁵ Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

We might say that in addition to the re-presentational work of the image, one must attend to the re-presentational work of the system of art history itself. The fact that its history can still be written (*Likeness and Presence*) shows this. The way in which Belting believes that we perennially return to the basic sense of re-presenting of the absent body shows a static presumption of given systematicity. Christopher Wood pithily sums up how Belting has not questioned his system's right to exist when he writes: 'it does not acknowledge that the place it is coming from is the place of art.'

Perhaps part of the problem is that Belting has written a hybrid art/anthropology. If he had added anthropological insights to art history, maintaining anthropology as a social science not seeking to write history, it could have freed his approach from such closure. For example, this is what saves Rudolf Arnheim's similar concerns, because at the end of the day he is worried about principles of psychology and their relation to art, not history. Arnheim, unlike Belting, is not a historian.

The antiquarian, like the curator today, wrote about whatever was in his collector's cabinet. Fully attained modernity, however, was also fully attained synthesis of the past, the panopticon, History. No longer a storehouse of actions to follow (*historia magistra vitae*), history becomes a record of transformations to understand, spelling out radical alterity. We became bystanders. A key to addressing the dilemma of art history's right to exist is to resurrect the anxiousness about art making at every historical point. We have to get to the strangeness of the act of making, to remind ourselves of the strangeness of the parallel act of writing about the colligated products of artistic production.

Thus the question is not that the act of writing betrays some partiality of position or tacit ideology, although that is certainly true, but rather that the act of writing exists at all. Jörn Rüsen shows how modern 'genetic' historiography is a peculiar way of 'sense-making,' which arises out of a recognition of plurality, that history is a process of modification, and is based fundamentally on change and difference.¹⁶ The idea that we have inherited historical tools originally formulated for both the practical wisdom within our lives, with a system of signification based on perfect efficacy (the Eucharist), and naturalized them for entirely new purposes, is precisely Preziosi's point. Every elaborated historical viewpoint should not only acknowledge its place in the scholarship (what we still do not know) and acknowledge its institutional point of view (relation to materials, direct or mediated); it should also acknowledge its very act or gesture of historicizing.

In Rüsen's account we are clearly dealing with the evolution of semiotic competencies. Preziosi is strongly identified with semiotics although he both (1) tends to stress the antiquity of basic semiotic abilities and (2) hesitates to identify

¹⁶ Jörn Rüsen, 'Narrative Competence: The Ontogeny of Historical and Moral Consciousness,' in *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005.

many contemporary conundrums with modernity. For example, in *Art, Religion, Amnesia*, he wishes to stress the idea that the conflict between religion and artifice goes back at least to Plato. He clearly resists whiffs of teleology. Yet his viewpoint does not challenge that such a development explains the interest we place in works of art today, why they are even works of art.¹⁷ Most importantly, while our contemporary semiotic competencies are surely historically contingent, they are also systematic.

Here we can return to the problem of retrospection. I argued that we continually show ourselves unable to express how our art historical position is somehow privileged. Our retrospective viewpoint is simply modernity itself, so art history's problem, its coyness, relates to our relationship to the riches of the modern viewpoint; art history cannot digest the legacy of the Enlightenment. Preziosi's diagnosis is important because it shows how *real* art historical knowledge can be gained by a *contingently* retrospective viewpoint. The key is to recognize this very contingency of interpretation itself (the 'repression of the impossibility of representation'), and stop fetishizing individual interpretations.

Aegean art and architecture

I must stress again that Preziosi has produced serviceable histories, most recently of Bronze Age Greece, in a book co-written with Louise Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*.¹⁸ As Preziosi's most significant example of empirical work since *Minoan Architectural Design*, it is a text to which to turn for a model of method.¹⁹ Fortunately, the Introduction is very thoughtfully written and reveals a lot about how a non-coy science of art history might proceed. First and foremost, it is art history, not meta-critique. The authors balance what is known against what is not known, what seems apparent against what we are susceptible to believe. The result is a workable framework for the advances in Minoan archeology while questioning what exactly 'Minoan' means.

Preziosi and Hitchcock ably lay out the familiar idea that art history helped achieve the wholeness of nationalist narratives through their art historical narratives. True to the critique of *Rethinking Art History*, older methods are indicted for assuming a reflection of ethnicity in style, and vice versa, from style back to ethnicity. In approaching their task of writing an introductory survey, Preziosi and Hitchcock are both aware that while Arthur Evans' fairy tale notion of the Minoans has been rejected, the removal of this stage machinery has still left the 'stage' intact.

¹⁷ For a promising framework of evolving semiotic competencies, see Jordan Zlatev, 'The Semiotic Hierarchy: Life, Consciousness, Signs and Language,' *Cognitive Semiotics*, 4, 2009, 169-200.

¹⁸ Donald Preziosi and Louise Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹⁹ Donald Preziosi, *Minoan Architectural Design*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983.

Preziosi and Hitchcock resist an easy mapping of contemporary categories onto the Minoans, noting the uncertainty of many basic assumptions about their social and moral lives. In writing the text, they specifically sought to question the idea that mentalities can 'pre-exist their material expression.'²⁰ Balancing the artifact itself against its reception by various groups, they grant a degree of plausibility to both interpretive perspectives: 'we acknowledge the existence of an artifact's original intentions and functions, while holding that these intended meanings may not be fully reconstructable from the object itself or from any seemingly complete reconstruction of its materials contexts.'²¹ They show how the image of the nature-loving Minoans, in symbiosis with nature, emerges almost as an inevitable illusion from an ambiguous ground of scholarship.

In expressing the fallibility of present knowledge and caution over simplistic interpretations, they are merely being good postmodern scholars. But note how they pass over to the territory that I marked before, that is, why a history of Minoan art *should have a right to exist at all*. Here, Preziosi and Hitchcock return to the idea that Rösen calls 'sense-making' when they note how history is comprised of 'systems of concepts and categories – the cognitive instruments – that we customarily use to fabricate and maintain our own social worlds.'²² Histories come together for the 'construction of common legacies: a heritage that could be ideally imagined and shared by a populace which might still be divided along class, linguistic, ethnic, or religious lines, but which might find its place in narrative histories and museum and tourist itineraries.'²³ Thus they are aware of the peculiarity of their position representing a form of specialized knowledge that is highly contingent yet knowledge nevertheless.

I think their synthesis works so well because there is an object to be explicated, against which to measure efforts and register both knowledge and ignorance. Preziosi and Hitchcock say that, 'our picture of the Bronze Age Aegean is in *no small measure* a twentieth-century artifact.'²⁴ This is real social construction, meaning *real* social processes are working on *real* objects. It is not the free-play of pure social construction, because the fact that we care about the Minoans *at all*, what we know about them, is partly (*in no large measure*) due to the objects and built environment that are investigated in that field.

So, does that mean that Preziosi is here somehow to be applauded because he retains a form of 'empirical realism' in his system? My opinion goes in that direction. But more important is how Preziosi consistently avoids a tricky performative contradiction in his work that is all too common among critical writing. His success is in no part due to the fact that his 'theory' has not bifurcated

²⁰ Preziosi and Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 25.

²¹ Preziosi and Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 26.

²² Preziosi and Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 20.

²³ Preziosi and Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 23.

²⁴ Preziosi and Hitchcock, *Aegean Art and Architecture*, 19.

from empirical practice, which actually is what gives meaning to the theory in the first place. In this, I read Preziosi the way that Christopher Norris reads Derrida, as investigating the deep metaphorical biases of a discipline, not overturning it; of exposing them and in so doing, contributing to the so-called 'unfinished project of Enlightenment.'²⁵ If Derrida is 'posing certain questions that have to do with the *conditions of possibility* for language and thought in general,' Preziosi is doing the same for art history.²⁶ This is not a purely critical project but 'irenic.'

It seems that art history, in its move to become a reflexive discipline, one that is no longer 'coy,' has misdirected itself to a lot of hand wringing and self-defeating rhetoric. The way to avoid being coy is to put the very act of writing history, its need for recounting, at center stage in any historical endeavor. The result is something not yet seen but toward which Donald Preziosi has consistently pointed.

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²⁵ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'*, London: Routledge, 2000.

²⁶ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 47.