

Relays, signals, actuality: a return to Focillon

Review of:

Annamaria Ducci, *Henri Focillon en son temps. La liberté des forms*, Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2021, 391 pp., 20 col. plates, 10 b. & w. illus, 26,00 €, ISBN 979-10-344-0079-9.

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Le passé ne sert qu'à connaître l'actualité. Mais l'actualité m'échappe. *Qu'est-ce que donc que l'actualité?*

— Henri Focillon

Among the notes for his 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' we find Walter Benjamin writing not only about Baudelaire, Marx, Ranke, and Brecht, but also clarifying his understanding of the 'messianic cessation of happening' by citing the twentieth-century French art historian Henri Focillon. Benjamin shares Focillon's idea of art as a 'rupture' within the very 'life of forms'. As a close reader of Focillon, Benjamin knew that this idea has nothing to do with Hegelian teleology, historicism, or even psychoanalysis for that matter. It is, on the contrary, a nuanced and complex attempt to understand the relationship between art and life as an aesthetic and historiographic event. More specifically, as an immanent event that transfigures with an agency and affect rarely accounted for by art historicism. This holds even if the event itself barely registers on the scales of historicist judgment. Thus Benjamin's notes emphasise that his concept of 'messianic interruption' — the *citation à l'ordre du jour* — is understandable through Focillon's words on art, life, and temporality: 'a brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms... a pure, quick delight, like the ἀκμῆ of the Greeks, so delicate that the pointer of the scale scarcely trembles... I look at it... to see, within the miracle of that hesitant immobility, the slight, imperceptible tremor that indicates life'.¹ Benjamin deeply admires and shares the definition of a work of art as a 'phenomenon of rupture' that he reads in Focillon.

¹ Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, translated by Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler, New York: Zone Books, 1992, p. 55. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I:3, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 1229. Cornelia Zumbusch has written a fine essay on Benjamin and Focillon; see her 'The Life of Forms: Art and Nature in Walter Benjamin and Henri Focillon', *Aisthesis*, VIII.2 (2015): <https://www.readcube.com/articles/10.13128%2Faisthesis-17569>. The epigraph above is relayed by George Kubler; see *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 14.

It is one of the undeniable strengths of Annamaria Ducci's new work that Focillon appears as a mediator and rival to many of the proper names of twentieth-century art history: Wölfflin, Panofsky, Riegl, Kracauer, Chastel, Berenson, and others. Ducci has given us a work of intellectual and cultural history of the highest order. For me, it is archival research in the mode Michel Foucault desired: that is, research into the very structure or governing rules of a given discourse in order to locate its points of inflection, compression, and contradiction. Within the discourse of art historiography Ducci foregrounds Focillon's archival presence within our discourses on formalism, materialism, and aesthetic autonomy despite his work remaining illusive, haunting, and misunderstood. She possesses an unrivalled and astute knowledge of her subject that underlies her to brilliant readings of Focillon's work within the discourse of European and Anglo-American art history in the second half of the twentieth century.

Such insights make us keenly aware of our own misreading or, worse still, acceptance of a stock version of Focillon as an art historian with no future, with no clear articulation of his concept of form, with no ability to complicate the discourses that have come to occupy our attention in the present. Ducci's scholarship dismantles these misconceptions. She presents Focillon not as 'the last great apostle of pure visibility' as Christopher Wood does in his *A History of Art History* (2019), but rather as a thinker of form as neither scared nor dogmatic. Although she traverses the life and work of Focillon, Ducci refuses to let the inherent limitations of biographical research have the last word. So while she addresses and is open to speculate on what Focillon and Panofsky may have talked about in the gardens of Maranville in the summer of 1933, Ducci insists that we become attentive to Focillon's ideas in order to address and, perhaps, redress how this work has been received and misread. For the fact remains that Focillon's own attentiveness to the modalities of an artwork's historical existence, as we witness in his writing on Piranesi, Hokusai, and medieval art, is presented through an art historical writing that is at once creative and critical. This writing reads less as an historical artifact in the way that Valéry can and more as an experimental mode through which Focillon's thinking on history ('secret ties' and 'affinities'), materialism ('undulating continuity'), formal 'vocation', and temporality (as 'multiplicity' and 'becoming') unfolds and refolds. Such thought problematizes systematic histories, periodization, and the logic of stylistic evolution.² As Ducci tells us, perhaps more

² My introduction to Focillon came via Tom Conley's stellar foreword to Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Conley argues that 'Focillon calls into question the rationale of periodization' because 'an "experimental" [Focillon's term] beginning seeks solutions to problems that a "classical" moment discovers and exploits. A "radiating" (*rayonnant*) period refines the solutions of the former to a degree of preciousness, while a "Baroque" phase at once sums up, contorts, and narrates the formulas of all the others. The Baroque thus does not

than other art historians, Focillon experimented with art historical research and theory by giving real attention to artistic creation, that is, to how artists think through problematics to arrive at contingent yet never final solutions, especially if these problematics are transhistorical and transcultural.

Most of us are well aware that in 1934 Focillon published an inspired, confident, and confounding text entitled *Vie des formes*. But very few of us have read that text recently. Ducci's work sent me rushing back to Focillon with an urgent desire to re-read him, to think him anew with the insights and interpretations she presents. With her ideas in mind, traversing the complexities and contradictions of art historical and aesthetic discourse that we currently face, Focillon's opening words to *Vie des formes* appear visionary and overdrawn, lucid and yet sibylline in their condensed breadth. I am tempted to relay the entirety of Focillon's opening chapter here, but I will restrain myself and offer only these two passages:

Whenever we attempt to interpret a work of art, we are at once confronted with problems that are as perplexing as they are contradictory. A work of art is an attempt to express something that is unique, it is an affirmation of something that is whole, complete, absolute. But it is likewise an integral part of a system of highly complex relationships. A work of art results from an altogether independent activity: it is the translation of a free and exalted dream. But flowing together within it the energies of many civilizations may be plainly discerned. And a work of art is (to hold for the moment to an obvious contradiction) both matter and mind, both form and content...but life itself, furthermore, is essentially a creator of forms. Life is form and form is the modality of life (...)

Now, that these new values and new systems should retain their alien quality is a fact to which we submit with a very poor grace. We are always tempted to read into form a meaning other than its own, to confuse the notion of form with that of image and sign...For form is surrounded by a certain aura: although it is our most strict definition of space, it also suggests to us the existence of other forms. It prolongs and diffuses itself throughout our dreams and fancies: we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite

comprise what we associate with Bernini, Borromini, or Le Brun'. He concludes by citing Focillon himself: 'The Baroque state reveals identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time'. It is an involutive event rather than a developmental-regressive evolutionary period. With Focillon we could call it a 'nomadic' experimental process.

realm – a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.³

Within these passages it is impossible not to sense how Henri Bergson is being transmitted here: the relation of matter and memory, time as durational becoming, the immanent and implicated folding of actual (historical time, appearance, image/sign) and virtual (as temporal becoming, an ‘indefinite realm’). Both Focillon and Benjamin were marked by their reading of Bergson.⁴ Thus, we also read through Benjamin’s eyes that line about aura as well as anticipate D’Arcy Thompson’s later *On Growth and Form* (1961), let alone George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* (1962). It is not the veracity or absolute clarity of Focillon’s thoughts that matters ultimately. Instead, it is their ability to refocus us on the artwork itself and its capabilities to magnetize content both within and without its historical milieu. Focillon’s real interest in the concept of a milieu and in the artwork’s ability to escape this originary context remains contemporary for us in ways that we have yet to fully articulate.⁵ He challenges us to think and write through problematics, to experiment with both aesthetic agency *and* historical reception; to create new linkages between art *and* life, history *and* becoming, along the ἀκμὴ of the *vie des formes*—conceiving an artwork as a past-future event, as a ‘great ensemble’.

It would be wise to acknowledge the supposed outmoded nature of Focillon’s thinking: it has been received by contemporary art historical practice as empty formalism, as wilfully apolitical, Eurocentric despite his broad interests, and thus irrelevant for any attempt to rethink our practice. It is my hope that Ducci’s

³ Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, pp. 31, 34.

⁴ Note the excellent work by Andrei Molotiu on Focillon and Bergson that also extends to Jacques Derrida; see ‘Focillon’s Bergsonian Rhetoric and the Possibility of Deconstruction’, *Invisible Culture* (Jan. 2000): <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/focillons-bergsonian-rhetoric-and-the-possibility-of-deconstruction/>. Focillon and Bergson are also addressed by Kim Grant, *All About Process: The Theory and Discourse of Modern Artistic Labor*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.

⁵ Our ‘return to Bergson’ has important precursors. Notably, the 1995 Louvre conference that resulted in the collection of texts *Relire Focillon*, Paris: Musée du Louvre et École normale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1998. Here texts by Kubler, Walter Cahn, Jacques Thuillier, and others are accompanied by three previously unpublished texts by Focillon. Another major inflection point in our ‘return’ is Christian Briend and Alice Thomine’s edited volume *La Vie des Formes: Henri Focillon et arts*, Paris: INHA, 2004. Ducci has a remarkable piece in this volume; *Relire Focillon* is key for her as well. To this line of return I would also like to emphasize Cahn’s essay addressing Meyer Shapiro’s critiques of Focillon; see ‘Shapiro and Focillon’, *Gesta* 41.1 (2002): 129-36; and C. Oliver O’Donnell, *Meyer Shapiro’s Critical Debates: Art Through a Modern American Mind*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, pp. 37-45. See also Emerling, ‘An Art Historical Return to Bergson’, *Bergson and The Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film*, eds. John Ó Maoilearca and Charlotte de Mille, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 260-271.

work on Focillon will put an end to this assumption. Moreover, for me, Ducci instigates an art history to come because she frames her *relire* of Focillon as a *delire* of Focillon, that is, as a call to understand the work of art as an event that interrupts and reorganizes both the life of forms and the world in which that putatively useless life takes place. Our rereading of Focillon today will have been as delirious as the reception of Gilles Deleuze return to Henri Bergson in the mid-1950s, when Bergson was considered passé, outmoded, irrelevant. Deleuze's 'return to Bergson' culminated in his inventive *Bergsonism* (1966), which taught us that any return worth its salt must be untimely and multiple because there is no faithful return, but only critical and creative ones that transmit the subject anew, otherwise, transfigured. As Focillon himself says, we desire 'strange fictions and paradoxes'.⁶ So there will be no simple return to Focillon. Rather, with Ducci, we desire art historical and philosophical thinking that transmits Focillon's concepts by passing them through the theoretical, historical, aesthetic, and socio-political discourses that have transformed the history of art and rendered it contemporary. This includes a refashioned debate about formalism, delimiting socio-political critique, and an intensified focus on the ontological and anthropological function of artworks. Refocusing on Focillon's positions, including his aporias and inconsistencies, is not only vital art historiographic work, but a means to construct an aesthetic and epistemic passage beyond the moralistic and instrumental approaches that threaten, yet again, to consign cultural history and the humanities as anaemic, otiose, cancelled, or privileged in the worst sense.

So not only do Focillon's ranging interests intersect our discussions of key art historical figures (Adrian Stokes, Aby Warburg), but also those of philosophers such as Deleuze (who addresses him in his work on Francis Bacon), Jacques Derrida, and even Alain Badiou. Focillon posits that if the work of art is an event, then history is a modulated and controlled form of time as such, which itself is an actual-virtual movement or 'becoming'. Ontologically art 'goes further than...illustrate history', he argues, which is why art historians must learn to encounter 'modalities of life' in order to write about how it creates 'worlds'.⁷ Compare this to Badiou's definition of art as 'a signifying formal organization of the sensible, within which it obeys its own events, its own rhythms, and produces its own historicity'.⁸ The Maoist radical Badiou and the supposedly apolitical Focillon share a threshold wherein the event of art is what matters most, that is, the capacities of a given formal property to harness and magnetize forces within and outside of itself in order to render humanist and post-humanist forces perceptible, sensible, and thinkable.

⁶ Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, p. 65.

⁷ Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, pp. 32-3.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, edited by Antoine de Baecque, translated by Susan Spitzer, Cambridge: Polity, 2013, p. 115.

Further complex understandings of such form-formalism are present in recent remarkable work by Caroline Levine, Eugenie Brinkema, and Sam Rose.⁹ Even my own work is an attempt to experiment with aesthetic history not as timeless, but as comprised of durational, contingent, feral artworks that enact sense-events that render other lines of time, other past-futures possible; art offers us another ‘promise of happiness’, at once sensible and intelligible, ontological and historiographic, time and again.¹⁰ It is my hope that Ducci’s book will reintroduce Focillon’s thought into these current debates as well as others about contextualism, presentism, affect, and agency in art.

For example, Matthew Rampley, with his usual acumen, has identified within the pages of this journal the paradoxes within some work on agency, affect, and intentionality in art history, sociology, and anthropology by Horst Bredekamp, Caroline van Eck, Alfred Gell, Georges Didi-Huberman, and others. He offers this critical and pressing challenge for us:

theories of pictorial agency that seek to replace circumstantial, historical, explanations with naturalistic accounts, and in particular, give a fundamental significance to affect, run into difficulties. This applies not only to the understanding of image response, it also raises broader questions to do with the shape of art history. While the idea of artworks having a transhistorical aesthetic impact offers a seductive vision of an intellectual landscape unrestrained by the drudgery of compiling chronological sequences and historical relations as envisaged by Didi-Huberman (which is, any case, a caricature of art history), there are considerable problems when it is based on the idea of a certain power or agency on the part of artworks. Not only is it questionable whether or how the transmission of affect – if it occurs at all – might figure in art historical interpretation role; it is doubtful, too, whether works of art can be meaningfully said to be able to exercise agency. And even if they could, this would not obviate the need for a theory of reception, in other words, an explanation of how and why agency has such different effects at individual times and places.¹¹

⁹ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015; Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022; Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Andrei Pop has written an excellent review of Rose’s book in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 60.4 (2020): 502-506.

¹⁰ Jae Emerling, *Transmissibility: Writing Aesthetic History*, London: Routledge, 2023.

¹¹ Rampley, ‘Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observations’, *Journal of Art Historiography* 24 (June 2021):

<https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/rampley.pdf>

A possible response could be offered by Focillon, one that resonates with the real gift that Ducci has given us in arguing for the future of his art historical thought:

It may seem that I have laid down a far too unwieldy determinism in underlining with such insistence that various principles that rule the life of forms and that so react upon nature, man and history...It may seem that I want to isolate works of art from human life, and condemn them to a blind automatism and to an exactly predictable sequence. This is by no means so (...) If a work of art creates formal environments that impose themselves on any definition of human environments; if families of the mind have a historical and psychological reality that is as fully manifest as is that in linguistic and ethnic groups, then a work of art is an event. It is, in other words, a structure, a defining of time. All these families, environments and events that are called forth by the life of forms act in their turn on the life of forms itself, as well as on strictly historical life...For within this great imaginary world of forms, stand on the one hand the artist and on the other form itself. Even as the artist fulfills his function of geometrician and mechanic, of physicist an chemist, of psychologist and historian, so does form, guided by the play and interplay of metamorphoses.¹²

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¹² Focillon, *The Life of Forms*, pp. 61-2, 156.