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Writing (and) the History of Art

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Writing (and) the History of Art

Writing Art History

Paul Barolsky

Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.

—Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

Art-historical writing is for the most part clotted with jargon and larded with cliché, impenetrable in its density, analytic and contentious to a fault, and, worst of all, utterly predictable. Too often lugubrious, the industrialized prose of professional art history is a sorry affair. This fact is well known to some art historians and even one editor of this journal recently asked, if somewhat perfunctorily, where had “the poetry” gone from such writing? There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization of which we all have our favorite examples, but these do not provide much solace.

To be sure, writing art history is not the same thing as creating poetry or fiction, but one wonders why art history cannot share some of the qualities of imaginative literature, why such prose should not be beautiful, playful, witty, and inspiring—in short, a pleasure to read. Why, one wonders, cannot art history tell a good story and tell it well, that is, with drama, excitement, and, above all, with a lively, indeed vibrant language? Many art historians are, like poets and novelists, passionate about art, about its theory and circumstances, but their language, often neutralized to the point of desiccation, does not reveal the passion that drives their scholarship, that reflects their—dare I say it?—love of art. I know art historians who read Proust and James, masters of language, but who themselves write in leaden prose, as if they had nothing to learn from our great writers. I know art historians whose eyes sparkle with life when they talk about art but whose prose is stillborn on the page when they write about it. Why cannot art historians learn to write in artful forms worthy of the art they interpret?

I think the answer to these questions is relatively simple. Most art historians who write do not think of themselves as writers, even though, paradoxically enough, that is what they are—by definition. If art historians thought of themselves as writers, most of them would have to face the fact that they are indeed bad writers, uninspired and uninspiring. Even many art historians who are good writers by art-historical standards, to the extent that there are standards in the field, are at best ordinary by higher criteria of prose style. Professional art historians do not conceive of themselves as writers because they are not trained to think in such terms. They are rigorously schooled in theory, methods, historiography, and scholarly techniques (stylistic analysis, iconography, patronage, and so on), but writing is something to which only lip

service is paid in graduate training. If anything, professional art historians are encouraged to distrust writing that is enthusiastic or rich in metaphor. I have a friend, an art historian of international distinction, who often says that if she reads a scholarly work that is entertaining, she is immediately suspicious. Many art historians are fearful that, aspiring to write an entertaining prose, they will give the impression of unseriousness, even of frivolousness, that their prose will be mistaken for mere “bellettrism” or “appreciation”—as if graceful prose and seriousness of purpose were incompatible.

Neither the “old” art history nor the self-styled “new” art history has a monopoly on bad or even dull writing. Traditional art history has been written in the form of the scholarly monograph or article, types of writing that often, but not always, have tended to abstract art from life by reducing it to formulas—sequences of forms, symbols, and conventions, like so many flavorless linked sausages. The more recent art history has been less concerned with art than with the circumstances in which it was made, especially with patronage and with the social, economic, political, and institutional factors that shape art. The writing of this kind of art history is often, however, equally lifeless, pedantic, and without grace. The story of an artist or of a patron, as of a work of art, should be a good story, a story told well. Old or new, art history has often not been a story at all, certainly not a lively, exciting story; rather, it has defined itself as an accumulation of arguments, documents, attributions, or theoretical speculations. No wonder, therefore, that for all the conferences, symposia, articles, books, anthologies dedicated year in and year out to both traditional themes and recent concerns with art-historical interpretation—indeed with “what’s wrong with art history?”—virtually no attention is given to the simple question of how we write, of how our style of writing is intimately related to what we have to say. For all our theoretical dissatisfaction, we are utterly complacent about our own bad writing.

The situation I describe is not peculiar to art history, for it is part of a broader scholarly malaise rooted in the professionalization of scholarship in the nineteenth century to which we are heir. The study of art and literature, of history and other related disciplines, came to be seen as a kind of “science,” and although we have moved beyond such a misguided conception of historical studies, we have not stripped ourselves of its baggage—that of writing in pedantic, often astringent, overly analytic, and technical prose. Even historians, to whom art historians are related, since after all art history is a form of history, have acknowledged a problem overlooked by their cousins, the art historians, that of “narrative,” or “plot,” of having a good story to tell. Historians began not so many years ago to miss the story in their

technical analyses, and they pointed to the exceptional, exemplary, almost novelistic book by Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, as a salutary sign of the return to narrative, to storytelling. Another book that comes similarly to mind here is the deeply imaginative, vividly told, and profoundly scholarly biography *Machiavelli in Hell*, by Sebastian de Grazia. I know almost nothing like these books in art history, good stories well written, well told, nothing remotely like Iris Origo's extraordinarily entertaining and learned *The Merchant of Prato*.

We are so fully absorbed in our own scholarly procedures, lost in our own habits of mind, that we do not reflect much upon the simple fact that as professional art historians we have cut ourselves off from the imaginative tradition of writing about art that extends from Philostratus to Dante, Vasari, Bellori, Diderot, and Winckelmann. We read such writers for historical reasons to see what we might learn about past thought, but it does not occur to us to consider what we might learn from these exemplary authors as writers. Their tradition did not die, however; we merely removed ourselves from it. It remained alive in the nineteenth century in the writings of Goethe, Gautier, Taine, Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Pater, and it survives in our own century, for example, in the work of Proust, Claudel, and Ortega. We sometimes study these writers for what they tell us about changing taste or attitudes. We seek to distance ourselves, however, from their "poetry," from their "impressionism," doing so at a price, for we cut ourselves off from rich veins of narrative and metaphor, from the tools of vivid writing. The imaginative tradition of writing about art remains alive today in the poetry and prose of numerous poets. In our own country, Mark Strand, Richard Howard, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Richard Wilbur, and W. D. Snodgrass are among the authors who have written with gusto, power, and learning about art, even though they were not "trained" in the techniques of art-historical analysis. These poets, not we art historians, have best articulated what art has to do with life, why it matters.

The success of poetical writers depends not only on their literary craft but also on their accessibility. Whereas we write dryly and spiritlessly for each other, often only for those in our particular branch of art history, these poets, often deft essayists, address themselves to a broader audience of non-specialists, once called the "common reader," although admittedly such readers are less common than they once were. We have more than a little to learn from such imaginative writers about how to look and how to describe what we see, about the exposition of ideas, about the very language of description, about the ways of explaining the relations of art to life in a manner that is both intelligent and inspiring, even to nonspecialists—in short, about the very sense of an audience.

The dreariness of art-historical writing is so acute that it is not uncommon for readers of this journal, presumably the premier journal of art history in the land, to glance through an issue when it arrives and to read only the reviews of books in their particular fields before putting it aside. Subscribers are not inspired to read because the articles are often dense and opaque, which is not to say they are unlearned or

unoriginal. Unappetizing and indeed uninviting, they frequently do not welcome the reader. Their tone is sometimes contentious, and here we come to one of the central factors in bad scholarly writing. For contentiousness, which runs deep in the discipline, breeds bad writing. It is trained into us at the earliest stages of our professional education when as young scholars we are taught to analyze scholarly literature in order to find fault and error—an easy thing to do because no work is beyond criticism in some respect. Trained assassins, scholars become skilled at shooting holes in the work of others. This fact has consequences for writing itself, because it makes scholars aware that they are similarly vulnerable to attack. And so, as they themselves write, they build bastions and bunkers in words, fortifying their arguments with endless examples, qualifications, details, and footnotes in an effort to forestall attack. Such defensiveness breeds prose that is dry, fussy, nervous, overwritten: in short, bad writing. The desperate attempt to defend oneself cramps one's very style. Knowing that all generalizations are vulnerable, scholars will often resist making them, but at a price. For writing void of generalization is void of general interest.

As scholars, we tend to overwrite, that is, to press our evidence too hard, frequently to bury our readers in detail or minutiae. I have never read an art-historical article or book that could not have been improved by editing, by compression into a tighter form. I think we can abridge our writing, reduce the bulk of "evidence" we present without sacrificing our ideas or arguments, in this way making what we say more inviting and understandable. Brevity is itself an art, the art of clarifying ideas, even complex and difficult ideas, making them more lucid and accessible. It is born of the process of winnowing away one's prose, of distilling and refining one's ideas, and laying them bare—the very antithesis of scholarly accumulation or piling on of examples or of "arguments from authority."

Such brevity is exemplified by that supreme form of artful prose, the essay. As an experiment in speaking briefly, the essay stands in an almost polar relation to the scholarly article. Whereas the article aspires to be definitive, the essay, more flexible, is suggestive. And here we come to the heart of the problem. As scholars, we tend to overinterpret, to offer overly reductive interpretations. Our inferences, hypotheses, speculations, no matter how hard we press them, are at best hunches. We would do better to present our guesses as such rather than disguise them in the fiction of conclusiveness. The essay is the perfect vehicle for suggestiveness.

How one writes is a matter of imitation and, I believe, we have much to learn from our finest essayists, no matter what their subject. Italo Calvino is an exemplary figure whose *Lezioni Americane*, translated as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, are rich and scholarly despite their brevity. In these essays, Calvino celebrates qualities that he finds in imaginative literature and that we find in his prose: *leggerezza*, which might be translated as "lightness of touch"; *rapidità*, which I prefer to call the "pace" of one's prose; *esattezza*, or precision of detail (not incompatible with suggestiveness); *visibilità*, the power to make visible with language; and *molteplicità*, or variety. Calvino's lightness of touch and pace, which allows him to wear his learning lightly, is an example to us all. I can

well imagine essays on the arts of Africa, Raphael, Berthe Morisot, Pre-Columbian sculpture, and any number of other art-historical subjects written with the same swiftness, sparkle, and gossamerlike prose that we find in Calvino by contrast to the plodding arguments we ordinarily make in our traditionally grave scholarly discourse. I can equally imagine essays on Gothic architecture, Chinese landscape painting, Botticelli, the arts of the French Revolution, and Rajput miniatures all written with the same deftness, wit, cunning, and scholarly precision that we find in Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*—essays that open our eyes rather than close them as we nod off under the weight of scholarly gravity. We may not be born with the literary gifts of a Calvino or a Nabokov, but we can learn from them about concision, vivacity, and metaphor, about celebrating the joys of art and its history in a poetic prose that itself gives pleasure. As Calvino says: "I think pleasure is a serious matter."

Many of the qualities we find in Nabokov and Calvino and in our finest essayists abound in one of the most magical books on art and its history to appear in years, Charles Simic's *Dime-Store Alchemy*, a brief prose-poem or series of prose-poems that not only evokes the art and life of Joseph Cornell but is also ultimately a meditation on artistic imagination. I have read this slim volume many times, and each time it has metamorphosed itself into another, quite different book. Rarely have I encountered a discussion so suggestive of what art is and does to us. Read slowly, Simic's book will yield up many secrets. Were I to teach a course on art theory or methods I would surely assign *Dime-Store Alchemy* to my students. No matter that it does not pretend to offer a key to art based on philosophy, linguistics, science, anthropology, psychology, theology, or any other form of the reductionism that clips the wings of imagination. Rather, Simic's alchemical prose mimics the rhythms of art and stimulates the reader to approach art on artful terms. In such a course I would have students read Borges's little book, *Seven Nights*, to show them how a scholar, as Borges surely was, can approach such subjects as Dante, Buddhism, or nightmares with a nimbleness and ease that serve as models for how we might write about the arts of Persia or Picasso.

In such a seminar I would explain to my students that many of the thorniest theoretical issues of interpretation of our day are grappled with by such writers as Calvino, Nabokov, and Borges, even though they do not speak of "theory" as such or use a technical vocabulary. I would remind them that, after all, "theory" (for all our academic window dressing) is, in the root sense of the word, how one "sees," and I would encourage students to find a language as precise and evocative as possible to describe what they see. I

would remind them that they are writers, and I would encourage them to develop in their prose their own sensibilities, their own style, urging that there are potentially far more ways of writing about art than they might realize, some of which have yet to be envisioned or invented. I would encourage them to resist the easy "truths" of current academic fashion and remind them that they belong to a tradition of writing about art far broader and deeper than the parochially professionalized study of art history suggests. I would have them realize that although at least one distinguished scholar has written what is called "the" story of art, there are, of course, many stories of art, some of which have yet to be told, and that all of these stories can be written with passion, clarity, and wit.

In a broad sense, all art, even abstract or decorative art, is in some measure representational, and as such is an illusion or at least allusive, even when its meaning is elusive. The word "illusion" is rooted in the word *ludere*, "to play," reminding us that all art, no matter how serious, is a form of play—whether we speak of the carving of a surprising animal head on a walking stick, the improbable grotesques on the frame of an altarpiece, the witty, plantlike arabesques of stucco on a bedroom wall, the rusticated stones that play upon the façade of a palace, or the fabulous beasts that slither across the page of an illuminated manuscript. What might well be restored to the study of art is the sheer delight of observing such play for its own sake, the joy of seeing the very play of the imagination, of finding suggestive but informed ways of describing the play of the artist's fantasy. I do not advocate a programmatic approach to art or the writing of art history, for systematic approaches to scholarship only generate dogmas, schools, formulas, epigonism, and passing fashion, and we have already had plenty of that. I advocate instead a sensitivity to the art historian's potential as a writer with the capacity to tell a good story, to describe works of art vividly and suggestively, indeed beautifully. I dream of an art history that is learned, imaginative, sensible, theoretically sophisticated, well wrought, and thus worthy of the very art it celebrates. I dream of an art history that, itself artful, is a pleasure to read.

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Artcriticism-writing, Arthistory-writing, and Artwriting

David Carrier

I speak of artcriticism-writing and arthistory-writing to emphasize differences between two modes of writing about visual art; and mention what I call artwriting to allude to shared concerns of critics and art historians. Compare and contrast, for example, two samples of artwriting:

1977: a college sophomore, naive, addicted to obfuscation, I visited the Jasper Johns retrospective . . . with my friend, a violinist with the eyes of a Bellini Madonna . . . I wished to impress her . . . I wanted to be straight, to be a guy. Could the museum help?

The painting that galvanized me was *In Memory of My Feelings*—Frank O'Hara, 1961 . . . primarily because it prompted me to read O'Hara.

The format . . . a horizontal rectangle with a smaller rectangle marked out in the upper left, suggests the design of the American flag; as if it is meant to be a "memory" of the original 1954–55 *Flag*. . . .

Picasso is the only artist prior to Johns . . . who actually focused attention on silverware in some of his works.

The hinges joining the two panels are references to previous still lifes. . . .

The silverware and hinges are most likely intended to be Duchampian references as well.¹

The differences between Wayne Kostenbaum's art-critical and Roberta Bernstein's art-historical accounts are so striking that it may seem surprising to find that they describe the same artwork.

"Experimenting with voice," a critic has written, "is one of this job's greatest pleasures."² Any number of art historians are excellent writers, but I cannot imagine an *Art Bulletin* contributor saying that. One real, too little acknowledged pleasure associated with artcriticism-writing is perversely enjoying writers whose voices are opposed to one's own. I enjoy the voices of Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, Hal Foster, and Hilton Kramer in the way that Roland Barthes loved reading Ignatius Loyola, Charles Fourier, and the Marquis de Sade. This is not to urge that criticism can be read apolitically, especially today when much art is explicitly concerned with politics. But it is to point to the literary aspects of such texts. Like a lyrical poet, Kostenbaum creates a convincing voice. Who wouldn't read on to learn why he found *In Memory of My Feelings*—Frank O'Hara so special? By contrast, Bernstein, who elsewhere mentions her long friendship with Johns, writes as an art historian, distanced and objective.

1. W. Kostenbaum, "Jasper Johns: *In Memory of My Feelings*—Frank O'Hara, 1961," *Artforum*, xxxii, no. 7, 1994, 75; R. Bernstein, *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures, 1954–1974: "The Changing Focus of the Eye,"* Ann Arbor, 1985, 80.

2. H. Muschamp, "Critical Reflections," *Artforum*, xxxiii, no. 9, 1995, 73.

3. L. Nochlin, "Frayed Freud," *Artforum*, xxxii, no. 7, 1994, 58.

4. L. Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading *The Painter's Studio*," in

Writing as an art critic, Linda Nochlin responds subjectively to the work of Lucian Freud, whose "representation of the male genitalia makes one wonder why his grandfather believed so fervently in penis envy: why would anyone not already encumbered with one *want* that pathetic, flaccid, droopy excrescence?"³ Since she has championed Philip Pearlstein, how unexpected is her reaction to what a less imaginative reviewer might identify as relatively straightforward nudes. When, by contrast, Nochlin writes about Courbet, she writes as an art historian. Acknowledging her subjectivity—"I am a woman quite consciously reading *as a woman*"—she identifies Courbet's woman in *The Painter's Studio* "as a Baudelairian type," setting this painting in relation to various nineteenth-century paintings and photographs.⁴

Art critics will find it surprising that in a collection of writings on "the new art history" an essay by the feminist film critic Constance Penley is praised because "one of its most notable features [is] . . . its refusal to enact the familiar kind of distance between inquirer and object of inquiry that is normally expected of scholarship in the humanities."⁵ Surprising because such a refusal comes naturally to the critic. When, for example, he writes about Courbet, Peter Schjeldahl says: "Sex is the key to Courbet. Like Whitman . . . Courbet kept the business of life simple: possess everything that possesses you. When he painted *The Origin of the World* . . . Somebody should probably have punched Courbet in the jaw."⁶ By contrast, when in her account of the *Arnolfini Portrait*, Linda Seidel adopts a personal tone—a natural procedure nowadays in discussing a painting about marriage and property—her subjective engagement with these issues builds upon traditions of commentary: "Having argued throughout against the notion of detached scholarship, I acknowledge in conclusion . . . that my concern with the generation of refugee art historians who were my first teachers was not simply an academic interest."⁷

For art critics, there is often no distance between them and the object of inquiry. This is why critics, so many of them poets, seem unlike scholars. I cannot speak for you, nor you for me; I need not worry whether my present account is consistent with what I wrote earlier. I can only speak for myself right here and now. Notwithstanding the attempts of so many theorists to undermine this autonomy of visual thinking and any such appeal to the immediate presence of the artwork or this conception of a "voice," total trust in direct experience is a natural way of thinking for us critics.

Now and then texts revealingly fall in between this division between artcriticism-writing and arthistory-writing. Bill Berkson's essay on Piero della Francesca, detailed in its analysis of the literature, reveals his interests as critic when it identifies perspective as "the crux of how his people keep their balance staunchly in the world we know, the world of contingencies,

S. Faunce and L. Nochlin, *Courbet Reconsidered*, exh. cat., Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, 1988, 27, 28.

5. N. Bryson, M. A. Holly, and K. Moxey, eds., "Introduction," in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, Hanover, N.H., 1994, xxvi.

6. P. Schjeldahl, *The Seven Days: Art Columns, 1988–1990*, Great Barrington, Mass., 1990, 87.

7. L. Seidel, *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an Icon*, Cambridge, 1993, 225.

while retaining something recognizable from elsewhere.”⁸ Writing on historical subjects in the style of an art critic, as do Dave Hickey, Robert Hughes, and Christopher Knight, identifies the outsider to art history. As a critic, Sartre wrote with authority on Giacometti, but his account of Tintoretto is lively amateur arthistory-writing.

No doubt, as historians have told me, my view of these issues is naïve because, apart from auditing a few grandly eloquent lectures by Meyer Schapiro, I never formally studied art history. Since my sense of things comes from reading, I understand artwriting by analyzing texts. For me the interesting differences between historians and critics appear in comparing the *Art Bulletin* with the art-critical journal whose present prestige and historical importance make it the obvious comparable American publication, *Artforum*. Like this journal, *Artforum* has book reviews and articles with footnotes about major artists, but it also publishes accounts of film; columns on talk radio, politics, and rock albums; interviews; exhibition reviews; and, of course, a great deal of advertising. Jack Bankowsky, the editor, has defined his program: “I do not believe that we can maintain a valid relationship to art without attending to the larger realm of visual culture, the advent of technologies, the movements of peoples, the broader field that has come to be called cultural studies.”⁹ His commissioned articles can require extensive editorial work; and so, more than with an academic journal, the result represents the individual editor’s point of view.

After reading *Artforum* for almost twenty years, I never cease to be amazed at its capacity to startle, and occasionally to bring out the philistine in me. Its capacity for constant innovation shows the successive editors’ skill as capitalist entrepreneurs; by contrast, the *New Criterion* and *October*, removed from commercial pressures, have become inbred. Art criticism still produces on occasion “know nothing” responses, as recently in the *New York Times* where quotation out of context was used to make a good clear review by Donald Kuspit sound silly.¹⁰ Such philistine reactions arise in part because criticism has such an obvious connection with commerce; in some ways, *Artforum*, which pays contributors, must be more like *Road and Track* or *Vogue* than an academic journal.

Reading *Artforum*, you feel that its writers, aware that you are fickle and ready to break away, will do anything to keep your attention. This carnivalesque scene, where even the staidest academic is determined to act as wildly as possible, feels very unlike the gray-on-gray world of art history. We art critics remind me of myself trying to engage an auditorium of unruly freshmen on a sunny day when they would prefer to be outside. (Would they pay more attention to my lectures on Descartes’s *Meditations*, I sometimes wonder, were I dressed up in seventeenth-century costume?) Criticism is expected to be personal because, in the limiting case, a useful approximation, the critic responding to work not previously written about has only his own response to go on. In this tradition of Diderot, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and Frank O’Hara—

represented in our day by Jan Avgikos, Gary Indiana, and Marjorie Welish—criticism is reportage.

Today’s critics and historians are quoting many of the same texts—the literature of feminism, gay studies, cultural studies, and poststructuralism—and rejecting formalism, but to very different effect. For me, the most striking recent change in *Artforum* has been its turn from extensive commentary on early modernism to focus on the concerns of cultural studies. The effect is to define a historical break, the way of thinking presented in Fredric Jameson’s much-discussed texts. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is as confidently far-ranging as *The Phenomenology of Mind*, but what impresses me when I stop to read critically is how selective are Jameson’s examples. In sculpture, Robert Gober, not Catherine Lee or William Tucker, who have more concern with tradition; in painting, Andy Warhol, not Catherine Murphy’s realism or Elizabeth Murray’s abstractions.¹¹ Is there then a real break in history, or is “postmodernism” merely the result of a novel style of narration? I find that question hard to answer.

What implicitly defines a period style, it might be said, is that figure whose views are rejected by everyone. The period style of our “postmodernist” artwriting is defined by ritualistic denunciations of Clement Greenberg, and in art history by the figure who plays a similar role, Ernst Gombrich, whose rejection of semiotic theories and feminism and association with liberalism make him the enemy of “the new art history.”¹² Despite Gombrich’s book on decoration and his pioneering work on comics, his theorizing is seen as centered on European high culture. What most radically separates both Greenberg and Gombrich from art critics today is their shared emphasis upon historical continuity. Just as Gombrich finds continuity from Giotto to Constable, so Greenberg emphasizes tradition in the history of modernism. Finding continuity requires a master narrative underplaying differences in favor of some deeper unity over time. In looking at the historical record, it is always possible to find both continuity and discontinuity. It would be possible to describe the best-known 1980s artists in terms of tradition: Barbara Kruger, it could be said, follows John Heartfield; David Salle surely learned from Roy Lichtenstein; and Cindy Sherman’s photographs are related to Surrealist images of women. But that way of thinking has not been successful.

No doubt this felt need for a “postmodernist” historical break was overdetermined. We needed our own period style; and this break is described by reference to the economics of “late-Capitalism”; perhaps such technologies as the personal computer, e-mail, the video disk, and the associated changes in our conception of public space require that art achieve radical novelty. And economic issues have some importance. Art history could continue even if no new art were being made, so long as there were interestingly new ways of describing earlier work. But art criticism, dependent upon a gallery support system, could not continue in its present

8. B. Berkson, “What Piero Knew,” *Art in America*, LXXXI, no. 12, 1993, 117.

9. J. Bankowsky, “Editor’s Letter,” *Artforum*, XXXII, no. 1, 1993, 3.

10. D. J. Schemo, “The Jabberwocky of Art Criticism,” *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1994, sec. 4: 1, 16.

11. F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, N.C., 1991, 161–72, 8–10.

12. This way of understanding Gombrich’s work, Mark Roskill has reminded me, does not take account of his early concern with semiotic theorizing or his long-standing interest in conventions in pictorial representation. See E. H. Gombrich, “Comment on ‘Theoretical Perspectives on the Arts, Sciences and Technology,’” *Leonardo*, XIII, no. 2, 1985, 126.

form unless there were a felt sense that major new kinds of artworks were being made.

Writing by critics is data for historians, who are expected to summarize earlier commentary before presenting their own interpretations. For the historian, tradition cannot but have weight; even if earlier commentators be judged entirely wrong-headed, the need to present their claims gives the historian's argument a slower rhythm than the critic's analysis. This procedure tends to create an effect akin to eclecticism in painting. If a painting alludes to Watteau, Chardin, and David, it is hard for the viewer to see that work as transcending its references; so, analogously, if your text must grapple with the prior commentary by Anita Brookner, T. J. Clark, and Thomas Crow, then it is difficult to establish your own voice. Much *Artforum* writing has almost no footnotes. For a critic it suffices to say, "I like (or dislike) such-and-such," and to give reasons which, upon critical reflection, may seem highly subjective; the historian typically aspires to objectivity. When a former editor of this journal rejected my submission, suggesting that because the style was personal, it belonged in a publication devoted to criticism, his action was perfectly just. For a historian there is something odd about writing on Matisse as if he were a hitherto unknown artist whom the writer was the first commentator to encounter.

Writing as a philosopher, I find that what ultimately interests me most about art criticism is the problem of truth in interpretation. An art critic aims to speak only for him- or herself, and so it is unsurprising that Jed Perl's view of things differs so radically from Lynne Cooke's, or that Lucy Lippard and John Ashbery do not see eye to eye. They are, I imagine, pretty different people. For critics, it seems, "there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be."¹³ In art history, by contrast, I expect objectivity in interpretation. But citing Nietzsche's perspectivism merely identifies one striking difference between artcriticism-writing and arthistory-writing. To adequately explain the connections between these varieties of artwriting would take a much more extended analysis.

David Carrier is a philosopher who writes art criticism. The author of Poussin's Paintings, The Aesthete in the City: The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s, and High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origin of Modernism, he is working on a philosophical study of the comic strip [Department of Philosophy, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15213].

13. F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, 1967, 119.

Writing (and) Art History: Against Writing

Ivan Gaskell

Do we need to write or speak about art in order to express coherent ideas about it? No. Philosophers, as well as critical and psychoanalytical theorists, have long discussed the linguistic articulation of visual and other sensory apprehension.¹ Although I would follow Wittgenstein and Heidegger in acknowledging that linguistic structure as a mode of ordering constitutes the depth structure of experience, here I shall suggest that interesting demonstration need not necessarily be predominantly linguistic in the iterative or textual sense. I shall discuss a way of dealing with art that minimizes speaking and writing. While ordering is necessary to this practice, speaking and writing are not. Further, I shall argue that this practice is critical as distinct from art-historical, and is properly conducted in art museums.

The consideration of practical criticism in art museums is part of a wider discussion of interpretation. In an earlier essay I distinguished between history and art history, even when both are concerned with visual material. Both historians and art historians can use visual material for their respective disciplinary ends, though those ends, and the means of achieving them, may differ.² Here I intend to distinguish between art history and a specific form of criticism. I wish in particular to draw a distinction between the proper concerns of academic art historians (mostly teachers in tertiary education) and art-museum scholars. The latter are practical critics who put critical judgments into predominantly physical, rather than written, form (and are thereby to be distinguished from critical essayists and theorists).

There is bound to be some overlap in the practice of academic art historians and art-museum scholars, some considerable sharing of concerns and procedures. They are members of the same family. University art history is the grandchild of four eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forebears: amateur scholarship, commercial scholarship, Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics and history, and museum scholarship.³ We might now credibly imagine museum scholarship, having engendered university art history, standing ready to

I am grateful to Salim Kemal for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. In the late 6th century B.C. Heraclitus stated, e.g., "Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language"; Fragment XVI: Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary*, Cambridge, 1979, 34–35, 106–7. Between the 4th century B.C. and the present day many thinkers have had interesting things to say on this question: Aristotle, John Locke, Bishop Berkeley, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name but four. For a recent discussion, see *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, Cambridge, 1991, with many further references.

2. See Ivan Gaskell, "The History of Images," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, Cambridge/University Park, Pa., 1991, 168–92. This essay was intended primarily for historians. I examined several art-historical and historical aspects of the study of visual material discussing four topics: authorship, canonicity, interpretation, and history.

3. Henceforward I use the terms "museum scholarship" and "museum scholar(s)" to denote the profession and its practitioners in art museums. I do this merely for the sake of convenience, and without wishing to imply a hegemonic attitude toward museums as a whole. Museum taxonomy is obviously a highly problematic issue well beyond the scope of this essay, though I acknowledge that much material of visual interest in the extended context of "art" is to be found in museums that are not art museums.



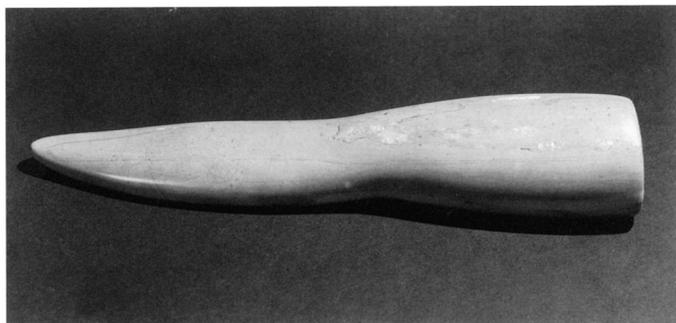
1 View of the exhibition "What, If Anything, Is an Object?" organized by Clive Dilnot and Ivan Gaskell, Fogg Art Museum, 1994 (photo: Evelyn Rosenthal)

detach itself from its grandchild in order to develop further as a quite distinct intellectual and scholarly practice.⁴ That practice is in essence critical (in a more direct sense than that in which art history is critical) and interdisciplinary. Academic art history is also obviously amenable to interdisciplinary practice (as witness the discussion in these pages by Carlo Ginzburg and others),⁵ but the ingredients differ from the interdiscipline of museum scholarship. When addressing visual material museum scholarship need give no more weight to art-historical concerns than to anthropological, psychoanalytical, sociological, or philosophical concerns (to name but four). Indeed, there are occasions when art history, however constituted, is an irrelevance to museum scholarship, and its intrusion is actually obfuscatory or worse (a claim I substantiate with an example below). That is, museums can legitimately treat objects of visual interest as having no pasts, and as occupying no field other than the immediate circumstances of those museums themselves. (I would not argue, however, that to do so exclusively would be responsible museum practice: I merely seek to demonstrate that the constitutions of art history and museum scholarship as interdisciplines differ.)

Although many other responsibilities are equally legitimate for museum scholars (such as the acquisition of objects, the conservation of objects in consultation with conservators and scientists, advising members of the public about objects in their possession, and deaccessioning, if permitted), I believe that the public presentation of visual material itself must be their core concern. Further, I suggest that this is the case not for reasons of social responsibility or social expectations, but rather as an implicit condition of the nature of museum scholarship itself: that is, it would be so even if museum scholars were the only viewers of the displays they contrive. I know that there are those who view responsibility for the public presentation of visual material as a distraction from scholarship, just as there are university teachers who view teaching as a distraction from activities they greatly prefer for fair reasons, including research and publication.

We should beware of drawing too close an analogy between teaching and preparing displays when comparing the professions, even though some institutions, both museums and universities, have legitimated such distinctions by promoting organizational hierarchies whereby relief from teaching duties on the one hand and from exhibit preparation on the other—in favor of the opportunity to conduct uninterrupted research—is given a position of institutional privilege. Ideally, teaching is an exchange between equals in which there is a disparity of experience but not of intelligence (on the Oxford and Cambridge model). In practice, this is frequently not the case and understandable impatience with the process on the part of the teacher results. For the museum scholar the ideals of exhibit preparation can also be frustrated by the intrusion of questionable assumptions about the character of expected or intended viewing constituencies, but the accommodation of viewers' legitimate expectations is an integral part of the preparation of any display where the museum scholar is as much a viewer with expectations as anybody else. That is, the process by which museum scholars construct exhibits is the unavoidable process of visual scholarship itself: it is necessarily heuristic and informs all else they do. In this it differs in practice from much teaching.

Further, in the execution of this responsibility, the museum scholar's principal medium is not the written word, but rather visual material itself and its physical setting (that is, exhibits). This means principally, though not exclusively, public presentation by means of gallery displays, whether temporary or long-term. The written word is, of course, an important adjunct to such exhibits, incorporated both within them and in accompanying publications. The documentation of visual material, which calls for the maintenance of records, the pursuit of art-historical scholarship, and the publication of permanent collection catalogues, is vital but secondary. These secondary responsibilities might be said to constitute one area of overlap with art-historical practice of the kind mentioned above. However, if public presentation by means of exhibits is the core responsibility of the museum



2 Constantin Brancusi, *Hand of Mademoiselle Pogany*, 1920, yellow marble. Cambridge, Mass., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Max Wasserman, 1964.110 (photo: Harvard University Art Museums)

scholar (both as a functional, social responsibility and as a way of furthering scholarship for diffusion by other means), and such presentation can legitimately be informed by non-art-historical concerns—even by concerns antipathetic to art history—those concerns will legitimately also inform the execution of responsibilities that have an art-historical component, such as documentation and cataloguing. As museum scholarship changes we shall see progressive changes in the execution of these text-based tasks.

As promised, I shall provide one brief example of museum display as non-art-historical, practical critical scholarship. Between January and July 1994 the Fogg Art Museum held a small exhibition entitled “What, If Anything, Is an Object?” (Fig. 1). It was the result of a collaboration between myself and Clive Dilnot, then associate professor of visual and environmental studies at Harvard University. We took one object of visual interest—Constantin Brancusi’s *Hand of Mademoiselle Pogany* (Fig. 2)—and placed it in a gallery at the center of a conceptual field governed by two centrally intersecting axes denoting “representation-function,” and “cognition-decoration.” Other objects were distributed within the field with respect to their share of one or more of these qualities and their corollaries. These objects of visual interest, drawn from many cultures and time periods, were selected to exhibit formal similarities when juxtaposed, as well as conceptual relationships. The objects included ancient Roman terra-cotta votive body parts, a Marshall Islands navigation chart made of palm-leaf midribs, two Inuit ivory snow knives, and a group of Phillippe Starck “biomorphic” toothbrushes. The selection and arrangement of these objects transgressed all art-historical considerations. Although quotations from texts concerning the relationship between people and objects were placed high on the gallery walls and the axes were inscribed, no labels were included beside the individual objects on display in order to banish textual intrusion from the sensual (specifically visual) field. (All the objects could be identified by consulting a handlist.) The relationships that viewers were invited to perceive were wholly non-art-historical: indeed, they were of a kind usually

inhibited by art-historical criteria. Instead, viewers were presented with an opportunity to explore the complex possibilities of relationships between objects and the people who use them. Furthermore, Brancusi’s sculpture was given the opportunity to work in quite another way from that normally encountered in museums or described in art-historical texts. The exhibit was a wholly sensual (visual) exercise in cognition.

Although enthusiastically received (by the press and visitors, according to an evaluative survey), public access to “What, If Anything, Is an Object?” was, in fact, incidental to our collaborative research, which could only be carried out by the very process of creating and subsequently examining that display itself. This is not to say, however, that either Clive Dilnot or I considered public access to be anything other than desirable. Although I would be the first to acknowledge that the exhibit was stimulated by ideas expressed in written form, and that the project was subsequently published as a scholarly article,⁶ my point here is that museum scholarship as practical criticism took a form both non-art-historical and atextual. This, and not the writing of art history, seems to me to be the unique business of the museum scholar.

We may well ask, in this case, why in the United States at least do we expect art-museum scholars to have doctoral degrees in art history conferred by universities? If we regard such an attainment as something more than a general education—that is, as the functional acquisition of knowledge and procedures essential to the proper discharge of a museum scholar’s responsibilities—we may be justified in asking whether such an education is indeed anything other than partially relevant. In supporting such assumptions by recognizing as legitimate scholars only those museum scholars who hold a doctoral degree, are not universities arrogating to themselves a function not properly theirs? Are art museums neglecting their responsibilities to educate future scholars for their staffs by abdicating that formal role in favor of the universities? Might we not profitably look to the French example where university art history and art-museum education are entirely separate, and the fast track to a national museum career is achieved by education at the *Ecole Nationale du Patrimoine*?

I pose these questions in the hope of stimulating a discussion, one that takes nothing for granted, of the proper professional education of museum staff. Each question obviously raises many complex issues to which, to my knowledge, there is no simple answer. A comparison with France, for example, may be of only limited use, for social and educational circumstances are obviously culturally specific, and no simple transfer of foreign institutional models would be either feasible or desirable. Government in France takes a far greater responsibility for civil society and its institutions than is the case in the United States, where the business of supporting and sustaining civil society has in many ways been taken up by the universities. Nonetheless, we may wish to

4. Ivan Gaskell, “The Curator’s Role: A View from the Department of Paintings and Sculpture, Fogg Art Museum,” in *Harvard’s Art Museums: One Hundred Years of Collecting*, Cambridge, Mass./New York, 1996, 156–61.

5. “A Range of Critical Perspectives: Inter/disciplinarity,” *Art Bulletin*, LXXVII, no. 4, 1995, 534–52.

6. Clive Dilnot, “The Enigma of Things,” *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin*, II, no. 2, 1993–94, 54–68.

entertain the possibility of a future in which professional legitimation in the United States is conferred by a plurality of institutions, as is the case elsewhere, rather than almost exclusively by universities.⁷ In particular, we may want to recognize more formally than at present that the ideal preparation for a career as a museum scholar may include, but ought not to be confined to, learning to write art history in the form of a Ph.D. dissertation (or any other form for that matter).

I invited a comparison between universities and art museums as institutions and as sites of scholarship at the outset, but I submit that this is not really to compare like with like when we come to consider the transmission of necessary knowledge. In this respect (and in others) the art museum approaches more closely the hospital than it does the university. Pierre Bourdieu has described the differences in education conferred by medical faculties and by faculties of arts and science.⁸ He demonstrates that whereas in the latter the production and reproduction of knowledge is formalized and transmitted rationally, medical education is the acquisition of an internalized set of skills constituting an art. In consequence, the relationships between the teacher-patrons and the pupil-clients differ markedly within the two institutions. Conditions in art museums more closely approximate the medical model than they do those of the arts and science faculties. Bourdieu writes:

It is indeed enough to think of the qualities required of the "great surgeon" or the "supremo" of a hospital department who must exercise, often with great urgency, an *art* which, like that of a military leader, implies a total mastery of the conditions of its practical accomplishment, that is to say a combination of self-control and confidence able to inspire confidence and dedication in others. What the co-optation technique must discover and what the teaching must transmit or reinforce in this case is not knowledge, not a package of scientific knowledge, but skill or, more exactly, the art of applying knowledge, and applying it aptly in practice, which is inseparable from an overall manner of acting, or living, inseparable from a *habitus*.⁹

For Bourdieu's "'great surgeon' or the 'supremo' of a hospital department" we need only substitute "museum director" or "head of a curatorial department." The pupil-clients in this instance are not Ph.D. candidates (they may or may not have received this degree), but rather interns or junior curatorial staff. Their process of learning is one of clientage, of accompanying a teacher-patron on his or her

rounds; and writing art history (or learning to do so) is the least of their mutual concerns.

If we accept this analysis, it follows that the most effective education for the future practical critic in the museum is the internship. Many museums, with the support of both the National Endowment for the Arts (though for how much longer?) and private and foundation sources, offer internships (by which I mean affiliations of at least one academic year, not short-term visits that often go by the same name). If art museums are to be viable sites of scholarship and therefore have the secure foundations from which to serve ever-broadening public constituencies effectively, more internships, grouped in coherent programs (such as that at the Harvard University Art Museums), are essential. University art museums, such as Harvard's (I make no apology for partisanship), and major museums that have fostered excellent working relationships with university institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, would seem to be the optimum sites for such educational initiatives. Internships, ideally of at least two years' duration, should be aimed at postdoctoral candidates, not for the sake of any specific skills they may have acquired in the writing of art history, but because a Ph.D. is the only way in which Americans can acquire a general education in some depth within an academic discipline. Only when we acknowledge that the education of a museum scholar is more akin to that of a physician or surgeon than to that of a university teacher will we be able to foster visual studies proper to practical criticism. This practical criticism is what must propel art museums, with all their scholarly and public responsibilities, well beyond the fulfillment of merely art-historical agendas. There are many occasions when the writing of art history is appropriate to the museum scholar's tasks, but it can only ever be ancillary to the main event, which is irreducibly visually (and otherwise sensually) defined, and constitutes a form of criticism that I have called here practical. When we acknowledge these conditions, the scope for fruitful interdisciplinary exchange between museum scholars, art historians, and others will grow enormously. Perhaps, then, ever more interesting art-historical writing will result.

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7. In Britain, e.g., admission to professions such as the law, architecture, and accountancy is not the concern of universities, although aspirants may have studied related subjects at a university, may have studied quite different subjects at a university, or may not have attended a university at all.

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier, Cambridge/Stanford, 1988, 53–69.

9. *Ibid.*, 57.

Intention(s)

Joseph Kosuth

Intention (Artists)

Intention is the forward-leaning look of things. It is not a reconstituted historical state of mind, then, but a relation between the object and its circumstances.—Michael Baxandall¹

When art historians, even the best of them, write about intention there seems to be a presumption that you have *two* things: the work of art and the artist's intentions. As an artist I find this, perhaps more than any other single thing, the major division now between how artists understand their work and how art historians see them. While the primacy of the object has long been questioned by artists, it remains the basis for much of the art-historical enterprise. This difference in the two disciplines, I feel, has been brought into focus by the issues raised by the context of art with which my own work has been long associated: Conceptual art. Paradoxically, it is some recent writing on this movement which has now brought art-historical writing into a crisis of meaning of its own.

Conceptual art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colors, or materials. Anything can be employed by the artist to set the work into play—including shapes, colors, or materials—but the form of presentation itself has no value independent of its role as a vehicle for the idea of the work.² Thus, when you approach the work you are approaching the idea (and therefore the intention) of the artist directly. The 'idea,' of course, can be a force that is as contingent as it is complex, and when I have said that *anything* can be used by (or as) a work of art, I mean just that: a play within the signifying process conceptually cannot be limited by the traditional constraints of morphology, media, or objecthood.

1. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven/London, 1985, 42.

2. I would cite my work from 1965–66, the Protoinvestigations, of which *One and Three Chairs* would be a representative example. This work, using deadpan 'scientific-style' photographs which were always taken by others, also employed common objects and enlarged texts from dictionary definitions. The elements were never signed, with the concept of the work being that this 'form of presentation' would be made and remade. The reason for this was an important part of my intention: eliminate the aura of traditional art and force another basis for this activity to be approached as art, conceptually. Ownership of the work is established by the production instructions which double as a certificate. This *is* signed, but as a deed of ownership, not as a work of art. Thus, I've made it clear that these certificates are never to be exhibited, and they rarely are. The art itself, which is neither the props with which the idea is communicated, nor the signed certificate, is only the *idea* in and of the work. As it was for other artists at that time, the issues of modernism were rapidly becoming opaque. One effect of this work was to 'sum up' modernism for me, and once that was visible I was able to use that view to get past it, as the work which followed shows. Thus, for me, this work was both a 'summation' of modernism and the way out of it.

3. The use of tautology in the Protoinvestigations has generated a variety of confused responses. One aspect of this work was the attempt to actualize a Wittgensteinian insight: by drawing out the relation of art to language, could one begin the production of a cultural language whose very function it was to *show*, rather than *say*? Such artworks might function in a way which circumvents significantly much of what limits language. Art, some have argued, *describes* reality. But, unlike language, artworks, it can also be argued,

Art can manifest itself in all of the ways in which human intention can manifest itself. The task for artists is to put into play works of art unfettered by the limited kinds of meanings which objects permit, and succeed in having them become not the autonomous texts of structuralism, but the production of artists as authors within a discourse, one concretized through subjective commitment and comprised of the making process. It is the historically defined agency of the artist working within a practice that sees itself as such a process, in which an artist's work becomes believable *as art* within society. To do that, work must satisfy deeper structures of our culture than that surface which reads in the market as tradition and continuity. The more enriched our understanding of that 'text' of art becomes, so does our understanding of culture. A focus on meaning, by necessity, has focused our concerns on a variety of issues around language and context. These issues pertain to the reception and production of works of art themselves. The aspect of the questioning process that some now call 'institutional critique' began here, too, and it originated with Conceptual art's earliest works.³

The relevance of this to the question of intention is in what it implies: the disappearance, perhaps with finality, of the threshold between what had been the art *object* (that which is now simply art) and the intentions of its maker. Indeed, there can no longer really be a separation between the work and the intention of the artist: the work of art, in this case, is *manifested* intention. Ultimately, we might want to ask, of course, if intention is the text itself, or the production of the screen upon which the greater social text appears—even if the fragments and overlaps are of many projections: race, creed, gender.

Recently I have corresponded with an art historian who wrote her master's thesis on my *Passagen-Werk*, a large installation I did for Documenta IX, in Kassel.⁴ In one letter, discussing artistic intention, she writes, "the relativizing position of the art historian says 'even if we can know what the artist intended, it isn't that important. What is important is the work of art and how it generates meaning.'" I don't

simultaneously describe *how* they describe it. Granted, art can be seen here as self-referential, but significantly, not *meaninglessly* self-referential. What art shows in such a manifestation is, indeed, *how* it functions. This is revealed in works which feign to *say*, but do so as an art proposition and reveal the difference (while showing their similarity) with language. This was, of course, the role of language in my work beginning in 1965. It seemed to me that if language *itself* could be used to function as an artwork, then that difference would bare the device of art's language game. An artwork then, as such a *double* mask, provided the possibility of not just a reflection on itself, but an indirect *double* reflection on the nature of language, through art, to culture itself. "Do not forget," writes Wittgenstein, "that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information is not used in the language-game of giving information." Whatever insights this early work of mine had to share, it did, and it initiated within the practice an essential questioning process which is now basic to it. It should be obvious that the 'baring of the device' of the institutions of art would begin at the most elemental level: the point of production itself, the artwork. Seeing the artwork, in such a context, forced a scrutiny of its conventions and historical baggage, such as the painting/sculpture dichotomy. First inside the frame and then outside. One goal of a work such as *The Second Investigation*, 1968, was to question the institutional forms of art. If the work that preceded this confronted the institutionalized form of authority of traditional art, this work pressed the point *out* of the gallery and museum into the world, using public media.

4. See Deborah Zafman, "Joseph Kosuth's *Passagen-Werk* (Documenta-Flânerie): An Installation of Ideas," M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1994.



1 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* [etymological], 1965

doubt her assessment, but reading her letter I felt again the distance between the art historian's approach and mine. What this suggests is that the art-historical process is a kind of conspiracy, even if unwittingly so, to politically disenfranchise my activity as an artist. If my intention is denied at its inception, then my responsibility for the meaning I generate in the world as an artist is also nullified. The artist becomes just another producer of goods for the market, where the work finds its meaning.

This, it seems to me, was exactly where we came into the picture in the sixties, when Noland, Olitski, et al. would never need to leave their studios; just paint 'em and ship 'em out, and let Clement Greenberg and his minions provide the meaning. For them, art and politics were separate, and their practice reflected that. What is seldom discussed is how one looked at those paintings and *saw* the theory. I think this greatly explains why, for so many now, such work is held in the low esteem it is. Perhaps I should make clear that I am not suggesting that artists are the only ones capable of discussing works of art. On the contrary, art historians and critics play an important role in the struggle of the work's 'coming to meaning' in the world. But that is the point: they represent the world. That is why a defining part of the creative process depends on the artists to assert their intentions in that struggle.

One of the greatest lessons defending the primacy of the intention of the artist, and the increasing importance of writing by artists on their work, is provided by this period of the sixties.⁵ Our more recent experience of the return to painting in the eighties reminds us again of the bankruptcy of a form of art that relies on its meaning to be provided by other than its makers. If Conceptual art means more than a style, its defining difference is established here in the rethinking of artistic responsibility in the production of meaning.⁶ Without this, the politics which inform work

remain homeless, only a topic among others that distinguishes style.

Artists working within such a practice have a particular responsibility not to permit their work at its inception to be defined 'by the world.' What the work *is* (that is, what distinguishes it from what preceded it) must be established by the artist before 'the world' includes it within all that is given. 'The world' begins as a process of institutionalization, and the art-historical and critical establishment is its first moment: without it there would be no 'professional' artists. Here is where one finds the true 'aesthetics of administration,' and it is a structural, and apparently inescapable, feature of the process of a work coming into the world.

Only a state of deep denial could keep an artist from avoiding the fact that seeing isn't as simple as looking: the text the viewer brings to a work organizes what is seen. The production of that 'text' has become a primary part of the artistic meaning-making process. The productive result of this understanding, beginning with Conceptual art, has been precisely the emergence of an 'art of intention' as I discussed above. If the actual people standing behind works of art—who provide the belief, in a sense, as they take subjective responsibility for the meaning of what is produced—think that an object 'speaks for itself,' they are sorely mistaken. The (making) process of putting a proposition (that signifying action which may or may not employ the object, performance, video, text, et al.) 'into play' is only *one* of the responsibilities of the artist. The act of putting it into the world is empty unless an artist also fights for its meaning. This informational framing of the proposition itself increasingly becomes part of the artistic process. Thus, a key to the changed role of intention and the artist's self-perception of his or her practice, is the role of writing by artists. On this subject, in the introduction to "The Play of the Unsayable," a curated installation I made for the Wittgenstein centennial in

1989 in Vienna and Brussels, I made the following statement:

One question remains unsaid: what is this text? This text owes its existence to the parentheses of my practice as an artist. This text speaks from that first and last. While philosophy would want to speak of the world, it would need to speak of art as part of that, if only to deny it. That which permits art to be seen as part of the world also nominates it as an event in social and cultural space. No matter what actual form the activity of art takes, its history gives it a concrete presence. Framed by such a presence then, this theory is engaged as part of a practice. Such theory I'll call primary. Secondary theory (by this I refer to art-historical and critical writing) may be no less useful (in many cases, more useful) but the point I'm stressing is that it has a different ontology. Primary theory is no more interesting than the practice, in toto, is. However, theory about art not linked to an art practice is unconcretized (or unfertilized) conversation after (or before) the fact. It is the fact of an artistic process which, having a location as an event, permits the social and cultural weight of a presence independent of a pragmatic language. It is, in fact, the nominated presence of the process which allows secondary theory its external object to be discussed. Behind every text about art rests the possibility of an artwork, if not the presence of one.

Texts about artworks are experienced differently from texts that are artworks. It is abundantly clear by now that we do not need to have an object to have an artwork, but we must have a play manifested in order to have it seen. That difference which separates an artwork from a conversation also separates, fundamentally, primary theory from secondary theory.

The work of art is essentially a play within the meaning system of art; it is formed as that play and cannot be separated from it—this also means, however, that a change in its formation/representation is meaningful only insofar as it effects its play. My point is that primary theory is part of that play, the two are inseparably linked. This is not a claim that the commentary of secondary theory can make. Talking about art is a parallel activity to making art, but without feet—it is providing meaning without an event context that socially commits subjective responsibility for consciousness produced (making a world). Standing guard, just out of sight, is the detached priority of an implied objective science.⁷

There is another consideration of artistic intention, also



2 Kosuth, *The Second Investigation*, 1968–69, from the exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form,” Kunsthalle Bern

important. It is *part* of the intention of this particular artist for the works to engage the viewer/reader's participation in the meaning-making process. By bringing with them what they do in their approach to the work, they thereby complete it. They are every work's 'local' site. This role would be rendered passive, and would provide only a moment of consumption, without work which is anchored to a larger process of signification. Thus the speaker is designated, embedded in the human meaning which artistic intention constitutes. No speaker, no listener.

Intention (Art Historians)

In considering this exchange of the objective voice for the subjective one, I, of course, contemplated the genre of confessional writing. But that seemed too obvious, too easy. Instead I decided on ventriloquism. I would write as though through the first-person account of many other characters, actual historical characters, whose narratives I would, by the mere fact of bringing them into the orbit of my own subjectively developed voice, suspend somewhere between history and fiction.—Rosalind Krauss⁸

5. Ad Reinhardt painted black paintings. But anyone who knew him, who knew how he thought about art, would tell you that he was more than just a producer of paintings; he was a producer of meaning. It is this *total* activity as an artist which ultimately provided those paintings with a cultural life as it preserved Reinhardt's reasons for making them, which you see when you look at them. By his ceaseless participation in panel discussions, his lectures, his texts such as “Rules for a New Academy,” his teaching, and his cartoons, he made it very difficult for others to coopt his work for their own purposes. Indeed, his work had to resist a critical atmosphere in which work that was outside of a certain orthodoxy was either made to fit, or was dismissed. The limits of Clement Greenberg's vision are probably witnessed with no greater clarity than in his statement on Reinhardt, that he “has a genuine if small gift for color, but none at all for design or placing” (quoted in the regrettable text

of Yve-Alain Bois, “The Limit of Almost,” in *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991, 18).

6. In the context of such a practice, I see an insurmountable contradiction for those colleagues of mine who have permitted art historians and critics to provide the theoretical basis for their work. What is thus brought into question is the very grounds of its authenticity.

7. See Joseph Kosuth, “A Preface and Ten Remarks on Art and Wittgenstein,” in *Das Spiel des Unsagbaren: Ludwig Wittgenstein und die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat., Wiener Secession, Vienna, 1989, n.p. In English and German.

8. Rosalind Krauss, “We Lost It at the Movies,” *Art Bulletin*, LXXVI, no. 4, 1994, 579.



3 Kosuth, *The Play of the Unmentionable*, Brooklyn Museum, 1990



4 Kosuth, *Passagen-Werk (Documenta Flânerie)*, 1992, from Documenta IX, Kassel: black room/left side; white room/right side

It's a dangerous moment for artists. The models of art historians writing on contemporary art give every indication of being in transition. The inherited model of art history's self-conception, part of its professional 'unconscious,' as it were, is one in which an old apparatus has not yet been completely dismantled. It implied that art historians speak with an authority which is 'objective and scientific.' The art-historical enterprise's links to academia do not contradict such authority, which originated with the internalized values of a regnant science upon which intellectual life in the university was founded. The social sciences must mimic the hard sciences, the assertion went, as this is the economy of academic standards and discipline. Thus, the question remains, does the art-historical enterprise speak with the voice of objectivity, even when its mission is contradictory to it?

That contradiction becomes increasingly pronounced as the works of artists are approached in a distinctively new way: as inspiration for the production of essentially subjective, creative texts by *auteur* writers on art. A rather ironic development, considering that the 'death of the author' discussed by Barthes and Foucault decades ago hasn't prevented the stylish use of French theory otherwise. Such theory, although making claims as art-historical text, betrays a hope that their production will gain status itself as a cultural object, post-S/Z. (Keep the power, have the fun?) It's one thing to commingle discourses, but, within this transformed discipline, what, finally, is the intention of the art historian that emerges? That seems a fair question, since the result of such writing on individual works (or, for that matter, an activity spanning a lifetime) selected for this treatment can be both deeply unfair and inaccurate.⁹

Perhaps what has initiated this transmigration of models, or, should I just say it, the source of this *license*, has been critical theory. It is one thing, however, to anchor one's writing within a discourse such as critical theory, with its position theoretically compelled to something like consistency vis-à-vis, for example, the originary and the historical narrative. At least their texts have a perceivable principled basis and there is no confusion about the writing of history in its more 'objective' conventional form. One can then perceive the (ethical) space within which the writer is operating: reader/buyer beware. Here, all 'texts' are equal, the work and the text it generated all being a part of the same surface, and any claims of objectivity are suspended as they are made irrelevant.

The hybrid of which I speak combines such a license with a conventional form of authority. This practice occupies a very different and self-servingly ambiguous ethical space. Having a mixed parentage has given us an interesting patrimony: rather like little Frankensteins of *Art-Language* (a license at least partially sired by Charles Harrison's fictive histories of

the Art & Language group), we have another, and mutant, form of art theory as art, except this time it is not the production of artists but of art historians. Maybe I'm partly to blame, writing as I did in *Art-Language* in 1970 that "This art both annexes the function of the critic, and makes a middleman unnecessary."¹⁰ I didn't realize at the time, however, that the art historians might join our ranks *under cover*. This emerging professional class of writers seems to want celebrated careers *like* those of artists while they keep their protective perch, and its detached view, with the perquisites and power of recorders of history. It appears that there is a palpable, if admittedly vague, dimension of something like a 'conflict of interest' if those given the responsibility to inscribe history are under a powerful and conflicting need to, instead, *make it*.

This leaves us with a brand of art-historical 'intentions' which begin to produce an ambiguous ethical relationship with the artist, in curating as well as writing. The history of recent art history leads one to conclude that there is a conservatism which pervades the art-historical and critical establishment, in which convention necessitates a view of artists as bewildered children playing with lumps of wet clay, in dire need of the paternal art-historical and critical presence to swoop down and make sense of it all. If you are one of the artists who risk standing up to this conception, prepare to be vilified.¹¹ As I've asked myself and others before: is our production, as artists, really only *nature*, from which critics, as historians, make their own 'culture'? And doesn't it violate society's sense of fair play that they are permitted to do so behind a mask of implied 'objectivity' without having to take the kind of *subjective* responsibility for the production of consciousness which artists have historically had to, and which has previously distinguished the two activities?

Who now seriously believes that the decisions made by such art historians in the performance of their craft are really any less subjective than those made by an artist, given the career needs and the social relationships of art historians such writing reflects? Previously there seemed to be some kind of moral imperative for art historians to be above such considerations out of a sense of professionalism. Having it both ways seems, at this receiving end, like an extremely unjust, and even corrupt, development. I always thought that critics, as journalists, could discuss the meaning of an artist's present production with the public in ways that indicated that the critics either got it or didn't (and artists could either deal with that or not.) The assumption was that, in the long run and after the smoke cleared, at least the historians could be counted on to be basically fair and accurate in saying who did what and when, why, whom it influenced, and the like. I assumed that the trail of evidence one leaves as a practicing artist with a public life would, in some sense, secure an honest

9. My own activities as an artist have recently been subjected to what I can only call an organized form of abuse by writers associated with *October* who seem to want to keep the voice of authority presumed by the former while having the 'creative' flexibility of the latter. See, e.g., *October*, no. 55, Winter 1990; no. 57, Summer 1991; no. 69, Summer 1994; and no. 70, Fall 1994. This has continued, as well, in various public lectures, panel discussions, and exhibition catalogues by the same writers.

10. Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note by the American Editor," *Art-Language*, 1, no. 2, 1970, 1-4, esp. 2-3, repr. in idem, *Art after Philosophy and*

After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990, ed. Gabriele Guercio, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, 37-70.

11. See "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," Round Table, in *October*, no. 70, Fall 1994, as an example. We know that there is a place for polemics. What I feel I can reasonably object to is when my work and historical position are intentionally misrepresented as a consequence of the *polemical* mission of writers who enjoy an authority as institutionally affiliated historians. Is it not an ethical issue when academic validation, which at least has the implication of scholarly disinterest, is used for such purposes?

record.¹² That record is, however, nothing more than a history of the intentions of particular individuals living in a given moment. The record of those intentions is the anchor, perhaps, which puts weight on the ethical responsibility of the art-historical enterprise. Without the meanings which such a record suggests, our cultural production as artists is reduced to being a playpen, a free-for-all of interpretation, institutionalizing history as a creative act—but only for its writers.

Finally, the reason we don't really consider the paintings by monkeys and children to be art is because of intention; without artistic intention there *is* no art. The subjective presence which stands behind a work of art and which takes responsibility for its meaning something, which I have discussed here, is what makes it authentic as a work. This is the human power which informs, in a sense gives life, to what would otherwise be empty forms and objects. Just as the grunts and groans of language would be gibberish as only physical properties of sound in themselves, within a system of relations they become meaningful. There is a tenacious formalism lurking in the art historian's argument which wants art as a language dead—archaic and unreadable, its meaning the province of whoever *owns* it—for they are free to make a decorative trophy of it and that would be its final meaning. In this view it is the role of the art-historical process to locate the value of art in the cadavers of passing artistic forms and materials, an institutionalizing process which severs the language from its speaker, so that it can give up its meaning to the market.

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12. After nearly thirty years as a process of the art-historical enterprise artist, I have recently been surprised itself. The vendettas of such fashions to learn that this may not be true, a history (and their petty and per least in the short run, if certain individual banalities) may fade from individuals, for ad hominem motives or memory, but their historical view may careerist expediency, decide other-not. Perhaps whatever altruism reverse. We need to keep in mind that might force our reconsideration such writing lowers the level for *all* of the dubious value of what may have us. The concern is that it becomes part been written as a result of such intention of a record, one which is restated (and tions. Indeed, we need to ask: are restated again, eventually taking on these *art-historical* intentions, or are the quality of a 'fact') as a natural they something else?

History, Writing, and Image in Maya Art

Linda Schele

"To reflect upon the choices and values that inform your own art-historical writing," read the letter inviting me to contribute to this issue of "Perspectives." That is what I have decided to do, but I do not intend my reflections to be prescriptions for how other art historians should work or what the discipline should be. I am reflecting on the transformations I have observed, because my field has undergone a revolution of perception and interpretation during the last twenty-five years. The driving force behind that revolution has been the ongoing decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system and its contribution to the understanding of Maya cultural history.

Although art historians have played major roles in this revolution, the arena of discourse has not been primarily in art history, but rather in the fields of anthropology and archaeology. This fact has meant that the response has been couched in the terms of archaeologists and anthropologists more than in those of art historians. One criticism, for example, has been that epigraphy and the study of imagery is "unscientific," and another has asserted that since everything the ancients wrote and depicted was propaganda, the corpus of information is unreliable and should be discarded.

While art historians and anthropologists can study the same things—that is, the object as artifact, aesthetic product, and carrier of symbolism and social intention—the two disciplines ask questions in different ways and often work toward different goals. A historian of Chinese art once put the contrast to me in this way: "Art historians study artists and their society in order to understand an object, while anthropologists study objects in order to understand the society that made them." This is a simplistic way of characterizing the contrast, but it is one I have found cogent. Anthropological thought on social processes and evolution, state formation, economic and power structures, kinship systems, historical linguistics, ethnography, and similar areas of inquiry have been central to interpretative work on Maya art, architecture, and archaeology. For me, the critical questions have concerned how human beings organize societies, create ideologies, encode their understandings of the world, and materialize these understandings in cultural production.

I have found myself in the situation of reconstructing a history and recovering a lost world view from the artwork I study, rather than using history and a world view to inform the objects. When I began my encounter with the Maya in 1970, I entered a field in which the decipherment process had reached a critical mass. The great Mayanist Tatiana Proskouriakoff had published three seminal articles on the inscriptions of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilán proving that the contents of the writing system were primarily historical.¹ She identified men and women both by their glyphic names and their portraits, and she placed their actions in a chronology accurate to the day. Other Mayanists, including

myself, followed her lead and began to recover the dynastic histories of individual sites.

During the early years, I worked with a group that met at Dumbarton Oaks in a series of miniconferences that occurred regularly between 1973 and 1979. The team included Floyd Lounsbury, a renowned linguist and kinship specialist; David Kelley, an anthropologist and ethnohistorian; Merle Robertson, an artist; Peter Mathews, an archaeologist and epigrapher in training; and myself, who was an artist at the time. Our collaboration not only brought different specialties and sensitivities to bear on common problems, but the synergy we developed also took all of us beyond our individual limitations. During those meetings our team worked out the syntactical and discourse structure of the hieroglyphic writing, and we used distributional and structural studies of iconography and archaeological context as parallel fields of data to tease meaning out of the archaeological record.² The result offered an extremely productive opening into the interpretation of imagery, architecture, and artifact.

The ancient Maya coordinated different systems of information in their objects so that pottery painting, narrative sculpture, and architectural decoration not only pictured action, person, and context, but also included parallel and often complementary information in written texts. In a small percentage of examples, Maya artists relied on only pictorial or only written information, but the majority of art objects fused the two systems into one image.

The texts usually give us very precise information about who the actors were, the actions in which they were engaged, and the days on which the actions occurred. Even this simplest level of information often contains valuable data, including titles revealing status, rank, occupation, parentage, and political affiliations. More complex texts can link together activities within the lifetime of one ruler, across several generations, and for entire dynasties that span hundreds of years. Moreover, scribes used legendary events from the remote past to give context to historical events, and they framed both in mythological time. Creation mythology, especially, provided the framework for political charter and historical causality.

The chronological placement of these actions was quite precise because the Maya used an era-based calendar to anchor events in the time stream.³ By cross-referencing all of the dates of actions recorded in the inscriptions of a single site with other factors such as life spans, reproduction age, and so on, we have been able to reconstruct sequences of events with great certitude. Much of my work has been

engaged in precisely this: reconstructing the dynastic history of individual sites, identifying the commissions of specific kings and lords, and investigating information about political exigencies, religious context, ritual, pageant, and other domains of experience that were encoded in such texts and images.

Even though the histories of these dynasties are under continual review and revision by the growing number of epigraphers working in the field, the reconstruction of history has gone to the next level of regional interactions and pan-Maya history. Epigraphers are finding cross-references to the same sets of events as viewed at different sites, so that we are getting both losers' and winners' perspectives. Although these wider sweeps of history are still under debate, they allow us to see how imagery worked on the larger scale of site interactions and how these reveal political and social strategies. Moreover, major archaeological projects are testing the veracity of these histories in the field by documenting the response or lack of response to events recorded in the inscriptional record in terms of changes in the material record.

The interaction between object, image, and writing has given us more information than just time, action, and actor, because the texts often sought to place the action in larger historical and supernatural contexts. The background for political history could be the legendary past when the first civilizations of Mesoamerica thrived, or the time of creation when the order of the cosmos was established. Scholars such as Michael Coe have shown that myths recorded during the sixteenth century are survivals of critical mythology from Pre-Columbian times.⁴ The *Popol Vuh*, for example, played much the same role for the Maya as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Greek cultural history. Texts have provided the names of gods and other supernatural beings, and have thrown light on the way in which they are manifested in imagery. Texts have elucidated the relationship between object and supernatural force, definitions of transformation and encounters with the supernatural, and the Maya perception of a divine context. Iconographic studies have not only identified what things are, but their context and distribution patterns have also provided information about strategy and social intention.

For the ancient Maya, art objects constituted two general classes: objects meant to be used in practice and ritual, or to create the context of spectacle, pageant, and ritual; and narrative imagery of people in historical action. Objects of the first type get to be represented in narratives of the second

1. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, "Historical Implications of a Pattern of Dates at Piedras Negras, Guatemala," *American Antiquity*, xxv, 1960, 454–75; and eadem, "Historical Data in the Inscriptions of Yaxchilán, Parts I and II," *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, III, 1964, 149–67 and IV, 1964, 177–201. (Proskouriakoff's earlier work had included a comprehensive study of style, *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*, Carnegie Institution of Washington no. 593, Washington, D.C., 1950, that is still used today). Another critical contribution came in 1952 from the Russian scholar Yuri Knorosov, who discovered the spelling system. Other scholars who made important early contributions were the Mexican Heinrich Berlin and the Americans David Kelley and Michael Coe. See Michael Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, London, 1992, for a full history of the decipherment.

2. Other people were following the same procedures in the seventies and also achieving results. Particularly notable early studies included Joyce

Marcus, *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands*, Washington, D.C., 1976; and a comprehensive study of the ceramics and art of Tikal in Clemency Coggins, "Painting and Drawing Styles at Tikal: An Historical and Iconographic Reconstruction," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1976.

3. The base date of the Maya calendar was Aug. 13, 3114 B.C. The Maya used a complex calendar system that counted from this date into the historical present by using a base-twenty system, using cycles of 360-day years aggregated into groups of 20 years, 400 years, 8,000 years, and so on. Scribes could give the exact number of days elapsed since this "zero" date, or they could anchor events to cycle ends. This system created a history in which the vast majority of events can be dated to a precise twenty-four-hour period, and sometimes we even know whether they occurred during the day or night.

4. Michael Coe first demonstrated the presence of Popol Vuh mythology in Classic-period art in *The Maya Scribe and His World*, New York, 1973.

type and sometimes in the glyphic system. What the texts say about these objects, their archaeological context, and the way in which the Maya depicted them in use furnish clues to their meaning. Finally, ethnohistorical records and modern ethnographies can also inform ancient meanings, if the connections are carefully made.

As the Maya produced objects, especially those that displayed historical narratives, the objects themselves became a part of the material record that conditioned future production. When the Maya made public history through their objects, they made it in full awareness of the artistic history of their own kingdoms. Individual kingdoms and regions developed styles that functioned as identity, just as style distinguished Maya art from other Mesoamerican art traditions. The Maya artists, probably under the direction of their patrons, used style as an instrument of ideology and politics on local, regional, and intercultural levels. Among such uses were the emulation of earlier art work, appropriation of styles from conquered or more prestigious sites, and the use of style as a statement of origin and political affiliation.

By building comparative frameworks with art objects from different sites and regions and across Maya history, scholars have attempted to reconstruct political context. Detecting fields of variation and distribution has allowed Mayanists to identify the evolutionary histories of images and propose meanings. Over the years, more and more people with different experiences and biases have joined the debate over these interpretations. As a result, the rate of discovery has grown exponentially and vigorous debate has created a rapid evolution of interpretation. Most practitioners regularly reexamine the entire interpretational field, including the most basic premises, in light of new discoveries. This continuous adjustment has led to discomfort among many archaeologists, who yearn for a single interpretation that will never be subject to change.

The relationship between writing and Maya art has yielded another class of information particularly important to art historians. The young epigrapher David Stuart identified artists' signatures in 1986. This led to the decipherment of dedication phrases that included the proper names for many of the major monuments and buildings, the Maya terms for types of objects, the names of the owners of the objects, and the names of artists. Although exploitation of this domain has started in exhibitions such as "Painting the Maya Universe,"⁵ there is much to learn about how Maya artistic patronage and production worked.

When I first began writing about this new history and my interpretations of the imagery associated with it, I emulated the writing of the people I admired. I wrote primarily for other professionals in the field, seeking to use the kind of jargon and discourse structure that would gain their approval and respect. I was steered into a new path when the Kimbell Art Museum contacted me about organizing an exhibition on Maya art, "The Blood of Kings," in which Mary Ellen Miller of Yale University became my partner. Both of us viewed Maya art objects as windows into the world view

and history of the people who made them. By 1985, when we began designing the exhibition, the process of decipherment and its results were twenty-five years old. We set about presenting some of the new history and understanding of the Maya world view to the public.

The Kimbell asked us to write a catalogue that would stand on its own after the exhibition had ended. That was my first experience of writing for a general audience. It was not easy. I remember the moment when Emily Sano, who was the curator in charge of the exhibition and editor of the catalogue, threw one of the first drafts down on my dining-room table and said that it would not do. Emily's specialty was Japanese art, so she had no vested interest in our arguments: her only concern was that they should be cogently and clearly presented for a nonspecialized audience. She crafted our writing and ideas so that ordinary people could understand them. I learned a lot from that experience, including the fact that specialized language and jargon often act to obscure meaning rather than enhance it.

The Blood of Kings was successful as an exhibition and as a catalogue. It caused a change of paradigm in the public's mind. The peaceful, pastoral Maya gave way to a historical Maya who practiced war, bloodletting, politics, and religion in a way that was knowable and understandable. Proskouria-koff had begun the revolution and many people had kept it going, but the *Blood of Kings* brought it home to the public and the media. The ramifications of that change are still playing themselves out in unexpected ways.

In 1986, the success of the *Blood of Kings* led an editor to invite me to submit a proposal to William Morrow for a book on the Maya. I accepted the invitation and asked David Freidel, an anthropologist and archaeologist I respect, to join me as co-author. I prefer working in collaborative situations because of the synergy that develops between authors of different training and perspective. We decided to write a history of the Maya to illustrate how we could extract intentional behavior, political context, and historical processes from the archaeological and artistic record. Many Mayanists had been talking of history in this way, but the resulting interpretations had not yet been presented in a public forum.

For *A Forest of Kings*, we chose a series of crucial episodes about which we had considerable data from imagery, inscriptions, and archaeology. We began with an episode in the Preclassic period (ca. 100 B.C.) and ended in the Terminal Classic (A.D. 950). Each episode concerned a different kind of political or dynastic problem. We assumed that the imagery and texts had been commissioned by lords who had personal and political agendas. They were not "objective" views of the history, but ones that presented a take on the events that served the winners best. We were criticized for using the indigenous records as historical sources because they were propaganda, but for us their value came precisely from their built-in bias.

We used archaeology and cross-references from within the site and at other sites to test the veracity of any particular

5. See Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe*, Durham, N.C., 1994.

assertion in the ancient records. Freidel's knowledge of social structure, state formation, and ethnographic analogy played a crucial role in developing our interpretations. We attempted to detect social intention and the strategies of the various participants in grappling with the problems faced by the Maya in each incident. In hindsight, we were wrong in some of the detail, but generally correct in the main trajectory of history as we reconstructed it.

Other scholars have continued to build on this first attempt at history, changing and adapting it to new decipherments and continuing excavations. In fact, this has been one of the great lessons I have learned. All any of us can do is publish the best interpretation of the fields of data that we perceive at any one moment, but the common stream of understanding and the patterns within the underlying data continue to change—and so must the interpretation. If interpretation is data-driven, it is necessarily ephemeral and in a continuous state of evolution.

If I believed the *Blood of Kings* had taught me how to write for the public, I was wrong. *A Forest of Kings* (1990) was to prove far more difficult to write than my first effort. Our editor at William Morrow, Maria Guanaschelli, required us to use an experienced writer to convert our first manuscript into something that the public could absorb. We had a bad case of “academese,” but she did not ask us to eliminate the evidence we needed to support our arguments. This we put in extensive notes. We could keep all the detail we wanted, but she required a good story that would hold the reader's attention. Learning to craft an argument in language that an educated, interested public can absorb requires strategies very different from those needed to write for a professional audience. To combine both in one work was difficult indeed.

In our next book, *Maya Cosmos* (1993), Freidel and I continued to write for a diverse audience, including the general public, aficionados of Maya civilization, students at all levels, professional academics in our own and related fields, and the modern Maya. The general theme of this book was the assertion that the ancient Maya framed their knowledge of the world and society within a coherent theory of cause and consequence. We argued that they encapsulated their understanding in a story of creation that was encoded in myth, metaphor, and symbol. It operated as a process that unfolded historically, as a social practice through ritual performance and the material context in which the performance occurred, and as a religious paradigm. We proposed that this universalizing and unifying view of creation endured as a process and developed over the entire span of Maya history, and that we could trace it in the material record left by the Maya.

In our view, there were practical implications to be drawn from our thesis and the way in which we sought to present it. As an archaeologist, Freidel asserted that the deposition of an archaeological record in the first place was governed by this universalizing understanding of the world. For example, we argued that the Maya believed that they brought soul force into the places they built and the objects they produced through dedicatory rituals, and that places so consecrated required deactivation when they were to be buried, destroyed, or abandoned. Both dedication and termination left

intentional depositions that can be recovered by archaeologists sensitive to their presence. For an art historian, the artifacts that come out of these contexts are art objects that carry encoded information about meaning and the rituals that led to their deposition. Archaeologists have recorded a great deal about these contexts in the past that can now be understood in light of what the Maya themselves wrote hieroglyphically and showed pictorially about their own cultural production. At the same time, archaeological context gives crucial information to the art historian and epigrapher that can elucidate what the Maya said and showed in their art.

The opportunity to write books for multiple audiences has changed my attitude about writing art history and the role it can play. Ten years ago I began giving workshops on Maya hieroglyphic writing to Maya people in Guatemala, and later in Yucatan. For five hundred years, the Maya have had their history ripped from them and refashioned to suit the needs of their conquerors. In more recent times, information from archaeological and historical research is only rarely available to them, because most of the publications on Maya history are in English, and because the Maya do not have access to the kind of education that would allow them to become part of the national institutions that oversee archaeology, especially in Guatemala.

I have led these workshops with Nikolai Grube of the University of Bonn and Federico Fahsen of Guatemala. We have learned as much from the Maya as we have taught them. The exchange has been on many levels, including the different kinds of specialized knowledge and experience that both we and the Maya bring to the meetings. The Maya have opened windows of understanding into their symbolism, ritual, and languages of a kind that is known only to native speakers who have been raised within a cultural tradition. We have brought the Maya the means of deciphering their ancient histories and the tools to debate and adapt the histories we are attempting to create. Our hope is that there will be Maya epigraphers, archaeologists, and art historians in the future who speak directly to their own people.

Working with the Maya has made me sensitive to the power of words and how they can harm or help, often unintentionally. The paradigm shift that Mary Miller and I triggered in the *Blood of Kings* has created a perception of Maya violence that has not been placed in the context of world history. By speaking of Maya violence so nakedly, while neglecting the violence in the history of the European peoples and their colonies, scholars, writers, and television producers privilege our own heritage and penalize the Maya. In the light of the genocide suffered by Maya people in the eighties and nineties, some Maya have challenged not the veracity of what we published, but its potential impact on their lives.

On the other hand, many more Maya see the history locked in the inscriptions as one of the keys to taking back their intellectual sovereignty. Our work has political implications as powerful and far-reaching as archaeology in Israel. People on all sides of the political debates in Central America use perceptions of the Pre-Columbian past to support their positions.

In the summer of 1995, an incident occurred in Guatemala that brought home to me the importance of these histories to the Maya community. My friend Nikolai Grube had arranged for a group of German politicians and businessmen to meet with Maya leaders in order to discuss how best to help the Maya communities. One of those leaders, an academic specializing in mass communication and education, told the visiting Germans that one of the biggest problems for the Maya is how to move into the twenty-first century as participants in the world culture without losing their identity as Maya. He declared that the Maya would do it in the same way as we do—through knowledge of their history—and that the greatest part of that history is preserved in the inscriptions and images left by their ancestors.

I find myself contemplating a conflict between academic freedom on the one hand, and responsibility for my words on the other. I would like to pursue the abstract goal of

following the data wherever it leads me without regard to anything but the “truth.” Yet the Maya have made me acutely aware of the responsibility that comes with writing history and of the power of words. It is not just what I say, but how I say it that is important. For most people in the world, the written history of the Maya and the ancient descriptions of their world view and ritual performance are matters of exotic curiosity. For the Maya, they are matters of identity and the validation of their heritage as human beings.

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