TEXTS ON ART

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Art history appealed to me as a youth in two different ways. There was first of all the then still contemporary high modernist excitement of the works of two great artists: Mondrian, only a few years gone, and Mies van der Rohe, still thriving. But there was also, seemingly throughout my formation, excitement in the promise of research into origins and influences, an approach to historical understanding that seemed marvelous from as soon as I became aware of it.

In one of his great dogmatic pronouncements Freud says that all intellectual curiosity derives from our earliest attempts to comprehend how we sprang forth from our mothers’ bodies. That, I’d say, is essentially diachronic, however unfashionable now, as well as at least semi-obviously true. Excitement in the promise of discovery did not seem so naïve before postmodernism served everything up in salad form, dressed with one or another favorite theory. If aesthetic concern might even drive artistic connections on the level of producers’ unalienated working interest, art history promised something considerably more inspiring to go after than scandal as intellectual spectacle. Believe it or not, you could even be fascinated by artistic diffusionism, though of course nobody would ever have any notions of diffusion who only attended to one sort of art or only to art of one place or time, even, or especially, the modern. So it would be great to be a generalist.
For me and for some of my teachers the history of ideas held special potential for the history of art. In retrospect, that may have been a stimulating and humane philosophical compensation for the heartless disappointment of ‘aesthetics proper’ after the demise of original English formalism and then in literature the hermetic ‘New Criticism.’ Anglo-American philosophy was in no position to help, owing, I think, to a polite Anglo-Saxon distaste for public reports on private phenomenal intimacies with objects as well as to the fact that in no other humanistic field but analytical philosophy does it matter so little whether something has ever been said before: hardly an ideal medium for sustaining historical consciousness. I myself once spent two afternoons in a university library storeroom filling out as many slips as possible to rescue ‘old’ philosophy books from deaccession as presumably as effectively obsolete as old chemistry texts.

Latterday German critical philosophy had its heart in the right place when it came to the aesthetic as such, as against the idea of the aesthetic; but it couldn’t even seem to get Warhol straight in terms of looking and seeing, not to mention fathoming the post-cubist European art-historical origins of Pop. Then too, French critical thought seemed to me all too pleased to entertain practically anything as a texte in a universe of textes – which I find differently problematic. Funny to say so in a book devoted to texts-on-texts; but mine, I hope, are ultimately devoted to the art in art.

And really, I’m no stranger to the play of texts, especially where ‘influences’ make for vital points of interstiction. I still hadn’t finished my (architectural) dissertation when I published ‘Samuel Johnson’s Uttoxeter Penance in the Writings of Hawthorne,’ in Hermathena (Dublin), for Spring 1971 – later discussed and supplemented in ‘Notes on Influence and Appropriation,’ in Modernities: Art-Matters in the Present (Penn State Press, 1993). Another case, twenty years
later, was precipitated when one day in the library stacks I chanced upon an unfamiliar old book offering itself as a possible influence on Longfellow – something much less likely now that American academic libraries no longer house everything in open stacks on site – which led me to see that poet in a rather unexpectedly postmodern light in ‘Professor Longfellow and the Blacksmith,’ *Annals of Scholarship* 10, numbers 3–4 (1993).

My favorite modes of discovery, however, are more art-historical, the most materially simple being the discovery of a work missing from the record; and while still a student I had two fortuitous experiences of such, both in Ireland. In about 1968–69, doing architectural research under Anne Crookshank, while she and the Knight of Glin were writing a book on Irish portraiture, I discovered, rummaging around in the attic of the Representative Body of the Church of Ireland, in Dublin, an extraordinary work, James Latham’s *Double Portrait of Bishop Robert Clayton and His Wife Katherine*, c. 1740, which I dusted off with my handkerchief and took a snapshot of, which I sent to them; after a thank-you, they took it from there, and the painting went on loan to the National Gallery of Ireland, which eventually bought it. Around the same time the other discovery was precipitated by a curious historical discontinuity in the great old Shell Guide to Ireland. I was driving around Ireland in the late 1960s, looking for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century churches for what would become my Columbia dissertation under Wittkower and, after his death, Dorothea Nyberg – both of whom, fortunately, encouraged my being a generalist (if some ‘hedgehogs’ would always find me not so much foxy as vague, I could learn to live with that). What happened unexpectedly and ‘out of period’ was that an intuition of historical discontinuity in the received account led me to the identification of Giacomo della Porta’s missing tabernacle of the Gesù, in Rome, the mother church of the Jesuit

Admittedly, such finds can be merely antiquarian, though in restoring something to historical continuity there can be a quasi-aesthetic gratification of reparation. More engrossing for me is the more 'con-textual' question of artistic influence, whether as a matter of quotation, allusion, or mere coincidence. I have never forgotten with what almost trembling excitement it dawned upon me, one day in the library in, I think, 1967, that I might be causally connecting for the first time, or rather reconnecting, the fascinating motif of a woman's head with hair pulled back into tear-drop form, in *Guernica*, with an amazingly similar form in Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents*, and to intimate, during the War in Vietnam, what this might mean. Neither, sorry to say, have I forgotten, all these years later, the frigid black-hole of jealousy I felt beside me when I sought spontaneously to share my enthusiasm with a conservative art historian standing there. Anyway, that December I published this and certain kindred points in an *Art News* article which I also read out on WBAI as an anti-war statement (more on that later). Happily, the story ends with Ellen C. Oppler acknowledging my *Guernica* 'sourcing' by including the article in her *Picasso's 'Guernica': Illustrations; Introductory Essay; Documents; Poetry; Criticism; Analysis* (Norton, 1988).

I always want to know, even with contemporary art: Where have I encountered such a thing before (no wonder why I have never been obsessed with novelty). This naturally leads to discovering possible visual sources – though frankly, I hardly care, at least to start, whether the artist was conscious of a particular source or not. That is a mere point of curiosity compared with whether such and such a *move* has ever been made *in the game*. An instance in which I take a certain
pride: the association of Le Corbusier’s *objet-type* smoking pipe with Magritte’s famous not-a-pipe painting is actually not owed to Foucault after all, as has often been said, but to Foucault’s translator’s deriving it from me and/or a simultaneous Belgian publication, specifically my ‘The Imagism of Magritte’ (*Artforum*, May 1974). There I also propose a Magritte connection with Ledoux’s image of an eye ‘taking in’ the Theatre of Besançon, as is accounted for in ‘Notes on Influence and Appropriation.’ Anyone who does not believe me is invited to go to the library and check the dates.

My most extensive project in sourcemanship has concerned the broader textual background to the modernist theory of integral flatness in painting as deriving originally from a critical question of flatness in textiles and other decorative arts: ‘The Carpet Paradigm,’ originally published as a long article in *Arts Magazine* for September 1976, then somewhat revised as a book: *The Carpet Paradigm: Integral Flatness from Textile to Art* (Edgewise Press, 2010), with a French version now in production: *Le Paradigme du tapis*, translated by Jacques Soulillou (Geneva: Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain).

Certainly it was much more affirmatively than now seems possible that early on I took so readily to a taste for cross-referencing that seems to have developed in my generation, quite adumbrating hyperlinks (‘idealistically’), even if by now my continuing search for origins is surely not the same search that it was to begin with. Because I have always thought the literary people more often than not misunderstand visual art, especially abstract painting and architecture, it took some time to appreciate that at least I had one ally in that camp, Harold Bloom. As a slow reader, I could never have hoped to keep up with his output; but it was reassuring eventually to receive a letter from him expressing interest in one of my ‘Iconicity’ articles historically cross-referencing abstract painting in *Artforum* in the late 1970s.
The Magritte claim had elicited some response too, unlike my own all-time favorite discovery, which concerns a source for Matisse’s great 1907 Blue Nude (Baltimore Museum) in a soft-core pornographic photograph. Because this has not, to my knowledge, been recognized – possibly because I have never been interested in theorizing the ‘high’ and ‘low’ of the matter – I simply repeat here a point raised in ‘Two Blasts-from-the-Past in Picasso (and Yes, Marcel, You Too): Notes on Retroactive Influence,’ in Arts Magazine for March 1985, and then again in Modernities: that a certain photograph of a reclining young (even problematically young) female nude, taken by Robert Demachy circa 1898 and printed up with rather the look of a naughty ‘French postcard,’ is fairly self-evidently Matisse’s source for the Blue Nude, right down to the painting’s frond-patterned backdrop as deriving from a meeker repeating design of foliage on something like a cheap shower curtain in the ‘original.’ Not, as I noted in 1985, that the suggested source will ever explain “how Matisse got the hip into such sublimately passionate relation with his souped-up fronds, which now,” for the first time, not the second, “throb with lush life, unlike the demure drapery motifs of their ‘source.’ In other words, do not look to Demachy for the gift of Matisse (not that there may not also be a gift of Demachy), except to see it missing, like the soloist’s part on those music-practice phonograph records that used to be known as ‘Music Minus One.’” As I have noted before, the image in question is handily found in Oliver Mathews’ book Early Photographs and Early Photographers (1973).

Although most of my sourcings are visual, and only a few text-to-text literary, and even most of the visual ones dependent on books; and though I am in a sense 'pushing' books here, against the tide of the illiterate screen culture; still, I cannot but notice that I am not pushing the kinds of books pushed today in art circles dominated, yet again, by an essentially literary outlook, however revised to attune to the 'visual culture' that must seem like where the action is. Yet as happily steeped in art history as I am, as a socially aware kind of guy I am not oblivious to visual culture. I was already thinking about this situation when it struck me that I might perhaps contribute something more affirmative to it because in recent years I have found myself writing about books of visual-cultural interest that actually do matter to me as a critically aware art historian. Thanks to the encouragement and publishing hospitality of Phong Bui, selecting and collecting these and some other compatibly textual texts has issued in the present volume.

The first text, on Aloïs Riegl's *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* (posthumous), considers the analytical task set by the great Viennese revisionist art historian of 1900 of comprehending the 'grammar' in art-historical development: the changing sense of artistic possibility, of what the standing rules of the game at any given point allow. His considering the whole development twice, in two different sets of manuscript notes, produces a complex mutual reinforcement, something like biblical parallelism, regarding what was culturally entailed in historical art, especially in regard to Riegl's favored period of 'late Roman,' which in his eyes held special modern appeal. Some have found this essay a helpful 'pony' to a difficult, complex and yet, once penetrated, fascinating text.

Foundational to modernist criticism in English was the work of Roger Fry, who first promulgated postimpressionism in 1910; but whose prior advocacy of the American painter Albert Ryder, the
second essay suggests, suggestively converged with the publication of Matisse’s ‘Notes of a Painter’ (1908). This little piece was long ago provoked when some fine Columbia undergraduate students of mine on the Columbia Review, including Steven Henry Madoff and Luc Sante (I hope I haven’t forgotten anybody), solicited an article from me. Also of undergraduate precipitation, on two counts – thanks to a Harvard student of mine as well as to one of George Santayana’s, – is the third essay, which explores the possibility that Duchamp’s famous, supposed desecration of a postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa by addition of a goatee, draws upon a likening in Harvard circles of the famous Spanish-American aesthete to the same ‘giocondo.’

Modern architecture, too, has served as receiver and transmitter of textually attuned artistic influence. I have toyed with the possibility of including an essay written as a tangent to a book of revisionist essays that I have written on Adolf Loos: an article entertaining the strange possibility that in responding quite without aesthetic fuss to build the quickest, cheapest row-houses in a severe housing crisis after World War I, Loos was, cannily or uncannily but actually, reiterating a particular motif from Greek tragedy: “The “One-Walled House”: A New Facet to Loos’s Dodgy Classicism?” in Word & Image 23 (2007). As ultra-textural as it is, however, that was too singular for the present textual company. More appropriately architectural is the fourth essay’s case of an irrationalist work, the most famous surrealist novel, André Breton’s Nadja, echoing something as poetically ‘functionalist’ as the preeminent modernist architectural text of the twentieth century, by Le Corbusier.

The fifth concerns, not unlike the case of Riegl’s Historical Grammar, one of those ‘heavy’ classics that seems more often mentioned than even perused: Gerardus van der Leeuw’s Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art (1932; 1948), recently republished. Here I seek to comprehend what in such a major work of scholarship has,
purportedly in a modern way, been at stake since the mid-twentieth century. The sixth essay looks into the intellectual space Ad Reinhardt would have shared in early manhood with his friend who became the best known monk (funny claim) of the century, Thomas Merton; and the seventh locates certain caricatural drawings by Reinhardt in a certain 'hieroglyphic' tendency transcending distinctions of high and low in American 1950s culture.

The eighth essay, on Pavel Florensky's legendary Iconostasis, written in Russia in 1922 but unpublishable until de-Stalinization, opens a virtual time capsule of once modern-attuned thinking on icons, representation, and related matters, and the possibility of its having been an art-attuned influence on the revisionist Freudian theorist Jacques Lacan. The ninth also concerns contemporary thinking with earlier modern roots: the textual as well as conceptual-art practices of the contemporary artist William Anastasi, whose investigations of the importance of Alfred Jarry as an influence on Joyce themselves open questions about Joyce and Duchamp.

The tenth and last, on the 'appropriationist' Mike Bidlo, is previously unpublished though not uncirculated. It reflects upon Bidlo's 'appropriated' paintings, and writings of the philosopher Arthur Danto which, on the basis of his 1964 encounter with an Andy Warhol Brillo Box painted sculpture, repeatedly declared that work to be the "end" of art – though Danto would eventually accommodate Bidlo's look-alike 're-plays' of those (and other) major modern artworks.

Reviewing this last text reminds me of the day I, long-time Duchampian, ran into Bidlo painting in P.S. 1, and pitched in to help him gesso the canvas for the Demoiselles d'Avignon (1983). I had once painted a decent full-sized Matisse Bathers by the River on the wall of my Columbia apartment; but in helping Bidlo with the Demoiselles undercoat I remember liking the surreptitious way my donkey-work would be covered over by his high art. A 1984 article that I published in
New Observations (number 24) and later reprinted as ‘Snake-Oil from Julio Schnitzel (A Parody)’ in Modernities shows a photograph by Bidlo (unidentified as painter but not as photographer) of me (unidentified) as a rent-a-cop guarding his Original Schnabel Simulacrum, 1983; for I was interested in more or less textual possibilities of intervention, and was using Mike’s photograph of me protecting his ‘non-Schnabel’ as valuable commodity to illustrate my own line-by-line parody of a, still, to me, amusingly badly written text by Julian Schnabel in a then recent number of Artforum.

Yes, in that artworks may sometimes count as texts, especially as circulating in a discourse, I suppose I have occasionally produced intermodal works that might be mentioned. Another article by me documents not only an early collaboration with Bidlo but also an extended intervention of my own that was as visual-conceptual as textual: ‘China Trade: Discourse with W. D. Barnes,’ in Arts Magazine for September 1986. Under my own by-line I tell there of certain works effected pseudonymously, including having certain canvases painted to order (very much ‘bespoke’ painted!) at a Hong Kong oil-painting factory. First, however, was the collaboration with Bidlo: Telephone Iron, 1983, pretty much a drawing in paint on canvas, executed by me in accord with his describing, only in terms of form, without identifying as such, a flat-iron. Yes, we were both aware of László Moholy-Nagy’s telephoned paintings; and Bidlo had been re-doing Man Ray ‘Flat-Irons.’

Another painting in the article, however, from my own brain as well as hand, is one of my own favorite works: the Duchampian Portrait of Dr. Mutt with Butt (after Nagy), 1984, described quite honestly in my text as “peculiarly nicely painted,” and as far as I know still in Peter Nagy’s collection.

Of the mail-order paintings from Hong Kong, one was my four-panel, Picassoid but conceptually self-referential Prague Self-Portrait,
1983–84, which was exhibited in the spring of 1984 at P.S. 1 in Jeffrey Daitch’s exhibition ‘The New Portrait;’ nicknamed ‘The Beatles’ in Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo’s Wild History (1985); and finally traded with Bidlo. By the same agency but in a different sort of exchange, I replaced Komar and Melamid’s K. G. B., 1975 – a painting I had owned and liked (and exhibited at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, in 1978) but in which I had lost interest after its authors emigrated from the Soviet Union, and traded with Ron Feldman, who had sold it to me, for a very nice Beuys drawing – with my own indirect Hong-Kong copy-cat work, based on the Komar and Melamid painting but complementarily titled C. i. a., of 1985–86.

That all the facts about my pseudonymous works in ‘China Trade,’ including the telephone collaboration with Bidlo, are true as ever, might in the end have left my actual writing, ironically enough, merely documentary (or ‘documentary fiction,’ a fashionable literary category at the time). The last work mentioned in it I produced at the invitation of Earl Willis for a show he was organizing at the artists’ club Kamikaze in 1985 or ’86: a typed-out conceptual work suggested, when I was stumped for an idea, by Marjorie Welsh: Art Criticism (after Baldessari, with Thanks to M. W.). That piece, which went unillustrated, is lost, while all the photographs of the works I have mentioned turn out to have been by my friend Tom Warren. Both textual-interventional articles are now briefly treated in my ‘Don’t Trust Anybody Dressed in Black,’ in James Elkins and Michael Newman’s The State of Art Criticism (Routledge, 2008).

The sources of the essays collected here are as follows, and for permission to reprint I thank the respective editors: 1, Art Monthly (London), number 285 (April 2005); 2, Columbia Review 55, number 1 (Winter 1976); 3, Word & Image 19 (2003); 4, Annals of Scholarship 13, numbers 1–2 (Vintage Modernisms; 1999); 5, Art and Christianity (London), number 54 (Summer 2008); 6, unpublished; 7, the Brooklyn
Rail, December 2008-January 2009; 8, Word & Image 26 (2010); 9, Aaron Levy and Jean-Michel Rabaté, eds., Anastasi's Pataphysical Society: Jarry, Joyce, Duchamp, and Cage (Philadelphia: Slought Books, 2005); 10, not formally published but written on the occasion of an exhibition ‘Not Andy Warhol (Brillo Boxes),’ at the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, in 1995, where photocopies were available for reading.

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