

Art History after Modernism

HANS BELTING

Translated by Caroline Saltzwedel and Mitch Cohen
with additional translation by Kenneth Northcott



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Preface to the English Edition

"Art History after Modernism" is the new title of an essay originally called "The End of the History of Art?" The title change alludes to the changing significance of art, which has repercussions on the discourse of art history whether or not art historians accept the connection between the two. Modern art, which has had a longer history in Europe than anywhere else, has always been more than an artistic practice; it is also a model that allowed art history to establish an orderly, linear progression. "Art history after modernism" means not only that art looks different today; it also means our discourse on art has taken a different direction, if it is safe to say that it has taken a clear direction at all. We have since discovered that modern art was rooted in a much longer artistic tradition, which the advent of modernism negated. Willingly or not, we are also confronted with the dissolution of the universal significance of Western art and its historiography. We have recently begun to admit the changes that affect even the canon of art history, which now reappears as a local Western concern, despite its universal pretensions. This does not mean that the traditional discussion of art history is on the verge of collapse, but it invites us to reopen that discussion to communicate with others from non-Western traditions.

The essay does not conceal its highly personal view, one that does not wish to dispense with method or a generally accessible discourse, but one that eschews the claim that it speaks with the voice of history or from a position beyond history. The American reader is invited to test his or her tolerance of a decidedly European way of describing the contemporary scene. The aim of this book is not to offer a definitive truth but to present the author's view as one based on personal history and professional experience. I feel no need to apologize for this; on the contrary, I am convinced that this is necessary to avoid an intransigent dogmatism that claims to possess an overview of our world. Only by learning to listen to one another and to accept that the other's experience is as legitimate as our own will we be ready to accept the future.

I wrote this book more than nine years ago, which is a long time when dealing with a contemporary topic. Moreover, I wrote it in German; a translation will inevitably alter some of the original nuances. An English-language edition was paradoxically necessitated by the views I

expressed in an earlier U.S. publication, *The End of the History of Art?* (1987), which no longer represents my thinking about the topic today and which I did not want to see in a new edition. I have dispensed with the section on Vasari, which did not need restatement, and have added some new text that did not even appear in the latest German edition, whose title translates as *The End of the History of Art: A Revision after Ten Years* (1995). All views on the contemporary art scene are open-ended; we cannot capture its meaning once and for all. Some experts on modern art take a stand against anything that no longer conforms to their own artistic experience, thus raising the question whether they are still truly engaged with art itself or whether they are merely defending themselves against the flux of events.

This does not mean that no firm view can be taken, nor does it imply a surrender to a cinematic course of events to be blindly followed. But it does mean that we are in control not of these events but only of our own particular viewpoint. We may be attracted to a school of thought that is briefly fashionable in academic circles. But we have adopted, if only unconsciously, a given tradition of thinking: in my case, a tradition rooted in long experience of art history that both shapes and limits my perception of the contemporary scene, a scene that in turn reacts to this tradition. Dissent and sometimes a secret rivalry are growing between established art criticism and its living artistic counterpart. But there is also a growing dichotomy within art criticism itself, which seems to be rejecting the intellectual symbiosis that developed between the United States and Europe in the postwar decades. This dichotomy, which has recently become my experience as well, caused me to hesitate a moment before venturing upon the present publication. No one wants to appear obscure or, worse, uninformed, although information is itself a matter of selection and local preference. My confidence in an ongoing dialogue within the West has encouraged me to take the risk of agreeing to publish the present volume despite my doubts. I was once trained to believe in this sort of close dialogue; so I was eager to know whether such a belief is still justified.

The first part of this volume has no equivalent in the original book. It begins with a balance sheet defining the difference I see between our current situation and what we call modernism. At the same time, I feel better prepared now to formulate the thesis of the end of art history than I was twenty years ago. Moreover, I can now refer to the discussion that has since arisen on the theme of my original book (for instance, in the writing of Arthur C. Danto). The art discussion has since become the playground of both art critics and artists, making it clear that the tradi-

tional narrative of art history was pursuing a different purpose. Style and history were in fact issues of early twentieth-century art, which the discipline unconsciously or intentionally keeps alive. The periodization suggested by the phrase "the late cult of modernism" moves outside art-historical or art-chronological periodization and reflects my view that our perception of art and the path of art history are colored by our own cultural experiences.

At the center of part 1 is a triad of larger themes that did not actually originate in the history of art but that have, nevertheless, changed and will continue to shape the development of the discipline. Only by writing this text did I grasp their inner connections. I began chronologically with the idea of Western art following the Second World War, when the United States led the way in cultural as well as in other matters. Today, however, after its own East-West dichotomy was suspended for so long in a "Western partnership," Europe has suddenly become self-absorbed again in its preoccupation with the reality of Eastern Europe. So far, art history still remains silent on this matter. Furthermore, world art is on the rise, a chimera of global culture that challenges our well-trained Western definitions of art. Finally, minorities are also claiming their own place in a canon of art history from which they feel excluded or in which they were never considered.

The last three chapters of part 1 tackle three other themes whose current significance is generally known. First, the categories of "high" and "low," long central to our understanding of art, have lost their firm boundaries. Second, with its working structures and temporality, media art, whether installation or video, has raised completely new questions that cannot be treated with traditional historical methods. Third, as institutions, the museums of contemporary art are increasingly being transformed in a way that no longer permits them to be used as the usual explication of art history.

Part 2 developed out of the original book. It begins with reflections on how contemporary artists present the history of art, then traces the art historical discourse back to its origins. After Hegel, art history detached itself from these origins, much to its detriment, thus immediately calling its critics into account. Even the coexistence of art history and the avant-garde, which always resulted in antagonism, allows us in retrospect to take a position toward the discipline in the present context. My inspection of the rules of this academic game is not intended as a formal exercise but as an opportunity to understand the historical reasons for certain notions and theorems that we must not confuse with articles of faith.

The reality of the work of art, which occupies the central position of part 2, resists concerns with the end of art history, since the work of art stimulates a discourse of its own. But in contemporary art, the concept of the "work" has itself come under dispute. My review of media history therefore examines anew the problems emerging in the present art scene. The concluding chapters form a new body of thought by engaging modernism and today's posthistory in dialogue, thus comprehending the peculiarities of each as seen from the art historian's vantage point. The artists' posthistory, I suggest, developed before that of the historians. I then discuss a film by Peter Greenaway, who, to my surprise, treated the same themes of frame and image that I had already used to describe the relationship between art history and art. It is strange that a text begun in 1983 discusses a film, shot in 1991, that unexpectedly reflects some of my earlier ideas. Chapter 20 is entirely new and thus demonstrates the flux of time in the book's argument.

PART I

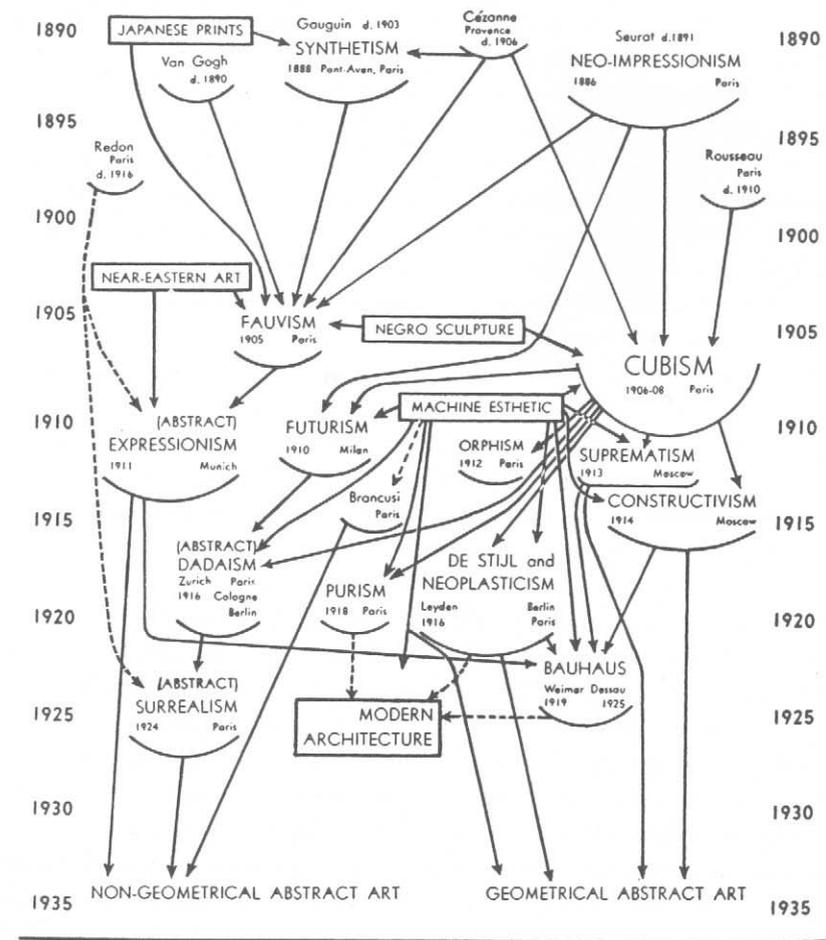
Modernism in the Mirror of Contemporary Culture

8 Global Art and Minorities: A New Geography of Art History

The figure of the frame, which can be used to describe art history as a locus of identity, can also help us to understand the problems that play a role in today's so-called global art. Art history as a discourse originally was invented for a particular culture, in other words, for a culture with a common history. By contrast, minorities that have surfaced in a given society feel that they need not be represented in such a frame, as they do not share the other's view on history. So now "political correctness," the battle cry of minorities and those who identify with perceived minorities, plays an increasing role in many countries. The connection between culture and history, like the conception of art history as an emblem of one's own culture, becomes obvious as soon as we focus on consensus and dissent. There was a time when dissent was the trademark of avant-garde artists who attacked culture as the trademark of the educated bourgeoisie. The creed of modernism was formed in such attacks. Today, dissent is rather to be found among art's audience, who demand that artists represent the claims of minorities and that the historians rewrite history to suit. The more individual groups in a given society no longer recognize the cultural heritage as their own, the less they are willing to accept its official image.

What we refer to as the history of art has long been a narrative about European art, in which, despite all claims of national identity, European hegemony was undisputed. But this pleasant image now provokes contradiction from all those who no longer find themselves represented by it. The protest arose first from the United States, which now dominates the art scene. It has been a long time since the Museum of Modern Art divided its exhibition rooms equally between European art before 1945 and postwar American art. It is even longer since Alfred H. Barr Jr. wrote in the 1930s his legendary exhibition catalogs, in which diagrams represented the history of modern art from 1890 to 1935 in a didactic and almost missionary way (fig. 16). European art there still monopolized this history and was presented chronologically according to a structure normally used to describe genealogies and scientific evolution.

These days, not only is American art before 1945 being rewritten: minority art and especially women's art have come very much to the fore as a new issue. The "neglected" part of history gave reason for the



16. Diagram showing the development of European modernism. From Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art in the Museum of Modern Art*, exhibition catalog (New York, 1936), i.

suspicion that official historiography had simply been "invented"; the demand arose for the latter's "revision." In Europe, where a multicultural society is not yet fully developed, it is as yet feminism that claims attention for women's part in the narrative of art history, in order to retrieve a forgotten identity and to finally give women's art the appropriate weight. In the United States, regional interests are requesting a revision of art history: the American West or Northwest are themes of regional exhibitions, and local artists share the invention of regional traditions. Usually, the dispute over the "true" history of art rages on in such exhibitions where visitors are expected to "discover" things that they cannot find in written history. Exhibitions of this kind are either organized by individual groups or meant for such groups.

Even so-called global art, in which every part of the world is to be represented, has meanwhile staked claims that, justified as they may be, will contribute to a disintegration of art history in the familiar way. A world culture, as represented, for instance, by UNESCO, demands a unifying frame in which also art has a place. But art history as it was developed for the European model is not a neutral and general tale that could easily be applied to other cultures that lack such a narrative. On the contrary: it developed within a particular tradition of thought in which it met the task to remember culture as a locus of identity. Intrinsic to this was the historical cycle that, in Europe, ranged from the ancient world to modernity and that formed the cultural space in which art continually fell back on its own models. Seen in this light, Europe was the place where a historical cycle of a special kind has occurred that, in turn, shaped those referent narratives by which history is narrated. This does not mean that I cherish a Hegelian view of history, as it excluded the rest of the world from history in the "proper"—that is, in Hegel's own—sense. I only insist that art history, as a given discourse, needs structural changes when extended to other cultures and cannot simply be exported such as it is to other parts of the world.

Boris Groys, in his discourse of a "cultural archive," which he distinguishes from the "profane sphere," claims that innovations originate outside or against this archive, yet gain significance only when they become part of this archive and thus provide the "cultural memory" that society guarantees. Cultural criticism, he maintains, comes from the groups that have failed to find "cultural representation in the established archives." The image of art history to which I refer is precisely this "cultural archive," in which the events that have taken place in art, arranged

according to their importance, form elements of that very construct we used to call *the* history of art.

But the framework within which culture becomes a meaningful memory is not as firm and immutable as this schema suggests. The archive cannot absorb everything without fundamental change to its own content and significance. The more and the faster it incorporates what is new, the less it can guarantee the hierarchy it represented. Protection against the new only meant that the archive was admitting the new only after it had become compatible with the existing hierarchy in the archive. The mechanism of constant extension does not by itself guarantee the continuity of cultural memory. Likewise, expanding the archive in the direction of other cultures cannot fail to change the former. We are already witnessing similar developments in the political world: the old states are dissolving into ethnic cultures with which individual groups or regions wish to identify.

Here we are broaching questions that belong in a wider context. In a planetary civilization, the Western project of the technological modernization of the world has become a threat to cultural diversity. It all too easily creates the misunderstanding that Western modernism also contains all the blessings of a global culture, just as missionaries in earlier centuries sought to spread Christianity all over the earth. "Only the West elaborates the rhetoric of universalism," which recognizes "no difference between near and far" because it is "unconditional and abstract," writes Hans Magnus Enzensberger in an essay on universal human rights, "Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg" (Prospects of Civil War). From a Western viewpoint, every historical conflict amounted to a "crisis in the ongoing process of assimilation. Global modernization is seen as an inexorable, linear process." We may add that so-called world art offers a folkloristic compensation, which is not expected to seriously compete with the Western model and which presents "third world" culture only under the conditions of an exotic "reserve."

For this reason, Constantin von Barloewen pointed to the mistake that living in the project of a global modernization respects nations but not cultures. This mistake is aggravated by the fact that modernization is always seen as synonymous with the import of Western media, which not only inform about the Western world but produce the mirage of proximity to and of the accessibility of the West, including its culture. Basically, this is a new colonialism which, in terms of the art scene, only allows the choice to "take it or leave it," while "ethnic allowances," once they maintain certain limits, are tolerated as a welcome alibi.

The global triumph of mass media transforms every cultural event into a media event, as if it had occurred in the media or had been created for the media. Individual cultures deliver the occasions for a memory globally available as soon as it is stored in the digital archives of a computer's memory and distributed by the mass media. Global culture celebrates its own omnipotence because it replaces personal memory with an omnipresent technical memory. Global culture is thus actually a phantom of the media, which promise the same share of culture to everyone, regardless of origin and social status. Similarly, world art, being free from language barriers, is hailed as the symbol of a new world unity, though it only delivers ingredients of a new media culture that is, again, controlled by the West. The concept of world art would need to be grounded in a history of world art that does not and cannot exist as a common model of memory. The so-called Imaginary Museum that André Malraux propagated after 1945 when accumulating world art—in texts and photographs on the printed pages of a book—was a European idea with a European meaning.

Literary and academic culture, in which the narratives of art history have always had their place, are now being replaced by media culture, which has very different criteria. In its own way, world tourism facilitated the error that the traveler understands whatever he can visit. The presence of the world as it is represented via its presence in the mass media creates the error that world art is available as well. World art has been physically collected in the West for a long time and thus seemed to have become the possession of Western culture—while the native cultures seemed to lack any appropriate discourse. Outside the Western world, interest in one's own culture has a different purpose, as natives have the impression that they were robbed by Western civilization, when they involuntarily handed over their own artistic heritage.

Global art, which belongs to everyone and to no one, does not create identities of the kind that arises within a culture with common traditions but still suffers from confusion with exotic or primitive art. The so-called primitives had been in demand in early modernism when people were tired of their own cultures and when their own art history seemed exhausted. But even this escape from art history inevitably became an event in the same art history. Primitivism is an inseparable component of Western art history, as the great exhibition organized by William Rubin in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 underlined in a secretly tendentious way. But what is true of primitivism was by no means true of the "primitives" themselves, whom we expected to find outside the boundaries of any art history. They offered the welcome

counterimage of our own culture, to use the title of Karla Bilang's book *Bild und Gegenbild* (Image and Counter-Image), whose subtitle speaks of "Das Ursprüngliche in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts" (The Quest for Origins in Twentieth-Century Art).

The ethnographic clichés long blocked our view, as Clifford Geertz repeatedly stated also for anthropological studies. The counterimage we expected lived from the doctrine that tribal cultures, to take just one example, had never made the experience of history. The kind of history we found there was so unlike our own concept of history that it was mistaken for a mythic form of life in which time had stood still. It is, however, evident that history does not live solely from the patterns of a linear history or from the dynamics of change that steer the course of technological modernization; it also is manifest in the use of social models and cultural traditions. So it was the lack of chronology (one of the most striking characteristics of the "primitive" idols) that discredited any attempt to write "primitive" art. But since archaeological research has begun, even the "dark continent" has asserted its own right to an *Art History in Africa*, as the Belgian anthropologist Jan Vansina chose for the title of his 1984 book. Once this progress will be recognized by Western humanities departments, we will be well on our way to an art history with a different meaning and a different practice.

In global art, of course, we deal not only with "primitive" cultures but also with early "high cultures" in which art history, if it has any tradition at all, does not have the same tradition as we would accept. The example of China reveals the otherness of a non-European tradition of art history. And finally, long before any of the known historical cultures, including our own, there existed the prehistoric culture of the *Frühzeit des Menschen* (early mankind), to quote the title of a book by Denis Vialou. For obvious reasons, the latter culture resisted any attempt (including Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*) to integrate it within a history of art. The question of art and the aesthetic phenomenon implicit in today's term was always out of place there. Our art discourse was not invented for and did not apply to any prehistoric material. So-called art history is thus a discourse with a limited use and for a limited idea of art.

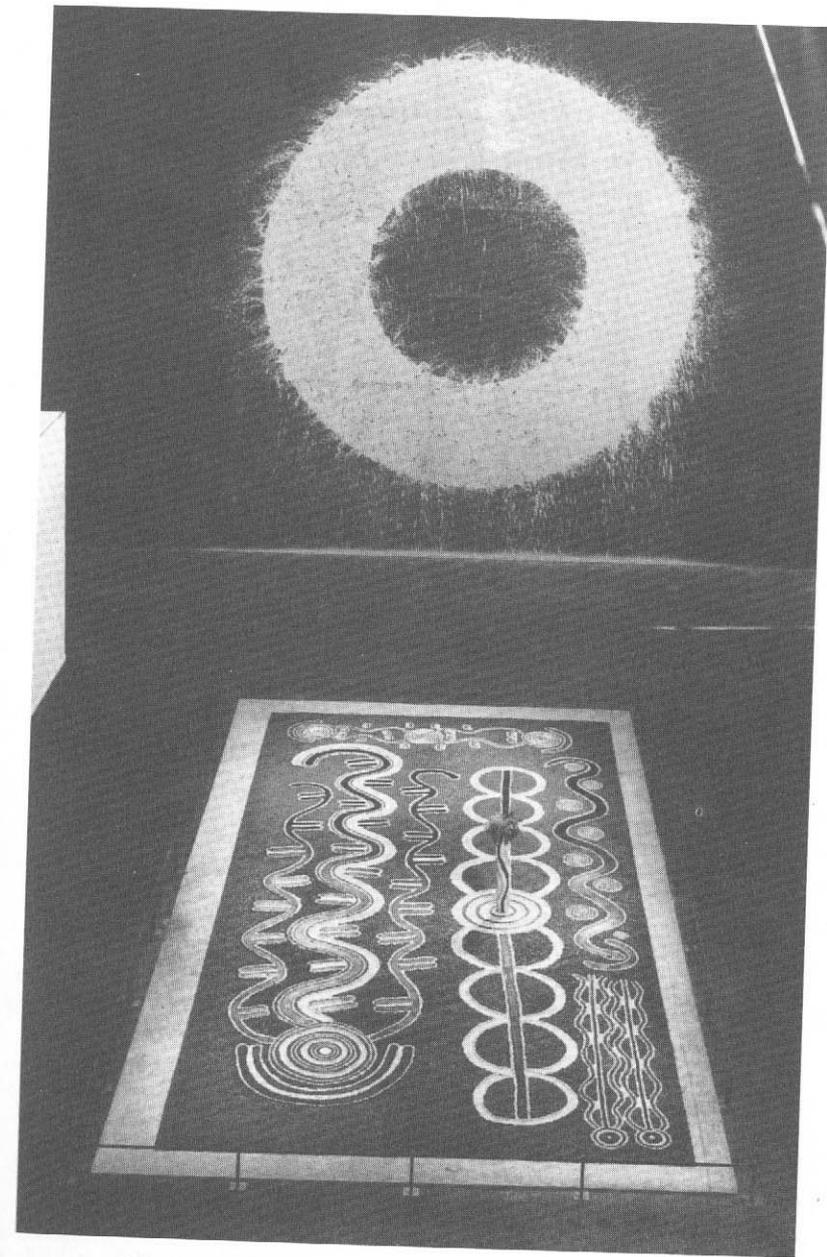
There is the question whether tribal culture—yes, I dare to say it—has *no art*, even while its images display the highest artistic skill. They served other purposes like religion or social ritual, which may be more significant than creating art as we understand it. This topic became an embarrassing one for any attempt to exhibit world art and to avoid the art topic at such occasions. Thus, the major exhibition staged in 1989 in

Paris revealed Jean-Hubert Martin's desperate effort to reopen the contemporaneous phenomenon of world art. The title *Magiciens de la terre* avoided the word art, whose idea nevertheless was the ultimate reason for exhibiting these "magicians of the earth" in an art museum where artists and artisans shared the contemporaneity of their visitors. It is not my intention to discredit this early attempt to deal with the new coexistence of Western and non-Western artists who do not share a common concept of art. Rather, such attempts reveal the conflicts that emerge on either side of the barrier enclosing the territories held by traditional art history and the latter's way of thinking.

The critics have then asked the uncomfortable question as to what the work of the minimalist Richard Long, titled *Mud Circle*, had in common with a ritualistic item of the Yuendumu, a group of Australian aborigines, which was its neighbor in the exhibition (fig. 17). The pair of exhibits offered formal analogies, which readily lend themselves to the contemplation of pure abstraction. But in the end, Richard Long could not be dismissed from his place in Western art history any more than the aborigines could be incorporated within it. This contradiction was, however, further obscured by the practice of labeling every exhibit with the artist's name and with a date of the work, as if these data—as normal and necessary as they are in the Western art scene—were even remotely relevant to many of the products of non-Western world art. In the case of the aborigines, not only the alleged analogy but also the open contrast lured the visitors into a trap, because the aborigines meanwhile produce for the Western art market, which places a high value on "indigenous art," so easily distinguished from its own products.

World art increasingly engages in the transcultural argument when non-Western artists express themselves in Western media and technologies in which they continue their native traditions, while at the same time carrying on a critical dialogue with Western culture. This may result in unusual works and conceptions, but Western culture cannot claim credit for them, nor will they play a role within it until Western art is capable of a creative response. For the time being, the cliché of "otherness" is more a hindrance to perceiving the other. Eleonor Heartney, commenting on the Paris exhibition in the July 1989 issue of *Art in America*, notes that, thanks to its present trendiness, the theme of the "other," as it was solemnly presented in this context, is in the process of being received "into the pantheon of the ruling myths of twentieth-century art."

A special case in today's world art is the alliance of non-Western art with Western media culture. This has created a meeting place for

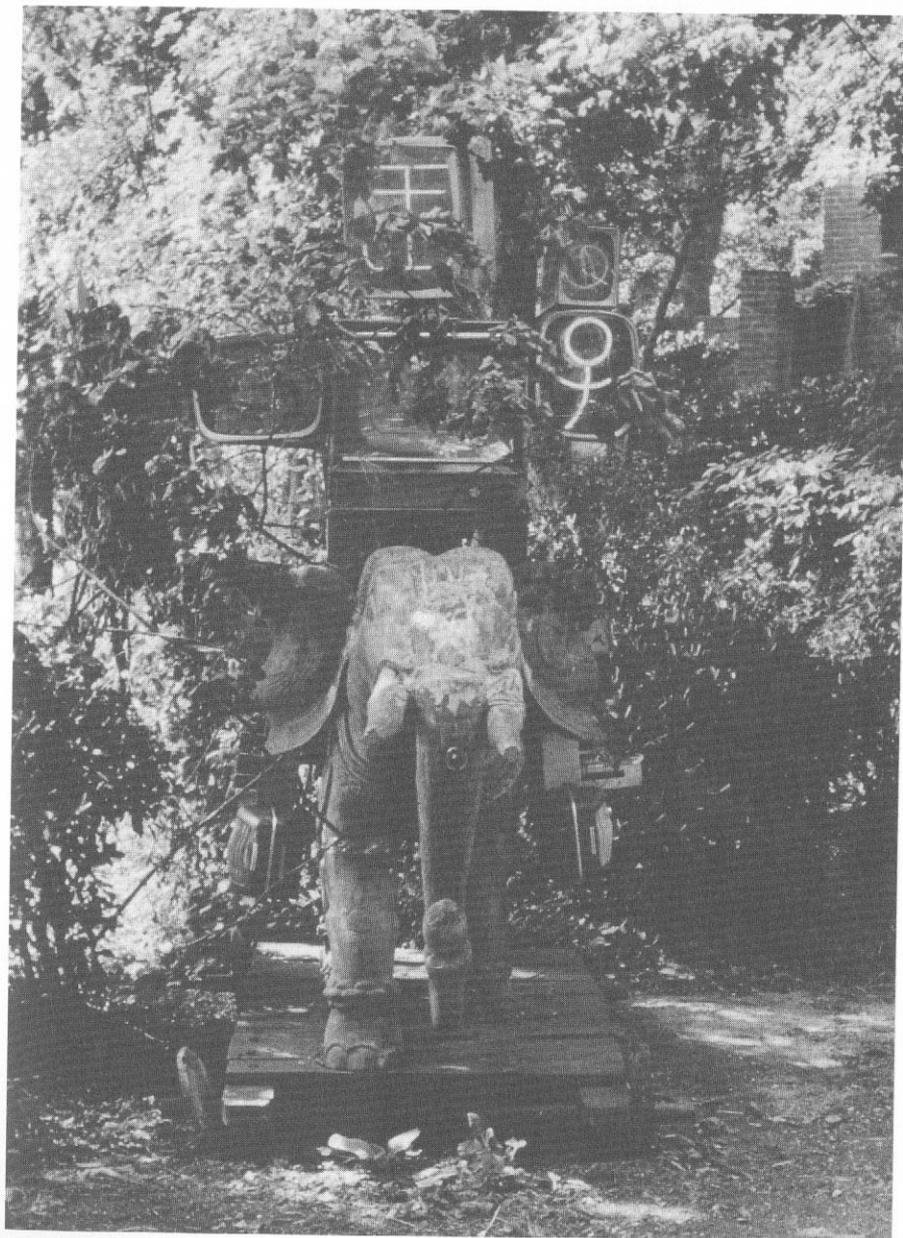


17. Exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, Paris 1989, showing *Mud Circle* by Richard Long alongside a composition by a member of the Yuendumu tribe, Australia.

artists from different cultures, who use the ubiquitous technology of networking to produce works without reference to place or time and to participate in joint artistic events everywhere and at any time. Their protagonist is the Korean-born Nam June Paik, who long ago has entered Western art history as the “father of video art,” where he is being remembered jointly with John Cage and Joseph Beuys. In a very personal way, Paik has introduced his own culture into the Western art scene, whose concept of an artist he adopted in paradoxical ways. Thus he does not qualify for any evidence of global art but has become a famous outsider of Western art, within which he was more celebrated than understood. The former key figure in the Fluxus scene, who likes to hide his own silence in a noisy Western potpourri of images, has repeatedly played with ideas of non-Western origin that seem familiar because of their Western manner of expression. Paik has been subtly addressing the theme of his own cultural migration, for example, in the summer of 1993, at the Venice Biennial, where he staged the voyage of Marco Polo in the garden of the German Pavilion (fig. 18), or in the fall of the same year, when he launched the companion exhibition entitled *Eurasian Way* (fig. 19) in the Watari-Um Gallery in Tokyo almost like a reversal of the Venice show, at least in the direction of East-West.

The revisions in conceiving culture, now on the agenda in many societies, are more contradictory than it appears at first glance. Western culture, which once felt up to the task of representing all ethnic cultures via exploration and exploitation as collection, is now proclaiming the future of a world culture in which it again claims the leading position. Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, are retreating in a kind of countermovement into their own histories in order to rescue a part of their identity. To Western eyes, such moves make them look nationalistic—a telling misconception. But while Western culture fosters its global ideas, its own cultural unity is disintegrating: that very unity that was supported by the educated class of bourgeois culture has long ceased to survive as a common ideal or canon.

Art history for a long time offered a favorite image of Western culture and its past victories. The objections to this image, which, as we have seen, began with the feminists, were raised much earlier by the artists themselves, as will be seen below. Minorities are now filling the void left by the “canon” with the “invention” of their own brand of art history, in which artists can meet an audience whose sympathies match their own. Where no minority can articulate itself, topical issues produce consensus and justify the production of art, whose topics are more important than its artistic creeds.



18. Nam June Paik, *Electronic Super-Highway*, Venice Biennial, 1993.

Today's world is a diaspora, as we read in the moving *First Diasporist Manifesto* written in 1989 by the Jewish artist Ronald B. Kitaj, who was born of immigrant parents in America and today lives mostly in England. A diaspora means extraterritorial living and the fruitless search for one's identity. As we know, among the Jews of ancient times, the ban on producing visual images was relaxed in the diaspora, so that Jewish art could be produced only in exile. Soon all Jews lived in the diaspora, at least until the state of Israel was founded, and they found in their art a medium of identity that was always connected with their religion. Today, the diaspora is no longer a Jewish fate, as Kitaj assures us, but applies to all who do not "feel at home in the world" and who therefore seek to join a group with common convictions. "Diaspora art," the term that Kitaj plays with in melancholy irony, is the opposite of so-called world art, and it usurps or replaces the old perception of identity that was for so long linked to the history of art in the West.



11 The Narrative of Art in the New Museum: The Search for a Profile

The site of the debate about art history will remain the museum of contemporary art, where any exhibition of new art also offers an occasion for discussing our idea of art history. But it has become questionable whether it is still possible to exhibit art history in the mirror of contemporary art. The current concepts of art raise the question whether they still agree on a common idea of art history. Simply to present works was not enough to bear witness to the course of art history and the state of art. We are still bound to an ever less comprehensible meaning of art that we still can identify within the context of its prior history, however that history may be understood.

As an institution, the museum, where artists and experts meet, has itself become a bone of contention. Pressure from the public, which expects to see in a museum everything that books no longer explain, has long since turned the question of content into an issue not only for the experts. Every debate on the subject of the museum also raises the question of what remains of the idea of art history. Where this idea has become uncertain, the exhibition space is being turned over to the most contradictory factions in order to rely on their credibility. Where any consensus is lacking, every type of art can demand access to the museum. Where no museum can meet the old expectations any longer, each museum allows exhibitions to let these incompatible demands have their say in a sequence of every imaginable conception.

The institution today thrives on the debates around its exhibition rooms. It thus continues to reenact the old play under every possible condition. When the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened the exhibition *High and Low* in 1990, it seemed to renounce the ideal of the exalted temple of high modernism and thus caused protests against the "desecration of the temple," where the vulgar design of advertising seemed to have moved in. As Arthur C. Danto explained on this occasion, the bourgeois concept of the museum as the *temple*, rather than the *school*, of art, was still retained even if modernism, of all things, became consecrated in this case. As late as 1958, Ad Reinhardt was still pleading vehemently for the museum as "shrine" rather than as a place of entertainment. Three years later, Claes Oldenburg turned the

tables by exchanging the shrine for the shop when writing his "Store Manifesto."

The museum of today has not, for all that, become a department store, but it readily employs the techniques of advertising to stage a long-controversial art in the best possible light. An institution that increasingly resembles the theater by its changing repertoire favors the sensational *mise-en-scène*. It also tends to resemble a free trade zone, where the prize is recognition in the art scene. It is often questionable whether new art is begging for a stage in the museum or if the museum is hunting for new art. Without the museum, today's art would be not only homeless but also voiceless and even invisible. In turn, the museum, as barely prepared as it is for contemporary art, would give up itself if it closed its doors to new art. This enforced alliance effectively wipes out any alternative to the museum.

In the 1970s, it was still possible to speak of a "crisis of the museum" in the same way as one spoke of a "crisis of art." In the meantime, however, the former identity crisis has made way for the new museum boom, in which ambitious curators and the public so willingly accommodate, that questions of principle no longer matter. The new openness of the museum, so urgently called for, looks different than expected. Instead of serving a broader public with a more liberal selection of art, the museum finds itself in the hands of that public. The one time oasis for aesthetic experience has now become the stage for the public's self-experience, now that the latter has lost any other occasion for such desires.

In 1980, Douglas Crimp saw himself in a gleefully destructive vision sitting "On the Museum's Ruins," by which he understood the ruins of the powerful fiction to present art as a coherent system and art history as its ideal order. His criticism addressed the "moral and aesthetic autonomy" of modern art, which Crimp could not reconcile with his Marxist concept of representation and therefore wanted to force art into the political representation of society. He would have rather preferred an archaeology of the museum as the old refuge of a hermetically sealed art and therefore attacked the "neo-conservative use of the museum as a setting for the fine arts." On another occasion he called for resistance against a false postmodernism that rediscovers art's old genealogies and "returns to an unbroken continuum of museum art."

Since then, the so-called museum art has lost its "exclusivity" as criticized by Crimp, even if there are still enough attempts to keep the temple pure. As a result, the old controversies give way to the con-

sumerism of a new era. Museum art no longer continues as a privileged and alternative species after the museum no longer resists the access of every possible art. Today, museum art can be anything, because anything can stand or hang in a museum. The museums are submissive even to the least suitable private collections, whose use is dictated by the sponsor.

At the same time, the new trend to topicality, as Siegfried Gohr remarks, seems to liken the museum to the annual "salon" of the nineteenth century. The close relation existing today between the museum and the art market reveals pressures from our society. Ever since our culture subscribed willingly to historicity as well as to the principle of marketing, it has ceased to classify the museum's difference from the market. The museum consecrates commodities that are simultaneously traded at the art fair. Institutions and events help in where art as such no longer appears to be convincing on its own terms. Enforced mediation is called for to support the former prestige of a weakened art. For a variety of reasons, society depends on a culture of privilege and is therefore determined to give art credit whether it deserves it or not.

Prices, as an index of prestige, often prevent a museum from purchasing a work that its own exhibition policy had promoted in the first place. Prices are subject to the laws of the market, of course, and thus make art resemble a mere commodity with which anybody may speculate. But the legendary prices paid for living artists must also be seen in another light. They are the visible symbols of an old myth of art and thus attract the aura that art itself is steadily losing. The prices cause an attention that art is frequently unable to trigger with its own means. In this sense, they offer themselves for a re-mythification of art, which as a result, thus seems to be protected from getting lost as a myth, the same way as we already lost religion.

Works in permanent collections, which no longer have a market value, are circulated within the museum's galleries so effectively that they constantly appear in an unexpected new light. The stage for contemporary exhibition techniques resembles that kind of theater that has prevailed in current museum architecture as a successful rival to the theater and the concert hall. The staging of art begins with the façade's inviting face and continues in the galleries, which are repeatedly redesigned for a new show. This type of staging is backed by the museum's education department, which has been addressing a new public for the last twenty years. It is no more geared toward opening up the temple

than is the museum's theatrical setting, but reacts to a crisis of an "art religion" that strengthens the subjugation to a secularization of art.

This boom in museum construction is justified by a desire for the aesthetic of representation, which is gradually disappearing from all other public occasions, thus detaching itself from serving the museum's needs. Museum architecture was called in Germany the last project allowing "the practice of the art of building," to quote from an essay on the contemporary museum. Even more than the opera and the concert hall, with their schedule and ticket policy, and despite the paradox that we continue to revere bourgeois culture but are no longer a bourgeois society, the museum represents the cultural state or the cultural metropolis that can no longer do so by other means.

Once we today enter the theater of art, we are facing a great choice of exhibitions that skillfully meet two completely different demands: the need for information and the desire for surprise. The need for information reveals the lack of insight into what is happening in art today, which no one is in a position to survey anymore. Exhibitions have now replaced many other kinds of communication about the state of art and the course of art history. They always were meant to attract attention when a new movement was launched. But today they promise to offer knowledge that can no longer be satisfied other than with assertions—and with works intended to substantiate such claims.

The usual rituals of art, whose reasons no longer are obvious, gain all the more weight the less the public feels informed. These rituals surprise the public with the pleasure of an exhibition that replaces the uncertain pleasure in the exhibits. The new style of exhibiting answers the public's desire for spectacle with a type of entertainment, which the media are less capable of providing. People used to visit a museum to see something that their grandparents had seen on the same spot; today, people visit museums to see what has never been seen there before.

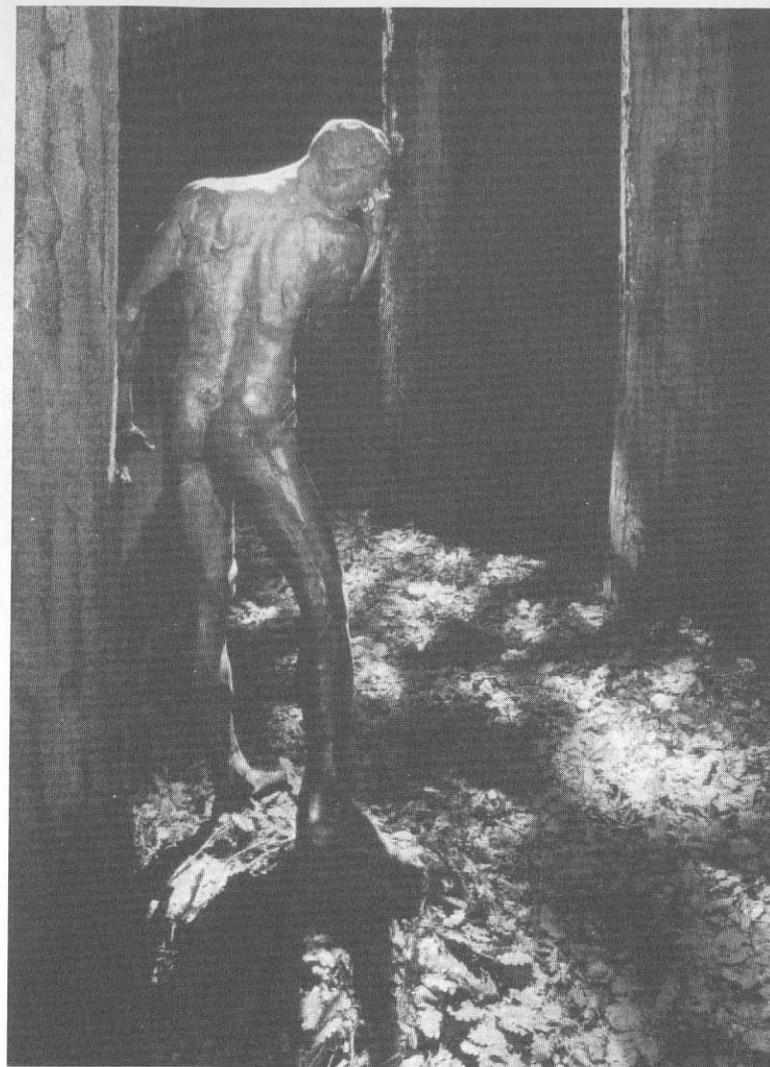
At the same time, museums invite their visitors in an audio-visual environment where they are shut off from the outside world and, in a dark, cell-like compartment, may experience the same intimacy as in front of the television at home. It is a kind of "screen environment" that we allow to capture our distracted gaze for a while. The museum, as a site for our imagination, has replaced the temple-like site of education it once embodied. Simultaneously, it aims at a disembodied space experience that is familiar from a television screen on which mere images pass in succession and cancel each other out. Thus, even when entering a museum we expect a telematic room quite foreign to the space of a museum.

The museum has become a railway station for the departing trains of the imagination instead of remaining the destination of a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of art. Installation art, too, creates alternative sites within the museum, denying the familiar museum setting by dislocating our visual imagination.

The museum was preferably the treasure house for a collection of unique pieces, unique in that they had only one place in the world. Here also, the power of the present was broken and exchanged for the time of history. Thus, the museum as showing items existing outside the visitors' lifetime and yet providing an experience of living space, inherited the situation in the temple or the church, where believers could physically experience the presence of a mythic time. The cult images in such religious sites were usually old yet present and visible as physical images, even as images to be seen only in a single place that you had to visit in person. The museum, as a symbol of a permanent place and of suspended time, thus is badly equipped for the ephemerality of today's exhibition practices. In a society that values data banks of information instead of a treasury of rare objects, a new *mise-en-scène* is required to despatialize and retemporalize the museum even within the museum and to exchange the "event" for the work.

The new energy in staging, however, finds its limits whenever premodern art, with its historical profile, is brought into place, in which case, prominent "visiting curators" for an episodic activity are given a freedom that the employees of the house themselves do not yet enjoy. In Rotterdam, Robert Wilson, the third in a row, succeeded in literally converting the museum galleries into stages on which the "performed" works from the permanent collections were hardly any longer recognizable (fig. 26). For a short time, the museum became a theater in the spirit of the baroque, which recycled art history as embodied in the old works, in a glittering "performance." The three art genres of "Portrait, Still Life, Landscape" (to quote the title of his exhibition) provided the repertoire for a *mise-en-scène*, which sometimes overdid the case when, for example, a Rodin bronze was displayed in an artificially illuminated autumnal forest as an example of "still life." It was a telling gesture to hand a museum over to actual scenography that transformed the museum into a stage with historical props.

In 1993, when Robert Wilson was playing theater in a museum, Peter Greenaway in another museum created a film situation without actually using film. The setting this time was the bizarre art collection of the former set-designer Mario Fortuny in Venice, a place where the film



26. Robert Wilson, installation using a figure by Auguste Rodin, Rotterdam, 1993, room 3. Photograph from *Robert Wilson: Portrait, Still Life, Landscape*, exhibition catalog (Rotterdam, 1993).

director, on the occasion of the Venice Biennale, presented statues, masks, porcelain, and old fabric like props for an imaginary spectacle together with Fortuny's own paintings (fig. 27). Simultaneously, Greenaway used the same space for an exhibition titled *Watching Water* in which he displayed props from his own films. In the old collection, on occasion created for a ritual of memory, he installed spotlights that, in a hidden mise-en-scène, illuminated various items from the collection and, at an alternate pace, made the pictures stand out or recede into the dark. The viewer seemed to participate in a film in which the other actors waited for him or her to share the space on the stage.

Peter Greenaway, as he wrote in *Film Bulletin* in June 1994, intended in the long run to "overcome the cinema situation" and to return the cinema public to their own bodies in real space that they had lost in front of the surrogate of the screen. His projects, including a touring exhibition titled *100 Objects to Represent the World*, reached a certain climax in the exhibition *Stairs*, which turned the whole city of Geneva into a stage in 1994. From a hundred locations reached by stairs, the viewers would become the center of a cinematic situation themselves by looking through a frame in the guise of a cinema screen and thus experiencing world, art, and film fused into one and the same view or vision.

The scenographic transformation of the art exhibition meanwhile is increasingly entrusted to art historians who have not the experience for such a mise-en-scène and exhibit old and new works together in false or fanciful genealogies that seem to have been released from the laws of art history in favor of a newborn argument. Such experiments are still limited to temporary exhibitions in which, on the other hand, they tend to become models in general. In 1993, for the *Sonsbeek Exhibition* in Arnhem, Valerie Smith produced a hybrid between a wax museum and a fairground, in which the promiscuity of old and new, art and curio, was downright dizzying. The old curio cabinet, the predecessor of the museum, was reborn when contemporary works ingratiated themselves with stuffed animals and kitsch figures of saints from museum store-rooms. In this atmosphere of dust and varnish, the memory of art history seemed to be left behind, since the show unleashed a chaotic stream of images and similes in which the contemporary exhibits appeared to have lost all their power to look like living art—as if they, too, already belonged in the repository of cultural memory.

The old forerunner of the museum, as Horst Bredekamp reminds us, makes a reappearance where art and the machine—whose separation gave birth to the art museum—are reunited in so-called media art. In the Kunsthalle in Vienna, which for a while occupied the Karlsplatz like



27. Peter Greenaway, *Watching Water*, installation in the Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, 1993. Photograph from *Peter Greenaway: Watching Water*, exhibition catalog (Milan, 1993), 23.

a forgotten container, an exhibition by Gary Hill demanded such complex technology that specialists spent weeks installing it. At the opening, however, the electronics were so well hidden—like the banks of machines behind a stage—that they allowed the illusion of a technology-free interplay of images that were technological. Such an exhibition is visible only as long as the electricity is switched on, since it is only the working monitors that illuminate the dark cubicles and fill them with moving video images. The real exhibition space fills with installation spaces that can be neither photographed nor described by texts, which is why exhibition catalogs no longer do justice to such works. The earlier presence of physical items, with their duration, here yields to the presence of a viewer, who enters the space and afterward brings his or her subjective impression home. The impression on the spot replaces the life of objects, and the exhibits are reduced to a sort of agency for the visitor. Art exhibited thus depends on the technology it contains, much as the transmission time of the videotape is regulated by computers.

As a post-technological tool of the imagination, the computer already has secret control over the old opposition between mind and machine. Its iconicity, which produces a digital (and *not* an analog) image on the screen, suspends the difference between the image and the sign in a hybrid between depiction and program. The computer, which challenges the received idea of creative art, moreover, as an archive of images, calls for a rethinking of the museum, because it behaves indifferently to museum pieces in their physical existence. Museum and computer technology thus in a way are rivals. The museum displays and symbolizes the experience of physical space (object space) as well as the experience of the time stored in the age of the objects. The computer, on the other hand, transforms images beyond place and time and into immaterial agents of information.

The museum's collection and the computer's database belong to different ages, although they coexist in the present. The collection principle in the art museum, moreover, lives from the condition of a selection that defined what we call art, while digital media aspire to the principle of completeness or totality of possible data. The selection, in turn, inaugurated the big gap within manmade pictures. Pictures inside the museum attained the status of art, while pictures that remained outside were forever distinguished as profane, banal, and artless. This very distinction, which justifies art history as a discipline, today loses its old and clear profile in the new media society.

Our concept of art is rooted in that of the Enlightenment age, which credited it with a timeless and universal significance transcending the

specificity of individual works or genres: art was declared timeless and universal, much as human rights themselves were meant to apply to all people, however different they might be in race and origin. But this idea of art was tenable only when phrased in a general art history. The view of art history was needed to frame the individual time of the works since art history had a universal validity, while the individual works did not. That is why the art museum was to become the spatial equivalent of the time scheme of art history. It offered a place for everything capable of representing the logic of art history, which, when the Louvre first opened, was only old art, while new art first had to earn the status of museum art—it had to wait for it.

The nervous debate over the recognition of today's art proves clearly the degree to which we still cling to an idea not older than two hundred years—regardless of the age (or the youth) of the works of art to which we apply this idea. This idea of art history as still ongoing links us to the great tradition of historical culture, since we fear nothing more than art becoming a notion of the past. The definition even of contemporary art ultimately needs the horizon of its history, as it is this history that helps to explain what is, in essence, inexplicable. But art enjoys a privilege that mere ideas can never obtain: it materializes in "a work of art" that can be acquired by a museum and exhibited there as "art," that is, in a work that always possesses a place and a name. Even if it is a fiction, as Marcel Duchamp suspected, it is still a necessary fiction for the purpose of exhibiting culture, though market values seem to dominate as a result of present practices in art commerce. Even if the market insists on the purchase price and the museum proclaims art as its property, it is still only the symbolic value that can engage our fascination for art.

To clarify this symbolic value that was so visibly staged in the art museum, it seems reasonable to review once more the museum as the traditional site for contemplating history, at least in the bourgeois age. If history counts for anything, it is shared history in which a society seeks identity. But what about history in the art museum, where it seems to be contradicted by the fact that the old works have paid with the loss of their social use to enter the collections and thus become art? History thus lay not only in the evidence of individual works but more in the evidence of an institution whose collection was thought to represent history. The nation had long since taken the place of religion much as the national art museum had taken the place of the earlier cathedral, many of whose treasures the museum itself appropriated. Strangely enough, history acquired a new authority behind the same museum doors at

which it appeared to cease, because the "immortal works" on display triumphed over time and celebrated the nation as living owner of these works. Once they attained their status in the museum, they were no longer subject to living time and instead became venerated in the name of a history as embodied in art.

The art museum was firmly integrated in the modern democracies where, in the name of the state, it visualized history, historical culture, and art that had become history. It appears to belong to all of us, and yet—or for that very reason—we have no right to take over the "temple of art," at whose entrance the state has placed its guards. Representation (art history) and the representing body (the nation-state) coincided in such a way as to be hardly distinguishable and therefore are subject to public protest, as was the case in 1994, when the National Gallery in Berlin, from its vast body of twentieth-century art, put on public display several paintings by such formerly established East German artists as Willi Sitte and Wolfgang Mattheuer. The public media accused the museum of having "smuggled" in pieces that insulted their feelings and violated the honor of the country. It is astonishing that emotions were still provoked by museum pictures when their exhibition on public walls seemed undeserved. The question of museum representation, as an official and public act, in fact concerned the institutions more than the individual artists.

Debates of this kind also occur in the former socialist countries, where there has been neither an unblemished museum tradition nor a democratic idea of the state. Since it had been the Party, in the name of the state, that had nationalized the churches' art treasures by transferring them to museums, the same churches are today requesting the return of these treasures, which would mean to dispossess public museums. Thus, Gothic altarpieces in Poland and old icons in Russia are being reclaimed from the national collections, because the churches see themselves as the true owners and as the genuine heirs of history. In Russia, the ownership of the ancient icon of the Virgin of Vladimir, which once carried the honorary title Patroness of the Country, has become the bone of contention between Church and state. President Boris Yeltsin in the end took the decision that the icon belonged to the state but could be used by the Church for acts of worship (fig. 28). This case is revealing, as it challenged not only the museums' ownership rights but also artistic value, as opposed to the more ancient ritual value. The opposite case is just as interesting. The monuments to Marx, Lenin, and other party leaders, who had always represented the official ideology and, therefore, the state, were sheltered—if they were not already destroyed—in

hastily organized open-air museums, as if museums were places over which history no longer had any power (fig. 29). This is how images formerly in the service of religion were treated two hundred years ago when the Louvre was opened, but people then recontextualized their booty by declaring them works of art that deserved another look.

In the West, it is the museum of contemporary art that stirs doubts about its purpose when it, on the one hand, tries to follow close on the heels of the old museum, which it, on the other hand, no longer resembles. In order to be taken seriously, it assumes the appearance of familiar institutions, including the dubious claim to be exhibiting art history, although the art historical genealogy of the respective works is more than uncertain. The question is not whether there should be museums of contemporary art, but whether their representation is still suitable. Museums recently have become art fairs with current offerings and changing views on the atomized art scene, yet they suffer from the false compulsion to canonize their acquisitions as the latest state of the arts, while, in fact, serving the art market, which takes profit from this canonization.

The institutional crisis of the museum mirrors a new crisis of the public consensus as to its forum. Looking back today over the history of the museum, we see the enthusiasm of a bourgeois elite, composed of art collectors and curators, to celebrate a common ideal of art and art ownership. The same elite wanted to be represented by a single idea of art and art history and therefore favored the museum as a site of collective identity and as a stage for performing a common history, the history of national art schools and the art of mankind. After our attitude toward history has changed, as has our perception of the public sphere, the role of the art museum no longer is the same. The common notion of culture is as much in doubt as is our consensus on how to represent the several groups in society that, at the most, still allows for tolerance. Finally, in the TV age the experience of the public space, which one more often experiences on the screen, has changed.

In the case of the museum, where individual collectors have always played a role, sponsors are increasingly requesting their own representation at the expense of the public realm, at least in Germany. The Museum Ludwig in Cologne, which was founded in the 1960s, is a case in point. The call for recognition raised by individual collectors reflected the experience that today's museum has become a stage for public activities, as a result of which it qualifies as a forum in its own way. It therefore falls easily victim to the competition of rivaling groups in society who no longer accept to be represented by a single ideal of art and



28. President Boris Yeltsin and Patriarch Alexei II in the Convent of Saint Sergei of the Trinity, near Moscow, in front of a replica of Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity, 1992. Photo by Deutsche Presseagentur.



29. Dismantling the Lenin memorial in Stendal, East Germany, September, 1991. Photo by Deutsche Presseagentur.

history. The museum in addition is expected to guarantee the type of cultural representation for which we no longer have valid symbols. We want to experience the present tense, much as other generations wanted to view a coherent art history, and thus tend to be easily disappointed when the museum fails to succeed in what needs to be represented in cultural terms.

The desire for information, at the same time, is a temptation to politicize the museum. The museum has always been a political issue, however neutral and apolitical it acted. Today's form of politicization, however, comes from interest groups operating in international circles and masked by the harmless-sounding catch phrase of "cultural exchange." They wage a silent battle for the mutual recognition of "views of history" when represented by "commissars" who decide what profile should be given to an international exhibition. Instances of disputed cultural policy are the exhibitions in which the tortured and tortuous art history of Central and Eastern Europe is presented as a glowing "Century of the Avant-Garde," in which the single nations have a differing share.

In the future, other symbols may emerge with the label "art," symbols with less emphasis on historical culture as was customary for art up to now. Official culture was for so long obeying a dominant discourse and at the same time serving economic interests that it ceases to keep the authority of an obliging ideal. A widespread claim for creativity questions the artist's monopoly on self-expression, while the artists in turn are increasingly engaged in setting up and running "artists' museums" in which they can escape the art market, as is the case in Lodz. Regional and societal interests of small groups demand the access to symbols that are no longer measured against a recognized style (and market) of art. In art literature, too, there are new narratives that refuse to bend to a single overriding history of art. The explosive diversity of our world mirrors in the diversity of views and concepts—which, however, are controlled by a monopolized media culture. This explains the increasing tendency toward an unofficial culture in which the art concept is as uncertain (or insignificant) as the belief in the system of a single art history.

In New York, the Museum of Modern Art served "modernists" like a church in which the believers gathered to declare their creed. Its opponents, including Douglas Crimp, reacted vehemently against its claim "to tell the story of modern art," as he objected in 1984 on behalf of all unbelievers. The museum's belief in the "essence" of autonomous art, as

Clement Greenberg formulated it, suddenly seemed like a barefaced lie that no longer represented the reality of art production and its contradictions; in other words, the museum lived on the faith of its adherents. Arthur C. Danto, who had shared this faith, now felt compelled to conclude that the "history of art" of modernism "has come to an end," since it had fulfilled its aim. The "end of modernism" in Greenberg's sense was, strictly speaking, "the end of a theory that explains *why art is high when it is high*. What has come to an end is a specific concept of art history."

It may seem like chasing ephemera if we try today to capture the image of art history that I am discussing here. Why do we need a certain concept for it, if all artists, past and present, prove to be unarguably real—as real as history—and if their works exist as palpably as solid objects? One can only reply that fictions have also made history and that they, too, have been reified. Art is a historical fiction, as Marcel Duchamp proved long ago, and art history is fiction as well—as André Malraux discovered, against his will, when he wrote about a "museum without walls." It is thus a question of institutions, not of content and certainly not of method, when we ask whether and how art and art history will survive in the future. Even the cathedrals survived the foundation of the museums. Why shouldn't today's museums experience the foundation of other institutions where art history no longer belongs or where it looks entirely different?

12 Art and the Crisis of Modernism

Arthur C. Danto, in the preface to his Mellon lectures, marks a difference dividing contemporary from modern art. The difference, he explains, is the result of a deep crisis that modernism suffered in the 1960s. "The great master narratives . . . have not only come to an end . . . Contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all." The history of art, which always had framed what happened in art, was a master narrative of this kind and also applied to modernist art, as the latter followed the lines of evolution and progress. The crisis of modernism therefore also affects the practice of writing art history and the confidence in an unbroken continuity of art. It is not sufficient to reserve this practice for the past including modernism since art is continuing and therefore needs continuous description. It thus poses the question whether it still can be viewed in historical terms. After these terms became obsolete, they also appeared questionable in retrospect. The easy solution to invent an art history for contemporary art is no solution at all when any narrative is contradicted by what artists are doing and how they are thinking.

But what actually was the crisis of modernism and how does it relate to the topic of a book that does not deal with art in the first place? "Only when it became clear that anything could be a work of art could one think, philosophically, about art. What of art after the end of art where, by 'after the end of art,' I mean 'after the ascent to philosophical self-reflection'? When an art work . . . [raised] the question 'Why am I a work of art?' . . . The history of modernism was over." Though it is not my aim to discuss modernism at this point, its connection to art history as a narrative with a logic of its own is obvious. Can we apply this narrative with the same confidence when we have to argue against living art and when the concept of history has been doubted in favor of the notion of posthistory? Danto's philosophical discussion remains his own answer and thus cannot be applied to my topic as such. Yet he had an acute eye for what happened when "modernism was over" and thus touched on the very roots of art historical practice.

"Artists, liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art in whatever way they wished . . . In contrast with modernism, there is no such thing as a contemporary *style*." Whatever his conclusions are,

he is describing not a mere episode in the history of art. The new self-doubt inherent in the production of such works as had always illustrated continuity and change also weakens the confidence in a historical sequence when its main witness, the work of art, collapsed as a norm. But how can artists liberate themselves "from the burden of history" when history is still a concern in their polemics? Danto reminds us that artists had located themselves within history and regarded their true mission to "make history" even in the avant-garde type of the game.

The conscience of history, after the end of modernism, was not over, but it suffered a deep change once that history was no longer obliging. There were enough artists who no longer cared for "pressing the limits of art or extending the history of art." They "had the whole inheritance of art history to work with, including the history of the avant-garde." But they did so now in the mood of retrospection. When believing that the old art history "was over," they also could dispense with the need to "overcome it." We will inspect examples of this postmodernist attitude below. They are guided by the experience of a gap separating artists from their modernist forerunners. But this new attitude does not only reflect a loss. It also reveals a freedom that formerly had not been permissible. It will be useful to discuss this new type of conscience (or non-conscience) of history in the context of my topic before discussing further the practice of the art discourse in our time.

In my book on the end of the history of art (1987), I discussed the performance of the French artist Hervé Fischer who, in 1979, solemnly had announced "that the history of art has ended" when appearing in the Centre Pompidou. The "linear extension" of that history would be a mere illusion after the "posthistorical emergence" of what he called "meta-art" had happened. In his book *L'histoire de l'art est terminée*, he comments that artists no longer were expected to devise an "as yet unwritten future of art" after they lost the confidence in the New for its own sake. "It is not art which died. It is its history as progress to the New that has ended." Fischer not only questioned an internal logic of arts evolution but also doubted the validity of history from the position of "posthistoire." Fischer's own escape from this dilemma was his belief in the social act since he regarded society as the only reality left also in art.

Others had searched for a different escape and had done so much earlier. The history of conceptual art appears in a different light when the latter is not understood as a single artistic current or episode but as the symptom of a crisis that no longer allowed art to materialize in the coinage of formal works (or concrete exhibits) and no longer would confirm the institutional logic of the art market and the museum. The

farewell to the reality of the work as the witness in a historical sequence also meant to part from art's ritual to be embodied (others would say, reified) in objects with a symbolical aura. The loss of the faith in the production of works also implied the loss of safe examples for discussing the history of art.

The discussion can be summarized with the views of the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, whose essays were the secret counterpart of Danto's writings. Kosuth's essay "Art after Philosophy" (1969) opened a debate to which Danto contributed a complementary argument by speaking of "[t]he transfiguration of the common place," as his book written in 1981 was called. However their arguments differed, the two authors seemed to share the notion that art had become a mere concept and thus needed a new discourse. But what about the history of art when art was tantamount to a concept and thus to a definition difficult to narrate in historical terms? Kosuth's solution as an artist was to escape into language in order to do art. Art was to become a "critical practice" questioning the nature of art and thereby eliminating the old ritual of producing merely new art. The artist, Kosuth concluded, had to become an anthropologist who however had to turn to his own culture in order to analyze its institutions and to rediscover the new meaning of art. In the respective text, written in 1975, he criticized the implicit teleology of autonomous art embedded in its own history or, even worse, the timeless objectivity of formal art. In the same year, Kosuth took his farewell from exhibiting in the Leo Castelli Gallery with a written statement in which he calls history "manmade" and therefore subject to constant reevaluation. "Historiography is our own mythology and . . . art an extension of it." His own exhibits were an attempt to "overcome my historical baggage."

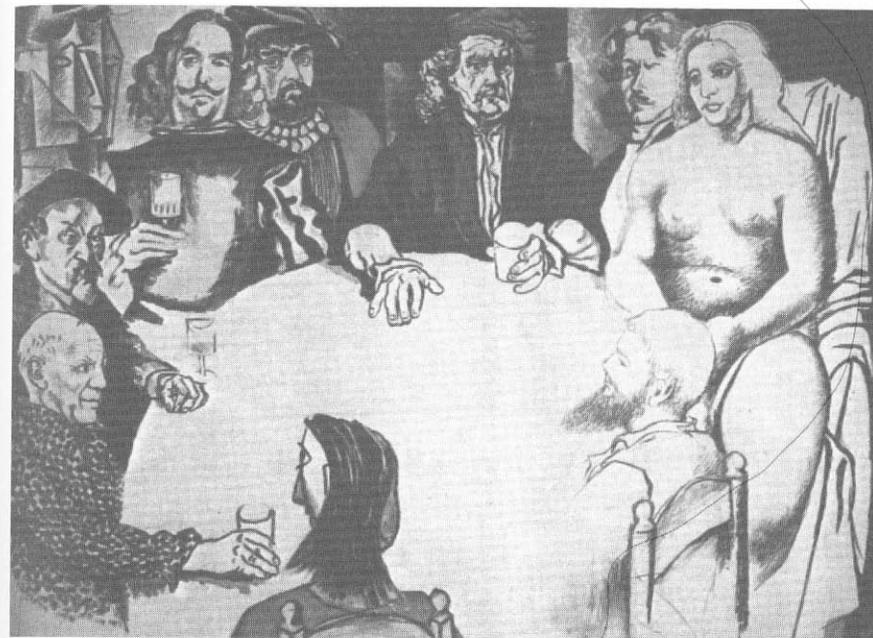
In an essay with the blunt title "1975" Kosuth recalls the late sixties, when "the Greenberg gang was attempting to initiate an Official History gestalt" that left little room for artists "that didn't happen to fit into the prescribed historical continuum." In the last battle of modernism as usually recorded, it was not only modernism but also modernism's claim of autonomous art, with an explicit history of its own, that the partisans defended. In the practice of art historiography in general, we may be reminded, autonomy had been the very precondition for distinguishing art history from social history or cultural history of a general type.

But the description of the art scene in the seventies is not yet complete. Artists who did not share Kosuth's beliefs nevertheless took a new stand in the face of past art history when they made it the topic of their work and thus offered a distorted mirror in which historical art (includ-

ing modernist art) suddenly looked like an ambiguous memory. There was also nostalgia implied, when one regretted the parting from lost ideals and staged the regret by quoting prototypes no longer obliging except for a memorial service. The rendezvous with the myth of art history, as something like a memory, first culminated in the year of Picasso's death, 1973, since Picasso, in retrospect, seemed to represent an innocent type of creation that was lost forever. What mattered was the feeling of distance that dominated artists mourning not only the death of a great master but also the death of that belief in the history of art that Picasso, despite his avant-gardism, had so beautifully represented.

Renato Guttuso, the Marxist realist from Palermo, for this occasion found a particularly original type of iconography when he painted Picasso in the company of the great masters of the past—from Dürer and Rembrandt to Courbet and Cézanne—at a roundtable in a series of memorial pictures that he first exhibited in the Frankfurt Kunstverein in 1975 (fig. 30). This was an assembly of the dead in which Picasso already had found his place and in which he represented an artist of equal stance and equal belief in a continuing or live history of art. It may be remembered that Picasso indeed had reenacted past masterpieces in his late series after Velázquez and others. In one of Guttuso's pictures, even art seems to participate at this symposium, since two of Picasso's models join the group at the table. The life of art, as embodied in great artists of the past, takes on an ambiguous effect, as Picasso appears to be the last in the sequence. The memory of Picasso, thus, seems to amount to a memory when art still lived in the frame of an unbroken art history.

In the same year, Richard Hamilton, who had inaugurated pop art in England, placed Picasso before a canvas by Diego Velázquez, the painter of painters as Manet had called him (figs. 31, 32). As in the case of Guttuso, this is not presented as a fully developed easel painting but is being introduced in the open form of a study or sketch and thus differs from the ultimate model to which the title refers, also in technique. The title, *Picasso's Meniñas*, sounds paradoxical as it was Velázquez who did *Las Meniñas*. But the title offers a memory (and memory may be synonymous with art history) of the series of fifty-nine reinventions of the *Meniñas* that Picasso did in the autumn of 1957. Even then they had been studies, though studies not for a work but studies after a work and thus paradoxical paraphrases whose working concept was already uncertain. André Malraux had discussed them in his book *La tête d'ob-sidienne*, which he also wrote a year after Picasso's death. Hamilton, in a strange repetition, had restaged the ritual of memory that Picasso had



30. Renato Guttuso, *The Artists' Symposium*, acrylic and mixed media on paper, 1973. Grafis Arte, Livorno (1975). © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.



31. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, oil on canvas, 1656. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

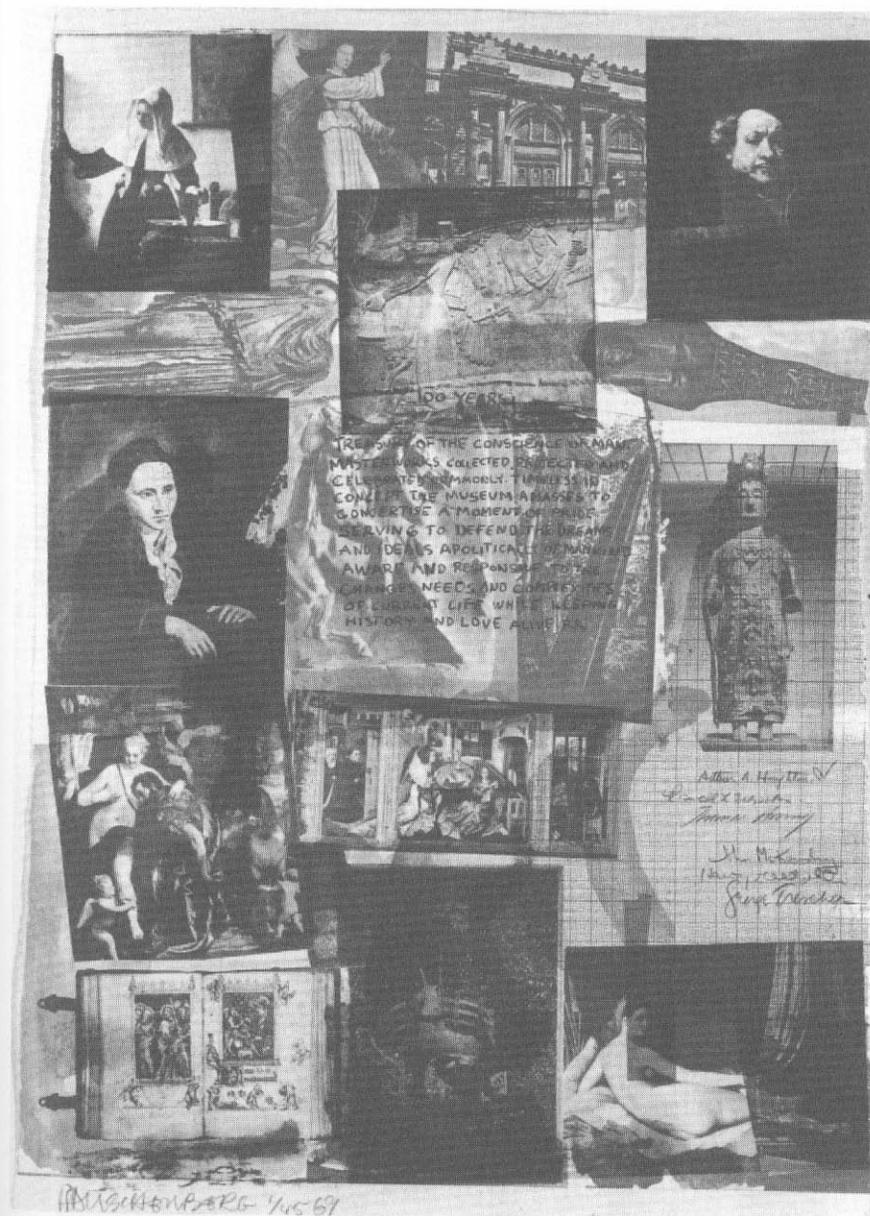


32. Richard Hamilton, *Picasso's Meninas*, study 3, pencil and ink-wash on paper, 1973. Collection of Rita Donagh, North End. © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

already had followed when doing “his own *Meninas*.” But the repetition was acted out in quite a different spirit, as if Hamilton was visiting a lost era in the history of art. In his gouache, Picasso occupies the same place that Velázquez had taken in his picture and thus simply replaces the position of the old artist while the other figures are all transformed into figures known from Picasso’s own work. The metamorphosis is ambivalent when we admit that Hamilton was mourning not only Picasso but also a closed tradition of living art history.

The same type of encounter with art history appears in a silk-screen print by Robert Rauschenberg in which the artist collages a random selection of museum pieces that all belong to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for whose centenary celebration, in 1969, the silk-screen print was edited (fig. 33). It would have been absolutely impossible for an old member of the avant-garde to deal with a museum of past art in that manner. But the impression that Rauschenberg “returns” to the past would be equally misleading since he only displays a new freedom in front of something that is already closed and does no longer threaten his own situation as an artist. The print, with its solemn dedication and the signatures of the museum officials, to be sure, was a commission, but Rauschenberg was not affected by the ambiguity of the situation. His print offers a nostalgic mirror of art history as contained in a museum that did not collect modern art at all, with the exception of Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein, which is the most recent element in this ensemble. Rauschenberg surely also captures the sterility of a museum space that seems to mirror the space of past art history.

The print thus appears in a striking contrast to earlier works by Rauschenberg, like *Crocus* and also *Persimmon* (see fig. 22 above), a silk-screen print with paint on canvas in which old works of art appear in the midst of scanned pictures from everyday life and thus mix with contemporary reality of the media and their reproductive nature. Photographic prints of two Venuses, one by Velázquez and the other by Rubens, gaze into a mirror, which may be interpreted as an allegory in different ways. The works themselves are a new mirror of consciousness reflecting a diffusely experienced world. The printing procedure, which in this case is a technique predating scanning, appears like a metaphor for the simultaneity of images in our memory, which may be called a collection of a different kind. “Objects also have history,” as Rauschenberg maintained, and to him they seemed more real than “ideas” but the things are here mere reproductions and thus assimilate to the reproductions of the art works on a similar level. Art history as exhibited in the



33. Robert Rauschenberg, *Centennial Certificate*, MMA, color lithograph, 1969. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Florence and Joseph Singer Collection. © Robert Rauschenberg / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



34. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 216*, photomontage, 1989. Courtesy Cindy Sherman and Metro Pictures.

museum and as written in academic practice or surviving in our memory in Rauschenberg's work finds a strangely appealing allegory.

Twenty years later, Cindy Sherman borrowed readymade images as they are collected in the memory of art history in her series *History Portraits*. In *Untitled 216* (1989), she chose the mask of a historical picture, which allowed her to replay a Madonna with child and yet to remain herself in the photograph (fig. 34). Mask and body, pose and actor fuse as she performs art history with her own body but with the help of a false breast and of borrowed costumes. The light for the shot repeats the original light in the painted model like a stage direction. The artist plays again the artist from a lost history of art, but in this case she takes the place of the model and thus quotes the role of being artist from her archetype. While staging art history, she creates an image in which photography blends with the medium of painting. The choice of a pose has always been her main concern. Already in her earlier work she was doing performance art, as Danto has described. This time, however, she performs art history in order to create art again. In so doing, she enters a stage that the former model of the old artist, as her double, has just left. The performance of art history leaves us with the disturbing impression of a *déjà vu* that would have been the breaking of a taboo in modernist art. Art history is strangely encapsulated in the *History Portraits* much as film history is deconstructed and replayed in the "film stills" of the seventies. In a way, the artist confronts us with a kind of readymade which only can be reused but not reinvented. While museums introduce us into art which they have not even sponsored, Cindy Sherman in a new type of "Art after Art" musealizes the art production and makes us feel that art history has become memory for whatever use.

13 Art Historiography as Tradition

The story that Hervé Fischer thought was over in the artists' circles had begun with the art history written by Giorgio Vasari, Florentine by choice, in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in 1550. In his introduction to part two of the book, he bravely remarks that he never wanted simply to produce a table of artists and works but intended to explain the course of things to the reader, since history was "the true mirror of human life" and as such also able to reveal human intentions and actions in the course of art. He therefore intended to present the artistic legacy by separating "the good from the better, and the better from the best." Above all, he intended to "discover the causes and the roots of each style and reveal the arts both in their ascent and in their decay."

Ever since Vasari wrote these enviably self-confident words, his successors have felt similarly obliged to present an outline of art history that would set the standard against which all individual works could be measured and that would provide a framework in which everything would find its proper place. But a history of this readability had to be first invented as a coherent scheme, while the works that it was to accommodate by contrast existed as a tangible reality. Initially, the enterprise took the form of straightforward narrative, which the author could carefully steer so that all went according to plan. But when later writers found it increasingly difficult to fit the growing material into Vasari's model, an official and universal narrative was demanded. In our case, the model had to answer a double question, since art history combined two concepts that did not share our meaning until the nineteenth century. Strictly defined, art was an idea embodied in works, while history was the meaning behind events. A clarification of the two terms was necessary before any attempt to describe art in the framework of its own history would make sense.

In 1764, when Johann Joachim Winckelmann published his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (History of classical art) in Dresden (fig. 35), he caused a sensation, as he was for the first time applying history in a strict sense to art. In his foreword, with the words of Cicero's *Orator* he stated that he was "using the term history in the broader



35. Title page, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Classical Art* (Dresden, 1764).

sense" that it "had in Greek." His aim was neither the "mere narration of events in chronological order" nor the usual kind of artist's biography. Rather, he intended to "attempt an edifice of knowledge" and to extract "the very nature of art . . . from the works themselves" instead of merely discussing the "external circumstances" that is, to qualify art solely in the context of general history. His predecessors, he maintained, had however not penetrated "into art's essence and innermost being" and thus told mere stories about artists.

Winckelmann found Cicero's comments opportune, since despite his own life in Rome, to which art lovers were streaming from all over Europe, it was not Roman art but Greek classical art, even without any Greek originals at hand, that he was searching for. With Greek art, he was thus focusing on a subject that was imaginary in both method and object. Ancient Greece, for the author, with its free society represented the ideal condition for art to enter history. But Winckelmann handled the subject with such method (he called it his "system") that art history has been modeled upon his approach ever since, and that art in its truest, most genuine form would be described as an object of its own history.

Art was not merely a general denotation but a concept in its own right—which in the end did not even need to be illustrated by works of art and could even testify against the available stock of works if they proved unsatisfactory. It was therefore paradoxically possible to speak of art's absence in history whenever existing or living art production contradicted it. As a conception, art was either absolute (in the eighteenth century) or retrospective (in the nineteenth). Still, the accepted narrative was the historical one which became the descriptive matrix for organizing the discourse. The entity of what was called art was deduced from the universal scheme called art history. Inversely, everything that entered this framework by necessity had to be a born work of art whether or not it carried the modern notion of art with it from its origin. The Viennese school of art history, which dominated the field since the late nineteenth century, conceived everything (from the late Roman period to modernism) as part of a single art history that confirmed the unity in world art conceived as Western art. This self-confident universalism was possibly nourished by the ambitions inherent in the imperial Austrian hegemony, whose eastern expansion, after all, had reached beyond Austria's own cultural borders.

Initially, however, art history as taught at the Academy in Louis XIV's France—for the purpose of being practiced by the young painters—covered an astonishingly small ground, being divided into a

"classical" section and one for "more recent art." This was still the case in 1793 and then again in 1803 when the Louvre was opened to the public. The ground floor was reserved for ancient sculpture, the upper floor for Italian Renaissance and French painting up to the seventeenth century, modestly flanked by the Flemish and Spanish "schools." For periods that had had no art in this limited sense, there was no need to involve the attention of art history. The so-called primitives, at the time a blanket term for any art earlier than the Renaissance, caused at this point still a certain embarrassment on the museums walls, as they could not be included in the "age of art." Of course, the "primitives" were seen in constantly shifting boundaries and finally, about 1900, were found in "prehistoric" art, which no one ever had wanted to incorporate in the materials of art history. Abbé Luigi Lanzi, who published his *History of Italian Painting* in 1792, justified his enterprise with the changed interests of the public, which was no longer satisfied with the usual travel literature or with the traditional artist's biography and its anecdotal narrative. He therefore intended "not to write the history of painters but the history of art itself," since "the philosophical spirit of the age demanded a system" for understanding how and why the arts, like literature and the history of nations, developed and declined. He aimed to educate the dilettanti or amateurs of the fine arts, whose "taste" for quality he wanted to promote, while the artists themselves already received their training in academies and museums. In essence, Lanzi was using Winckelmann's model for narrating the history of "more recent" art in Italy.

Soon after, things came to a head when Napoleon's art booty induced the Louvre to constitute a first panorama of European art, totally omitting medieval art which only much later became the concern of a kind of national archaeology. As late as 1814, Louvre catalogs would apologize for exhibiting the Italian "primitives" antedating the "splendid century of modern painting," as viewers might be put off by their "austerity." Other visitors, it was hoped, however, would seize the opportunity to study the exhibits "illustrating the course of art" that, in turn, would mirror "the development of the human spirit."

In Germany, too, at the time, art history gradually stirred the ambitions of the younger generation as an ambitious task of writing history. Johann David Passavant, who had begun as a Nazarene painter before taking over the newly founded municipal art museum at Frankfurt, in 1820 published his *Ansichten über die bildenden Künste und Darstellung des Ganges derselben in Toscana* (Views on the Visual Arts and a Description of the Same in Tuscany) in which he wanted to "present a

clear and general description of the course of the visual arts, from their ascent to their decline." But he restricted his materials to the example of Tuscany, "since the art of this region had developed in a superb way and, thanks to the excellent volume by Vasari, has become generally known." Even at this point, Vasari's *Lives* served as a guide and thus reduced the possible area of investigation. Nonetheless, the author generalizes his project when he proclaims, "There are, of necessity, three periods in the art of every people whose art has reached its prime." This reservation betrays his belief in a secret norm of art—which Passavant simply took for granted. Art history could be narrated only where art had reached its proper destiny in the course of history and thus had manifested its definition (or its proper destination) in universal terms.

The reciprocity between historical narratives and axiomatic conceptions of art was already established in an early manner when the rhetoricians of antiquity devised evolutionary models that even surpassed the narrative methods used for conventional history. Narrating the genesis or decadence of style in literature and in the visual arts was always a rewarding strategy to put forward a norm or ideal for art. In this discourse, the single work constituted a mere station in the development toward the unfolding of a norm of art. Even if complete in itself, a given work remained open-ended in relation to the evolution of that norm. It seems paradoxical that, of all things, a norm (as the aim of future fulfillment) should render each result (each single work) achieved along this path incomplete and thus make it dependant on an overall historical process. The concept of style served to define the individual phases of the process and to locate them within a cycle where it would become visible in its truth and destination. The historical description of art thus began as applied art theory and consequently was in trouble as soon as the latter became out of fashion.

Renaissance art historiography already had erected a canon of ideal or classical beauty that culminated at a given stage in history and was lacking in all other periods. This teleological approach was rooted in the biological model of growth, maturity and decay that Vasari wanted to transfer from the life of nature to the life of history. The repeatability of this cycle provided the formula of rebirth or renaissance. The equation of an ancient and a modern cycle in art was pure fiction, yet it seemed to furnish the *historical* evidence that the artistic norm had already been discovered in classical times and could therefore now be *rediscovered*. The classic, then, was the visible realization of an aesthetic norm that was no longer derivative but absolute. If art in the future would no longer

fulfill the norm, so much the worse for art. Thus, history could not contradict but only confirm the historian unless the truths were no longer recognized, which then would confirm his fears. Vasari was thus writing the history of an idea as much as he was basing his history on an idea.

The rigid framework of this art historiography was as practical as it was impractical for Vasari's successors. Winckelmann, however, no longer wrote the history of contemporary art but chose ancient art for applying the same model of an internal cycle of style. Although this history was now situated in the context of Greek politics, it retained the appearance of an autonomous cycle. Winckelmann's neglect of the art of his own age in favor of the art of a lost and distant past for which he could claim an absolute truth was a telling choice. From the distance of pure contemplation, Winckelmann devised the fiction of an "authentic antiquity," which he nonetheless sought to establish as a model for *imitation* in the living arts. He thought to have rediscovered the cycle in the surviving Greek sculptures as a visible trace of time, as it was mirrored in the biological cycle, the apex of which by necessity had to be the classical.

The modern departure from an applied theory of art, which art history had been at an early stage, was achieved at high cost. After losing its function as training for artists, the new historiography of art depended on models from other fields of social research while liberating itself from philosophical aesthetics, which viewed art as a pure principle and thus detached it from any empirical context. This was the moment when, in the words of Hans Robert Jauss, "historical and aesthetic contemplation" parted ways: "blind positivist empiricism opposed 'aesthetic metaphysics'" after the latter declared its allegiance to a "semblance of autonomy" in art, which, in turn, necessitated Marxism to develop arguments for contradiction. The new art history profited much from Hegel's system of writing history and his historicist revision of former aesthetic discourses. Hegel's *Aesthetics*, first and foremost, provided a philosophical support for writing the history of art—the art of all peoples and of all ages. "Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is." The art connoisseur, who regarded "imitation" as the meaning and driving force of art history, is replaced by the philosopher, for whom art incorporates a past stage in the history of "mind." Since, as Hegel maintains, art no longer offers "total satisfaction," the "science of art" serves to answer the new "need" for defining the role of art, a role already exhausted. The new "science of art" looks at art in a bird's eye view from where its history is seen spatially, that is, as a panorama of a

universal "evolution." Art is simply the raw material for "the thought of contemplation," which knows more than art itself has ever known. In fact, Hegel attempted to disenfranchise all artists' aesthetics and all applied art criticism in favor of a new variant of global history.

Art, as a visible symbol of *Weltanschauung*, in Hegel's view had no autonomous meaning but represented "the essential worldviews inherent in its concept." Hegel's revision of the function of art in human society, which often was disparaged as "the aesthetics of content," had however a lasting effect on subsequent writing on art even after parting with Hegel's "system." "It is the effect and the progression of art itself" in which the latter finds its world historical task. By making visible whatever ideas were topical in a given society, art "at every stage of its progress helps to free itself from the content it has incorporated." Once "the content is exhausted" and the respective symbols have been fully established, it loses its "absolute interest." Thus, art ever so often "gets rid of its content" and thereby, to compensate for this loss, releases a new creative activity. But in modern times, Hegel claims, art is no longer bound to "a particular content" and therefore loses the authority to act as a medium of representation. All that is left to the individual artist is to reflect a personal view of art. "It is no help to appropriate past worldviews" as the Nazarene painters had done in converting to Roman Catholicism. For Hegel the very essence of art had already exhausted itself in history, which, for him, made possible the writing of art's history a posteriori.

Since the classical already had taken place, imitation ceases to make sense from a distance that is fixed forever. But it is not only the classical in art but also art itself that has already taken place in history. As the visible revelation of the mind, its function in a universal history can only be seen in retrospect. From now on, art was understood as an activity of the past when measured against "its highest destiny," in a famous phrase by Hegel. Since it lost "its earlier necessity in the real world," it has been displaced "more to our imagination." Hegel adds that, "drawn into aesthetic presence, the work of art no longer keeps the religious and historical context" in which it was born. "It emerges as an artwork which makes it autonomous" and, as a result, allows its new life in the museum's enclave or its qualification for the discourse of aesthetics.

That is why art can be viewed without the distractions of subject matter or symbolism. If the viewer is a historian rather than a contemporary, he meets art in the archive of culture. Hegel's aesthetics coincide with the rise of bourgeois culture, in which reflection on art for the first

time became the concern of a newly born academic discipline. Hegel provided a philosophical model for this discipline in which art shifted from a living practice to a topic of memory in the guise of history. Whatever efforts are made to renew Hegel's discourse, they cannot compensate for his erroneous belief to judge history from an independent position, that is, from a position outside (or after) history.

That is why the so-called "death of art," as Gianni Vattimo discussed the term in his essay "The End of Modernity," must be translated in our own experience where it requires comment. When Vattimo speaks of the "utopia of a society in which art no longer exists as a specific phenomenon: (and where), in the Hegelian sense, it has been suspended in a general aestheticization of existence," the term "art" needs reconsideration. The "explosion of aesthetics outside its traditional boundaries" may be a contemporary experience, but it can scarcely be derived from Hegel who, as a representative of his own age, offered a kind of ontology of art (even when applying it only in retrospect) and thus also, in principle, delivered arguments for the creation of the new art museum, in which the historization of art found its institutional counterpart.

Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849), the "French Winckelmann," took a stance against the claim of the new museum to become the site of "visible art history" and, in 1815, wrote a critique of this institution in his book *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art* (Moral Considerations on the Destiny of Works of Art). The foundation of museums was an irrevocable turning point after which most of the experience of art was directed toward the past. But what bothered Quatremère most was the interest in an art that, once placed in a museum, had lost its place in life (*emploi*). Advocates of the new institution were ready with answers. Like history, as whose shiny mirror it was exhibited, art provided a powerful "image of the progress of the human mind," as Joseph Lavallée wrote in 1804 in the first volume of his *Galerie du Musée Napoléon*. The Louvre catalogs from the very beginning were eager to provide a "course in history" that would instruct the reader about "the origin and progress [*marche progressive*] of the arts," to use another phrase of Lavallée's.

Quatremère, the critic of Napoleon's museum projects, was not prepared to accept art's confinement within history and contradicted the loss of the authority it had possessed in moral education. He therefore insisted on "mimesis" not in the artist's sense but in the sense of enlightening the general audience. An art that withdrew from life into the museum ceased to be a "school for good taste" where beauty had been an ethical ideal. Quatremère thus accused the new art historians and museum ex-

perts of "abusing the museum and abusing criticism." He accused the new art history for its support of the unfortunate pseudopresence of art in a museum, where it was "restricted to a passive role" and only satisfied an indifferent curiosity (Hegel's "Interesse"). "Since they (the works of art) lost their effect, they lost their *raison d'être*. Turning the exhibition into a practical course in modern chronology amounts to killing art in order to turn it into history"—"C'est tuer l'art pour en faire histoire."

After the Romantics invoked historical art as a model for contemporary art—the last time such an attempt went unchallenged—art historians and artists parted ways, and soon art history emerged as an independent academic discipline. Art historians did not care any longer for the art of their own time, since only the past seemed to have produced art worthy of that name. Conversely, artists no longer searched for models in the past but headed with the same energy for the future, over which the past would have no power. Both parties were concerned with the past, but in the opposite sense: the one took it as an ideal either to be recovered in living practice; the other, as a burden from which to be freed.

The telling term "avant-garde," used in the visions both directed to a new society and to a new art, has never shaken off its military sense, but now it has become history. Rather than an army, that is guided by a small vanguard, the avant-garde scouts out the paths to where the battle is to be fought and won. In the visions of artists and social utopians, the avant-garde was guiding the rest of society into the future where the latter would follow. Progress, which epitomizes the linear concept of history, is the task of an elite who would define it for themselves while believing that history was at their side. It was an elite composed of revolutionaries who succeeded the former elites of power and education. Although stigmatized as dreamers who would fail to recognize reality, vanguardism believed it would anticipate the fulfillment of history in the future. The art historians, if they paid attention to recent art at all, soon felt at variance with an evolution that they could not measure with their established paradigms—until the avant-garde's success forced them to take over its model of history *en gros*.

Since it was first used by Saint-Simon, the term "avant-garde" became a catchword in the socialist camp where it would justify the visions of a new society. In the artists' camp, it was the battle cry of the *refusés* who broke with the art of the salon and flexed their creative muscle against academic conventions. In the early dreams of utopia, social thinkers and artists were united by the same sentiments in which the renewal of art was also seen as a promise of social renewal. In historical practice, how-

ever, the harmony between the two camps, between art's autonomy and social engagement, soon ended in conflicts that would flare up repeatedly in modernity. Art's history, it was soon conceded, was different from social or political history, however close they approached one another.

The avant-garde finally represented modern art so triumphantly that the latter seemed synonymous with the history of the avant-garde—and was exhibited as such, whereby progress was recorded as departure toward new artistic creeds. It thus caused irritation when, around 1960, the linear direction of progress became uncertain and the received model of progress—as if there were no alternative—collapsed. Commenting on "the death of the avant-garde," art critics consoled themselves by making a complete turn and speaking of the "myth of the avant-garde," as if the latter had been a mere phantom. Others who resisted the loss of a cherished paradigm would proclaim the emergence of a "neo avant-garde" or even "transavant-garde" in order to save the continuity of modernism. By a strange about-face, the avant-garde had become the more important tradition just as the conservatives had previously held onto theirs.

Significantly, the crisis of the avant-garde was a fruit of its success. Suddenly even the general audience was waiting for an ever new avant-garde much as it had formerly resisted the avant-garde and thus offered the desired identity as the eternal enemy. In recent modernism, the avant-garde, despite or because of its threatening gesture of revolution, had found public acceptance which had deprived it of its necessary opponents. Art's desired power over life in the end resulted in its confinement in the art scene where, much as in sport, the general audience expected to applaud the latest world record. An unwelcome side effect of the avant-garde's success was its appropriation by the "art of advertising," where its creative ideas were forged into consistent practice of design. This launched a rivalry with what had hitherto been the avant-garde, until advertising for the avant-garde could no longer be distinguished from the avant-garde of advertising. In his book *The Tradition of the New*, the American art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1962 analyzed the paradox of exalting the avant-garde to an undisputed tradition. In an exhibition in the Guggenheim Museum in 1994, the formula was resurrected, but now, in a strange oblivion of what it had meant before, it became reused for the title for a show of "postwar masterpieces" from the museum's collections that were to confirm the unbroken power of an avant-garde whose identity could no longer be defined. When the sociologist Diana Crane summarized New York art from 1940 to 1945

under the heading of a *Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, as she called her book, she unwillingly demonstrated how easily concepts, once they become detached from their original sense, become fetishes and as such reclaim the role of timeless definitions.

Art criticism, which left its traces in art historiography, successfully entertained the fiction of an infinitely elastic avant-garde. Whether the latter was—against better judgment—still defended as a living force or criticized as absent, its paradigm did not suffer much damage. It seemed that in losing the avant-garde, one would lose the very meaning of modern art and its forward energy. The avant-garde had slowly degenerated to a matter of style and as such, that is, as an elitist phenomenon, was losing ground to “low culture.” The few critics who contradicted the ideology of avant-gardism came mostly from the Marxist camp and therefore lamented contemporary art’s lack of political engagement; but they were no exception in defining and redefining the same idea.

It is a telling coincidence that at the same time when the avant-garde lost ground, the monopoly of a linear evolution of style suddenly appeared an old-fashioned topic in art history writing. It may be objected that this is an analogy of very different areas: on the one hand, cultural discourse; on the other, a single discipline’s favored method. All the same, the analogy cannot be ignored, since both the belief in a progressing avant-garde and the belief in the meaningful progress of style evoked an autonomous history that followed its own laws. If the progress of art was avant-garde’s business and if this progress could be measured in terms of style, then the fiction of the true history of art affected both topics. Their analogy was their mutual vow to maintain art’s autonomy—an autonomy guaranteed by works of a certain kind: in the case of the avant-garde, by works representing innovation; in the case of art historiography, by works representing a given style most convincingly. It is thus the autonomy of art that also preconditioned the formalist approach in the historiography of style and therefore remained a heritage of modernism in general. The doubts of the continuing existence of the avant-garde that characterize the 1960s may have been caused by avant-gardes with a different or with a lacking concept of the working process by which they seemed to disprove themselves as avant-garde. The work, as an entity of its own, had delivered the same paradigm that also attracted the attention of the historians of style. Subsequently, it was rather the context of art that in both cases gained unprecedented attention, as it was in the context rather than in the creative act that a new definition of art was expected.

14 Methods and Games of an Academic Discipline

Art history, as a discipline, profited in its own way from the general crisis of the old idea that art was synonymous with a timeless and universal idea (which it, to be sure, never was, however strong that fiction worked as long as “classical” education mattered). The crisis was felt in Romanticism, but it also was enforced by the museum age in which no axiomatic doctrine of art could be upheld any longer. The new axiom of history as an explanatory paradigm allowed the exercise to contemplate art as a privileged manifestation of history and to understand the changes in art as an index of the temporality of history. The respective discipline, as a latecomer within the humanities, was expected to demonstrate the course of history in the mirror of art. This intention implied the isolation of art’s form as “style” and the analysis of the individual work as a mere item of style in the collective sense while anything else that also distinguishes art definitely received less attention. Soon, biographies of single artists also had to prove the style pattern in the version of “individual style.” The monographic treatment of a single work, as a rich “text” or cosmos of its own, therefore had an astonishingly late entrance into the scholarly practice because the topic would have contradicted the obsession with the anonymous “law” of style and its evolution.

I must insist on these roots of a discipline since that worship of history, as it became idealized in the retrospective dreams of bourgeois society, no longer is ours. Michael Podro, in his book *The Critical Historians of Art*, has enough to say in this respect when he discusses this topic under the heading of the motivation of change. Heinrich Wölfflin, who contributed most to the promotion of art history as an independent field of research, in his *Principles of Art History*, published in London almost twenty years after the German edition in 1932, even entertained “an art history without names” in order to describe the autonomous but forceful evolution of art under the law of history. “One day,” he writes, “an art history must come in which the genesis of the modern way of seeing can be followed step by step.” Then, “the history of styles will be described as an uninterrupted sequence,” a breathtaking time movement of an abstract beauty and logic.

This view not only was based on a concept of art’s autonomy but, in

addition, implied the history of style as an autonomous process. Philosophical aesthetics, however different their aims were, involuntarily backed this position by confirming the autonomy of art. Even Theodor W. Adorno, still in the tradition of the age of Enlightenment, insisted on the function of art to have no function. In its early phases, art history, as a discipline, identified style as the unity among the diversity of historical art. The methods that supported this topic and that changed when style lost its former fascination allow for a brief survey that will help us to identify the intentions that were behind the traditions of the discipline.

In a celebrated elaboration on the narrative of style, the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl developed the theory of *Kunstwollen* (the will to art) as a magic formula for grasping the secret motor in art's development. The theory was rooted in the climate of historicism, which intended to justify every manifestation of history as an end in itself and to avoid judging it according to standards not born in the same time. If "artistic capacity" was limited in a given time, the implication was to consider these limits as its very intention, its "Kunstwollen." In this way, archaic art as well as decadent art could be measured against its own ambitions and not against an axiomatic viewpoint be it classical or not. Thus, art history acquired an almost unlimited competence for embracing the art of all times. It was in the line of historicism that, in the end, world history turned into a phenomenon of style. When styles in art were equated with styles of thinking or styles of life, the analysis of art's historical shape was celebrated as an all-explaining manner of narrating history. The spirit of an age seemed to be synonymous with the style of an age or vice versa. The *Zeitgeist* explained the *Zeitstil*, which, in turn, was followed by the next one in the interminable course of history. Art history, thus, appeared as a master narrative for explaining history as well.

Henri Focillon propagated a self-explaining law inherent in *La vie des formes* (The Life of Forms), which was expanded and updated by George Kubler in his fascinating study *The Shape of Time*. Like the old model of the cycle (in nature, society, and culture), this model of history claims that art everywhere went through similar cycles, which are not subject to chronological time but to an altogether different time pattern of change ranging from an early stage via a stage of maturity to a late stage. The explanation of the individual phases, as solutions destined for given problems, had developed in other disciplines from which it was applied to an autonomous history or style. The sequences in this cycle appeared as finite quantities, since during any given stage, a topical problem suddenly could take another direction and thus give rise to a new

sequence based on the given level reached by the development. The actual date of a work mattered less than its age within the course of a cycle. Any two works could belong to the same period but represent an altogether different stage in their respective cycles: one could reflect an early phase while the other, despite the same date, could represent a late phase in another cycle.

In such a view, "chronological time" (to use Siegfried Kracauer's expression) is exchanged against structural time, which as a stylistic cycle or morphological sequence could undergo a duration and a tempo that were not to be measured in years or decades. This view is rooted in biological models based on slow or fast growth of species and races. But what was it that caused art to "develop"? As we know, works of art do not grow, nor is art a confined entity; it forms a general concept. The respective problem was solved by selecting single traits in art's physiognomy that permitted the disclosure of a trajectory of style. Scholarship was eager to single out successful developments from others that failed to make history. It thus not only relied on the density of its material but also employed an intentional selection, which worked best where a minimum of characteristics applied to a maximum of examples.

Such methods, despite their uncertain paradigms for explaining the direction of evolution, matured in the soil of a connoisseurship that emerged in the discipline. As a consequence, art history even today seems to fall into two categories; the results of the one compel museums to amend the current labels of their exhibits while the results of the other have no direct impact on the barren descriptive facts on a label, the data of a work. Connoisseurship was oriented toward the single work, whereas history became restricted to the sum of the works in which it was embodied. Today we are faced with a new connoisseurship that, with the help of the sciences, explores the technical structures in a given work rather than the work itself. This development toward technology threatens to become an end in itself. In this way, this method seems to practice the end of art history when it dissolves works into technical data and reduces the artist's personality to anonymous techniques.

In their appropriation of the paradigm of style, Bernhard Berenson (1865–1959) and Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) represent a revealing contrast. Berenson was so successful in advising museums and collectors, for whom he identified their acquisitions, that he was able to acquire the villa I Tatti near Florence where, in a photograph (fig. 36), he poses as the proud possessor of a masterpiece. Mere "historical meaning," as he noted in *Florentine Painters*, was nothing compared with



36. Bernhard Berenson in the villa I Tatti, Florence, 1903. From David A. Brown, *Berenson and the Connoisseurship of Italian Painting* (Washington, D.C., 1979).

“pictorial meaning.” In brilliant prose, he wrote a new type of artist’s biography and assembled in his writings an imaginary museum of Italian Renaissance painting: indeed, he so much assimilated the mentality of the Renaissance age that modern art mostly remained alien to him, a position he shared with his friends, the collectors. Hence, the writing of a continuing history of art did not matter much to him as a discourse of general significance.

Wölfflin, too, chose an ideal of the Italian Renaissance as a subject of his book *Die klassische Kunst* (The classical art), but he had a university career that helped him to establish the professional profile of the discipline and liberate the latter from the shadows of cultural history as practiced by Jakob Burckhardt. His way of “looking at art” rather than examining single works satisfied the cultural ideals of the educated elite more than collectors’ interests. He justified his preoccupation with the formal aspect of art by referring to a book written by the artist Adolf Hildebrand, *Problem der Form* (Problem of form), which in his early days had “fallen like refreshing rain on parched ground. At last here was a new way of getting hold of art” and a new approach for making “art’s essence” the theme of art history. Soon he reduced any single work so much to an example of style that the pendulum swung back in the opposite direction. The new battle cry was iconology, as Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) turned it into the most successful method in art history of its time.

Iconology was an old term when Panofsky reused it in 1939 in order to introduce a new discourse in art history, no longer a discourse of style but one directed to a “history of types” that was to study the “tendencies of the human mind” as it materialized “in certain themes and ideas.” Thus the history of art in the sense of a formal entity was to be transcribed into a history of “cultural symptoms” or of “symbolic forms” in the sense the philosopher Ernst Cassirer had defined them. Iconology was called upon to retrieve “the true meaning” of art from documents and texts drawn from the same tradition in which the artists had lived, and thus to recover the cultural knowledge as stored in the production of historical art. In the introduction to his *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky placed much emphasis on the acceptance of art history among the established fields of the humanities and thus presented his field as a true “humanistic discipline.” Iconology helped in this respect since it made use of the same texts that the classicists and the historians celebrated as their sources. It is important to rediscover the importance of this topical logic that was addressed to the other members of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. The American context in gen-

eral mattered in this respect. The appellation of the "true" method of art history was, for reasons easy to explain, restricted to Renaissance art, which proved to be the most rewarding realm for discussing humanist thought also in art. The relation of text and image, for the first time, became a familiar topic in art history though there was no satisfactory theory as yet in reach for dealing with the problem in general terms.

Today, the question arises whether this type of iconology can be updated for contemporary concerns or whether an altogether new type of iconology has to be developed for a comprehensive study of images, which the term, when taken literally, implies. It is obvious that the study of Renaissance art, even when extended to other periods, cannot be the only purpose of a general discourse of the nature of images. The sole application to art has had its merits and may still be continued along the same lines in the practice of the discipline, but it is no longer qualified for the general discourse on images, most of which today are to be found outside the limits of art properly speaking. Ernst Gombrich, in several of his books, has already anticipated a broader use of iconology in the sense of the visual heritage and the internal logic of images versus texts. But it has been W. J. T. Mitchell, originally a literary critic, who in his *Iconology*, a study of "image, text and ideology," as its subtitle says, in 1986 has opened access to a redefinition of what the term may imply in the future.

But already in its original, Panofskyan variant, iconology has inborn structural problems and even deficits that Georges Didi Huberman thoroughly addressed in his *Devant l'image: Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (1990), to whose analysis I refer with no further comment. Initially, the method made rather ambivalent use of discussing ideas and ideals for their own sake without paying much attention to their social and even ideological functions. At times, the respective practice seemed to revive a parlor game in the age of the old humanists (or rather, their patrons and sponsors), who flattered themselves (or were flattered by the artists) by decoding textual sources or literary, philosophical, and other messages in the pictures. At that time, the perception of art was guided by encoded messages that seemed more obvious to the layman than the creative potentials of the formalist composition as such. It makes sense to rediscover these riddles and metaphors today after our culture has lost them, but this hermeneutic activity, in its restricted aims, cannot claim to be the master discourse in art history and also has no visible connection to the earlier attempts to write a history of art properly speaking, that is, to explain what this history was and how it may be described in retrospect. When studying contents of works

rather than works themselves, iconology also lost the very entities that made up a history in the proper sense and thereby approached what had been called *Geistesgeschichte* in art history, a term that is not easily translatable. The relation between art as such and the visual heritage has generated ever new problems whenever art history has attempted to limit their materials to art. At times, art historians such as Alois Riegl wanted to escape such boundaries by applying the concept of style to everything visual, such as fashion and objects in ordinary use. Riegl's view in a way harmonized with the aestheticization of life by the art nouveau, which would bring about a new era of design. All such attempts reveal the problems that an art history properly speaking generated when isolated from any other aspect of society.

Iconology, in its more developed ambitions, in turn was based on a tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that had made the nature of historical perception their theme and thus delivered the terms for empirical art criticism. Wherever such an approach overcame "the positivist naiveté that lies in the concept of the given by reflecting the conditions of interpreting," to quote a remark by Hans Georg Gadamer, it developed into a critique of positivism and invited a reflection on its own premises. Interpretation did not amount to simply "reproducing the original production" of meaning and form. In the case of aesthetics any such experience is necessarily preanalytic and yet is forced into the subject of a methodical analysis. In addition, we have to remind ourselves that in the days of German idealism a normative aesthetic transcended the realm of the art production of today. The concept of art in its older sense eventually was transferred to a concept of the work that attracted the former attention directed to art. Thus, the aura of the single work inherited the ideal beauty inherent in the older doctrine of art. This view of a work, therefore, as a philosophical problem, must not be confused with the work studied by empirical research.

The problem at hand soon lost its object or changed its direction when interpretation as the question of truth in a scientific sense, to quote Wilhelm Dilthey, became the real target. But the dialogue between the one who interprets and the work to be interpreted carries the danger that the former will only celebrate his or her approach if need be at the cost of the work. The hermeneutic mind that is left alone is easily tempted to reproduce his own exegesis. Art history borrowed from this type of hermeneutics the belief in the possibility of guaranties or rules for approaching its objects, that is, the works in question. Hans Sedlmayr established norms for interpreting art that his school had to follow faithfully. He even did

not hesitate to distinguish the "work" as a self-referential item of interpretation from the mere "Kunst Ding" (we could also call it "objet d'art"), which the interpreting mind encounters before the hermeneutic procedure awakens or recreates it as a work of art. Historical research in this context was relegated to a minor function, which made a "second art history" possible. This description, though it only may serve to memorize a certain moment in the history of the discipline, still may remind us of the conflicts that by necessity broke out wherever the given history of art was transformed into a model for looking at art. This is why establishing universal rules for the study of art is a contradiction in terms since they have to be rethought by each successive generation. Since the process of systematic interpretation also involves the interpreting mind, the hermeneutics of art can never lead to a permanent solution.

A particular problem already defines the early work of Heinrich Wölfflin when he wanted to establish ideal notions of art as ideal norms in human perception. Wölfflin's famous "principles of art history" offer a catalog of general "laws" that appear intrinsic to art and supposedly belong to physiological and even psychological norms of perception. Thus, Wölfflin classified the classical era (Renaissance) and the Baroque era in terms of style with inborn "categories of perception" such as the "open" and the "closed" forms, to which he accorded significance as universal as his humanistic education would allow him. But the problem has much broader implications. Our perception of art is linked to contemporary conventions or, in other words, to the "period eye," which has to be explained in cultural and not in biological terms. What Wölfflin assumed to be permanent norms in fact is subjected to cultural and social changes, which in turn filter our perception. This is a received truth nowadays but was not accessible yet to Wölfflin, who aspired to the authority of an "absolute eye" overlooking all art in its history. It is, in fact, the other way around. The historical styles mirror historical modes of perception that we can reconstruct today with their help.

Having gone this far, we may be tempted to leave the decoding of art to psychology or, at any rate, to look for such guidance. But pertinent attempts have been usually confined to a psychology of perception Gombrich relied upon when he wrote *Art and Illusion* as a "psychology of stylistic change." Any style, much like taste and fashion, answers conventions of perception that are applied to conventions of representation or vice versa. Thus, styles of art and styles of perception coincide in generating a constant learning process in which any mimetic strategy becomes "a lasting event in the theory of perception." The danger in

Gombrich's method is the temptation to reduce anything in art to the game of perception. The implied axiom of illusion, however, embraces a simplified notion of visible reality that was to be matched by pictorial illusion. Today it is rather the notion of fiction, both as an aim and as a strategy in art, that attracts our attention. So it is appropriate to digress briefly on the possible meaning of the interplay of fiction and reality for describing art history. Illusion was a mimetic goal that sometimes employed scientific aids such as central perspective but whose intentions had already reached a saturation point in the nineteenth century, bringing all representational art of this kind into disrepute. Thereafter, the effort of an ever more perfect reproduction of nature came to an end and with it ended the hope of perfecting art along the lines of imitation.

Most different concepts of reality applied to nature are given to society as the constructed environment. Reality, understood in the latter sense, rejects precisely the safe reference for improving art, since, in contrast to natural history, social and cultural history have changed at greater speed than even art could change. Their reality has always been a *historical* reality, which in turn became the topic of ever changing interpretations in the various humanities. Wherever art represents the sociocultural world, the naïve game of mimesis of the visible yields to a new game whose rules are determined by the politics of communication. The definition of reality proved to be a constant source of controversy among the various interest groups in society, wherever they had access to representation. In the art of the twentieth century, abstraction and realism have long contradicted each other in their respective concept of reality: abstraction has entertained an almost mystical effort in discovering the invisible behind the world of appearances, while the various realisms either questioned social reality or, as state art, produced ideological counterfeits of social reality. The reproduction of reality has always been guided by the aim of either affirming or negating it.

Not even photography, which claimed to own an indexicality of reality, has kept its former promise. In the words of Susan Sontag, it developed into an "elegiac art" that meanwhile "tends to aestheticize the world." There are as many photographic ways of reproducing the world as there were in painting before the advent of photography. In this sense, the short history of photography presents us with a model case that may elucidate the problems in the long history of art. For quite some time, the history of photography seemed to coincide with a history of photographic techniques, according to the motto "One always does what one can do." But why is it that, despite the camera and its given technology,

we recognize the great photographers by their personal style? The choice of their own style even extends to the choice of a particular technique which was to shape a personal perspective.

Man Ray and surrealist photography paved the way to use fiction as a means to overcome photography's inherent indexicality. "Subjective photography," whether in photocollage, multiple exposure, or other techniques, was turned into "autonomous photography" long ago, for fiction also serves the self-presentation of any medium. When representation triumphs over its motif, fiction uses a technology for a personal *mise-en-scène*. As a result of its technique, photography had an immediate mastery of reproduction, which favored its liberation from standard tasks.

Fiction, too, in its own terms, is a statement about the world, and perhaps the history of art could be described as the history of fiction. After today's technological environment has displayed the natural environment and after the various worldviews have competed with each other, reality has become increasingly opaque—and thus a new topic for dissent. Already the old realism, in Gustave Courbet's sense, was too polemically charged to lend longevity to an art on the edge of society. As soon as art began to embrace reality, it became entangled in endless contradictions. As soon as artists began to compete with each other in defining reality, they compromised each other with their conflicting results. The desire thus grew among artists for a final "truth," which they sought in a new definition of reality. In the early twentieth century, "style" became a grand utopia whenever it was enlisted to prepare a new model of society: "style" with an ultimate and universal authority was expected to become a rescue from all thematic and pictorial pluralism.

But abstract art, which was chosen as the expression of the new "style," was only a short rest along the way, while at the other end the program designed to combine "art and life" was defeated either by "life" or by its own illusions. Abstract art flourished in the private visions of individual artists and alienated itself even further from mass culture in its postwar variant, which the *nouveaux réalistes* sought once more to counteract around 1960. Conceptual artists soon denounced the reality of art as a cherished fiction, while photorealist painters lured the same viewer into a trap of perception. As art is inextricably entangled in its changing environment, it retrospectively discredits a "master narrative" that claims to describe it as an independent phenomenon.

In the meantime, the discipline of art history, to reach self-reflection of its methods, takes refuge in its own history and thus reveals that it has

reached the Alexandrism of a late cultural situation. To gain a picture of the present state of things, one would have to inspect national variants and trace art history in countries like England, where art history does not have an old academic tradition, and the United States, where it was liberated from German émigrés long ago. It was there that the discipline welcomed specialists from other fields, due to the fact that the retrospective approach was less strictly canonical than in Germany. In France, philosophers such as Louis Marin, until his premature death, and in Italy, members of the Umberto Eco school such as Omar Calabrese taught the subject of art history in other ways of thinking. The "new criticism" in the United States and the aesthetics of reception and deconstruction had their own part in academic practice.

In the United States, Arthur C. Danto, from the philosopher's perspective, has reopened the discourse of art history and also has joined my argument about the "end of art history" (see chapter 2). In *Art History's History*, Vernon Hyde Minor, while surveying the different methods of the discipline, appends such an easy résumé of semiotics, gender studies, and deconstruction, as if a complete revision of the canon already had taken place. We are facing a decentralization in the games of the academic discipline which dissolves and contradicts the former unity of aims and means and which soon may well cause nostalgic feelings in remembering what art history once was and how sure it was of its own mission.

15 Work of Art or History of Art?

Whenever the historical explanation of art appeared to have been exhausted as a topic in its own right, the work of art, which at least had a tangible existence, attracted attention instead. The work of art has its own indisputable reality, which is why we would like to believe that it has always been the first and the most important concern of art historiography. But the situation is quite different when we inspect the literature on art: in the eighteenth century, the preferred way of speaking about art was as an ideal, for which individual works only served as examples; in the nineteenth century, the new concern for "art history" again reduced single works to proofs in the framework of style as useful witnesses of development. In both cases, the works ranked behind the primary themes of "art" or "art history." Only very late, perhaps not until the postwar period, when contemporary art already had begun to question the concept of the work, art scholarship recognized its own credibility due to the fact that it possessed works that visibly embodied such a time pattern.

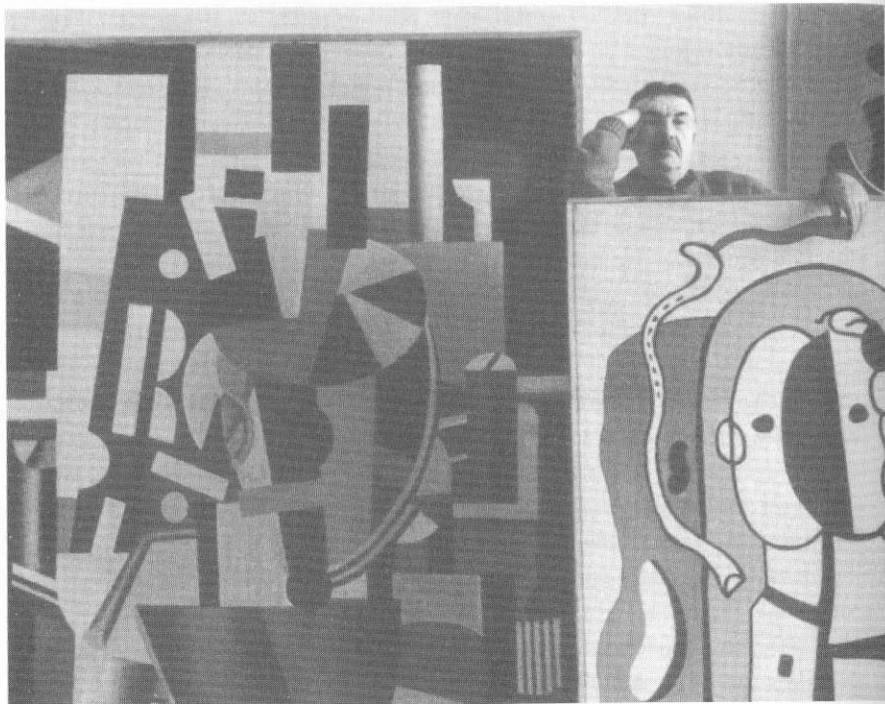
The work of art represents a characteristic unit that requires an equally characteristic approach: interpretation. The latter is not a priori bound to a particular method, since a work is accessible to different methods and allows for all kind of questions. The game of interpretation needs simply a work and a person, the interpreter, who claims a right equal to the work itself. A given work requires to be understood, and its viewer wants to understand it. Even in the ancient world, poets attempted an adequate response to works of visual art, arguing that these were silent and thus needed an interpreter to make them speak. Sometimes they employed the technique of ekphrasis even for nonexistent works so convincingly that such works really did come alive in fictional description. The reinvention of the work in question on behalf of the interpreter has remained a temptation to this day: one is often ready to make the interpretation convincing by supplying what is necessary or desirable for it.

Marcel Duchamp undermined the reality of the work, as opposed to the fiction of a large-scale history of styles and ideas, by his symbolic act of converting ready-mades into works of art. He did not

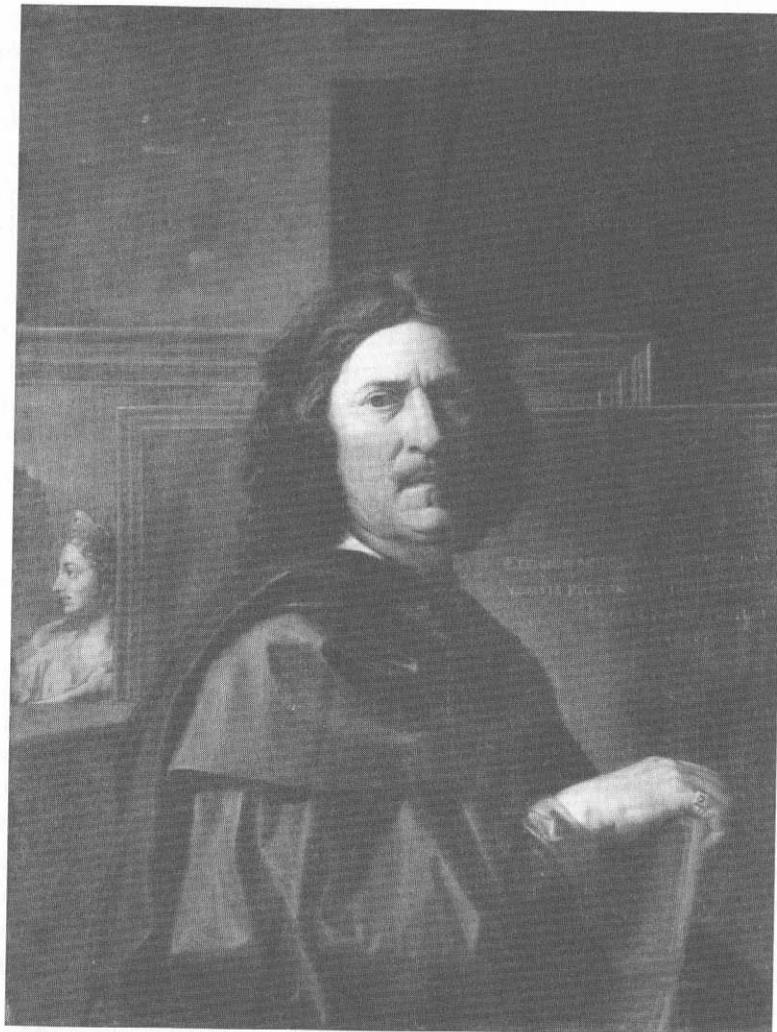
care so much for the distinction that ready-mades were functional objects and therefore a priori differed from "mades" in the sense of personal creations. Instead, he insisted on the recognition that the material aspect of the work, as a fabricated object, was not enough to turn it into a work of art. However solidly it may exist, the work of art only acquires its proper status by a symbolic transfer. This view not only conveys irony but also historical knowledge. It was never the reality of the object but the idea of "art" that decided the matter; the object was the vehicle of an idea, even if only that of "art history," that one wanted to read from it. The equation of work and idea emerged in a climactic moment of modernity.

But the frame of reference represented by the unit of the work of art is still not exhausted until the artist, traditionally the creator or author of its idea, is brought into play. A given *object* was the site of his *concept*, which he realized in a *percept* for a third party, the viewer. The artist communicated with the viewer only through the work, which was why he intended the work to speak for him- or herself. The relationship between the artist and his work is as difficult to define as is the relationship between art as an idea and the work as an object. The artist appears as independent creator, while the individual work is always one of a series of dependent creations, however finished and complete it may appear. He even could be right against his own product, if only because he would produce others that would express his ideas better and more comprehensively. The main interest of art scholarship was therefore to study an artist in his works and to view his personal development in their light, as a result of which art scholarship needed works as evidence for this project. The notion of an artist's oeuvre then served as a generic term embracing the individual production as a whole.

The constellation of artist, oeuvre, and work becomes manifest in a portrait photograph of the painter Fernand Léger published in the catalog of the first Documenta exhibition, which supports my argument (fig. 37). As a self-portrait, the scene appears to have been staged by Léger himself, even if he is also the subject. Two large pictures of his fill the viewing field such that they extend beyond the frame, thus revealing his oeuvre as an incomplete unit that ultimately exists only in his production as a whole. The artist's head and shoulders emerge in an empty corner and, so it seems, in an interval between the two pictures. Léger with this *mise-en-scène* referred to Nicolas Poussin's self-portrait of 1650 (fig. 38), which he admired as the representative of French classicism. In a text that he wrote on color he recommended that every foreigner



37. Fernand Léger in his studio, about 1950. Photograph in *Documenta I*, exhibition catalog (Kassel, 1955), section 4, plate 3. © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



38. Nicolas Poussin, self-portrait, oil on canvas, 1650. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

should study France by first going to the Louvre where Poussin's painting hangs. In a 1945 essay, he refers to Poussin when describing the contrast between "objet" and "sujet." In modern art, in his view, the object in its lucidity was destined to triumph over the subject in its sentimentality. Taken further, the relationship between object and subject was to be extended to that between a work and its creator: the latter had to give priority to the work as witness of an objective, modern world instead of serving his self-expression.

For this reason Léger steps back behind pictures in which the human figure has already disappeared or decomposed, while Poussin with his own body covers his own works, which fill the background in a similar parallel arrangement. Poussin's self-portrait is a work in its own right, whereas Léger's photograph is not. The change of medium allows photography to capture the reality of Léger's person while simultaneously contrasting it with his works, which have their separate reality. Léger suffered from the painful ambivalence that his social ideas of art still depended on the old medium of easel-painting—Poussin's medium, whose limits he so urgently longed to make explode. Under such circumstances, the self-representation of the artist in the work, in the manner of Poussin, for Léger had become a major problem.

The work, which involuntarily retained its accepted status for Léger, testifies to history even when it no longer exists but can still be remembered because it did at one time physically exist. The history of art thus consists not so much of the eloquent texts it has engendered but of the silent works that it has handed down to us. Regardless of the history of their various reception, works allow us our own access that culminates in their physical encounter, whatever we may think of the "loss of the aura," in Walter Benjamin's sense. Works thus represent history in that they represent historical ideas of the world in historical embodiment. As such, they remain almost untouched by the turnabouts in the art historical discourse we are discussing here.

This is not true of the discourse of style that relied on the "pure form" as its own domain. The paradigm of style prompted Heinrich Wölfflin to speak of an "inner history" of art in which every form "continues to work procreatively." Since then, the discourse of style has generated other concepts, such as genre style or functional style, which threaten the unity of the old concept. It is only the single work that still today asserts its former position at the crossroads of all the determinants (artistic, iconographic, etc.) that have conditioned it. Works react with equal force to existing traditions and to contemporary experiences they

reflect. They were neither conditioned exclusively by other art nor did they testify solely to art, which would be pointless to question. The conditions they have absorbed and the impacts they have left on later artists concentrate in the unit of a work in a paradoxical ease.

This notion of the work, which scholarship embraces more confidently than ever, however, has long been subject to strain, initially from the outside, until the art scene itself undermined the respective concept from the inside. Externally, the crisis came into the open already when André Malraux, reusing an early concept of style, published his *Musée imaginaire*: a fictional museum replacing works by purely formal qualities and notions of art where works of world art turned into photographic clips to serve merely as illustrations. The real museum with its limited number of works yields to a book whose potentially limitless illustrations and texts release an overall vision of the art of all ages and peoples. The literary *re-creation* together with the visual *reproduction* generated a new experience of art. A contemporary photograph shows us a bird's-eye view of Malraux's salon, where a panorama of art (but not a coherent panorama of art history) covers the floor in preparation for the art book (fig. 39). Georges Duthuit sharply attacked Malraux's concept in a two-volume critique of 1956, *Le Musée inimaginable*, where he accused the writer of reducing people and works of art to "fleeting fictions": "After the *roman de vie*, follows the *roman d'art*, and all direct experience of the work itself is repudiated" in favor of beautiful illustrations and the imagination that released them. But his critique was soon forgotten, and in his later role as minister of culture Malraux was able to test his project in new, spectacular happenings. I still remember Wolfgang Fritz Volbach warning students against reading Malraux because he would rob them of their belief in art history.

His book as surrogate of an art collection presents itself with a choice of surprising analogies in which "pure art" seeks the observer's gaze, freed entirely of all historical and thematic preconditions—indeed, even detached from the existence of the work's unit itself. Works are here no longer entities of their own nor do they refer to historical artists. They rather reemerge as vehicles of humanity's self-expression as an immortal species, which Malraux pursued in its most distant and inaccessible traces. In contradiction to Oswald Spengler's famous theories in his book *The Decline of the West* (1918–22), he wanted to celebrate human creativity as seen in the global mirror of its creations. He understood art as the "last coin of the Absolute and therefore as an immortal self-expression of mankind." Significantly, the photographic details that illustrate his comparative study are not described as such but as



39. André Malraux with the illustrations for *Le Musée imaginaire*. Photograph taken about 1947.

“fragments,” since Malraux saw each work as merely a fragment of an overall unity or of universal esthetics (fig. 40).

It is a strange coincidence that, from the 1950s on, art historians who had never considered individual works as a topic of their own, now embraced a new hermeneutic endeavor whose contrast with Malraux’s project was total. New monographs on individual *works* replaced the old monographs on individual *artists*; the biographical schema gave way to a hermeneutics in the manner of literary criticism. Charles de Tolnay, who initially had departed from Panofsky’s iconology, published monographs on the *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, and this inaugurated a work-oriented type of research whose methods were flexible enough to accommodate philosophical views and to live up to a work’s originality. Each work was seen as embodying a complex net of ideas in need of an interpreter and thus offered an incentive to write a congenial text.

However, the most famous text that emerged during the controversy over the reevaluation of the work as the last stronghold of art history was a philosophical contribution. In 1966, Michel Foucault published *Les mots et les choses*, which he introduced with an interpretation of *Las Meninas* (see fig. 31 above)—only eight years after old Picasso in a Paris gallery had exhibited fifty-seven studies based on this baroque masterpiece of Spanish painting. It was a French paradigm that prompted Foucault to investigate the “classical age” of the seventeenth century with the focus on a “theory of representation” in which the picture, along with language as the “tableau des choses,” became the topic of an “archaeology of knowledge.” In his painting, Velázquez already subtly distinguishes the work as material object, which we see in a rear view, from the work as an idea and a creative act in which the painter, the model, and the viewer are all involved. In Foucault’s language, which always brilliantly is meant to fail in the face of the nonverbal structure of the work, the painting is a symbol of “représentation,” which here becomes its own topic in a self-reflection of the creative act. As a result the painted work itself was recognized as the locus and impetus of theory.

Philosophical hermeneutics was followed in the 1970s by literary recreations of a painting. Thus, Peter Weiss chose Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, the emblem of pre-Romantic salon painting, as a case study for his own views on art in his *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (*The Aesthetic of Resistance*). In the subsequent volumes, Weiss, a former painter, continued to recreate or restage works of the old masters, which runs oddly parallel to the simultaneous experience of the loss of



40. André Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire*, part 1 (Paris, 1951), 62. Michelangelo's "Night." Explained as "fragment" in Malraux's book.

the "work" in contemporary art. There is meanwhile a full-fledged literary movement dedicated to the nostalgia for the former idea of a work, whose profile has been lost in literature as well. The only other example I will mention here is Julian Barnes, whose *History of the World in 10½ Chapters* returns to Géricault's painting. Filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette meanwhile also take successful part in this "archaeology of the work." In his 1983 film *Passion*, Godard has a Polish film director shoot scenes from great works of art—among them Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (fig. 41)—as a film set; but the director finally gives up this enterprise, saying he "does not have the right light" for it. The loss of convinced and convincing works in the visual arts of today's culture, which no longer bothers to invent or justify them, explains their return in literature, photography, or film where such memories do not conflict with literary practice.

By contrast, since the 1960s, visual artists have polyphonically proclaimed the "death" of the former concept of the work of art. They wanted to escape that concept in their search for an extended art practice. As a single statement, the work no longer would do when all they wanted was to make "proposals" in order to open the work's limits. Yves Klein, in his *Fire Pictures* and *Anthropometries*, by their utopian devices, liberated the artist from the traditional profile of the work, which he blamed for continuing the same old "spectacle." In his 1957 diary, he described his monochromatic "proposals" as "landscapes of liberty." When he came under attack in London from critics who demanded an explanation, he played a tape recording of human screams. "This gesture alone should have sufficed. The public had understood the abstract intention." Elsewhere, he noted with laconic ambiguity: "My pictures are the ashes of my art." He also wanted to free the theater from stage production. The void seemed to him the last refuge of the "Absolute," and therefore he inaugurated a non-show in an empty gallery.

Along the same lines, Klein soon was determined to transform the creative act into an independent event: the work of "performance." In his *Les Anthropométries de l'époque bleue* he used, in his own words, female nude bodies as "living paintbrushes," which, however, he did not touch himself, just as he did not directly lay a hand upon the work (fig. 42). Rather, the work was produced in the presence of an invited audience to the accompaniment of chamber music, with living models who transferred "pure pigment" of blue onto the canvas with their own bodies, under the direction of an artist dressed like an orchestra conductor performing the myth of artistic creation. We may ask ourselves whether,



41. Jean-Luc Goddard, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, film still from *Passion* (1983), detail.



42. Yves Klein, action art titled *Les Anthropométries de l'époque bleue*, March 9, 1960. Galerie internationale de l'art contemporain, Paris.

after such reflexivity, the necessary innocence could still be regained in creating the usual works and whether a work that produces itself would still succeed in following the course of art history. It is doubtful that their position in art history was ever in the minds of the old masters while they were producing their greatest works. Nevertheless art scholarship remained fixated on the presence of works and rediscovered them when nothing else of substance seemed to endure. Even the enigmatic metamorphosis by which Yves Klein reached the utopian gesture of the play-acting artist-creator, did not discourage his interpreters to talk of "works."

The situation can be summarized as follows: Art history, as we know, investigates works that carry representation. But it is also engaged in self-representation when it uses a particular kind of discourse, the discourse of art history. The old procedure of explaining the world through its history in the meanwhile suffered the crisis of representation. Doubts about exclusive rights on explanation have also infiltrated other branches of scholarship. In the case of art, things seemed right as long as the commentary chose a role analogous to that of authorship and creation, in terms of representation, while retaining the same distance to the work as the work maintained toward the world in representing it. In other words, the respective text depicted the work much as the work depicted whatever it chose as its subject.

This familiar order was already disintegrating when, in the modern period, the presence of the work found its meaning in nothing but itself. In this process, the artistic form acquired the same authority that motif and content had formerly possessed and thus it guaranteed the complete autonomy of the working process. Today, this innocence in the creative act has gone lost, and the original forfeited its established meaning as a unique creation, unique in terms of its formal entity. If the roles of commentary and work were once kept strictly apart, this changed when art declared itself to be a text about art. Montage dissolved the former unity of representation as embodied in a work by replacing it with the work's self-reference. However much the work is still, in retrospect, a *pièce de résistance*, it may be questioned that its former position based on its coherence in structure and meaning, still can be upheld.

16 Art History versus Media Studies

Art history for a long time concentrated on the examination of phenomena of style and yet evoked the illusion that its approach was comprehensive enough to justify the claim that the term "history" implies. The more it opened up its field of research, the more difficulty it had to find a common denominator for the multiplicity of questions it was confronted with. Today, the models that once possessed the authority of the old academic discourse are exhausted. So we are compelled to pursue several art histories that secretly compete with each other or even exclude each other. For a certain time, it seemed as if it was possible to match the new questions by escaping into what was called a social history of art. But the hope for a new reigning discourse proved illusory, because the time of master narratives seems to have passed. Only the complexity of what a single work comprises in itself still continues to fascinate us. Whatever a work has to say is expressed in its visual structure or expression, even if we all too often tend to select what corresponds to a given discourse.

Individual meaning not only is implied in a work's production but extends into the history of its reception, as has been discussed in literary criticism. A given work did not only exist for its contemporaries for whom it was made but continued to impress later generations among which artists joined the ranks of its interpreters. Thus, production and reception in the case of the work of art are inseparably linked in the individual history of such a work, even if we keep them apart in our discussion. Any new work was seen against a horizon of expectation that constantly changed along with the coming and going of ever new ideas of art. Against this background any attempt of imitating or contradicting existing solutions in art production addressed an already initiated audience that would follow or resist it. Competition not only existed between living artists but also moved later artist to react to existing models. Seen in this perspective, the old view of a linear evolution of style loses the authority it once was given since its mechanism no longer can be upheld in the light of new discussions. People have always lived with single works rather than with styles, and the same works still today inspire our new questions. Works age less than the discourse we address to them.

Today, art history is practiced in an environment in which new technologies and visual medias have changed our ideas of reality and visibility. We value them mostly in light of the information they transmit or purport to transmit to us. This new experience explains why we are more and more inclined (or seduced) to understand historical art production with reference to their born messages as historical media (including the already historical media of the modern age like photography and film). Also picture painting appears as a medium of its own whose aesthetic and social function had its imprint on what the single work had to say or how it could say it. Images and language both served as systems for a symbolical communication with the world. Today, as nonverbal communication meets with growing interest, even the social sciences include visual media in their research.

Art history would gain a new authority, given the contemporary constellation among the humanities, if it would not fear to betray the autonomy of artistic images, that is, to lose sight of art among other visual territories. The choice cannot be between discussing art against nonartistic media or vice versa. It may however be that a topical dualism between art in the absolute or mass media outside the art world appears as an obstacle to open art history beyond its traditional boundaries. Such a dualism however does not give justice to historical periods when such boundaries were much more fluid. Today, our world is filling up with images and symbols in which the distinctions between medium and reality have become blurred, as Susan Sontag once described in her book *On Photography*. Contemporary artists, too, are prompted to reflect on signs and fictions in mass media, the way they reacted formerly to the experience of nature. Even in classical modernism, art production had given up the paradigm of nature as their exclusive reference. Contemporary art continues in this line by analyzing the fictions of mass media that have created their own type of reality by interfering with our gaze and the world.

There is a naive reductionism in play when art historians still leave any media theory to modern visual technologies like photography, film, and video while setting aside historical images as art properly speaking. It may be conceded that the beginnings of media theory have taken place in film studies and related fields. But this is no reason to leave things where they were. We may also add that current media theories long ago have consulted art theories, and even Marshall McLuhan confessed that he owed his inspiration to art criticism when he wrote his primer *The Mechanical Bride*. We also may be inclined to turn the question around when we discover the introduction of the art discourse wherever the

boundaries of entertainment and information are left behind. The borderline of art runs straight through contemporary visual media and thus disregards the territorial claims of the several academic disciplines in question, even when the latter wish the world to be ordered according to their own concerns.

It is agreed upon that media studies and art history profoundly differ in their interests. It is therefore unthinkable that art history should become an expanded form of media studies, as also an annexation in the opposite direction would make no sense. But the coexistence of art and nonart images even in historical times invites a dialogue between the respective disciplines. So-called media art (like video installation) may be called the most advanced version of media theory and media criticism. Art history, though it is sometimes embarrassed to admit it, has long enough studied its usual topics in the sense of visual media as well. It therefore seems appropriate to sketch the relation between public media and art while bearing in mind that this relation has undergone constant change. There was a time when the visual arts belonged to the larger territory of public images and therefore served information as much as insisting on their aesthetic proprieties. Today such functions are distributed to separate realms, since information and communication only survive as a matter of technology and politics.

Media studies necessarily are restricted to questions of technology and communication (how do media function, for whom, and for what purpose?), which means that their scope differs from that of art history. Questions in media studies boil down to the following one: How does communication work? Nevertheless, communication today is opaque enough since it functions via anonymous channels and leaves the recipient with the ubiquitous TV screen, which produces the phantom of an absolute presence where there is only the transmission of illusion or pseudopresence. In addition, public media always know the answers and spare the recipients from asking their questions, as they never question themselves. Their power lies in their ability to overcome space and time while providing the illusion that the viewer participates in life events. I freely admit that I am consciously contrasting such public media with art as an individual expression or personal message. But artists who are working with "special effects" in advanced technology are confirmation enough that they see themselves in the very same conflict. Their installations attempt to restore a space for personal orientation and experience that contrasts with the public site of the TV monitor and allows the audience to become active again. It seems that the protagonists in this

type of art scene today defunctionalize their technological tools in order to appropriate them for the scope of art that, in this case, means replacing rapid consumption by a hermeneutic effort allowing for uncertainties and open questions. Peter Sellers, in a talk he gave on the occasion of the Erasmus Prize at Amsterdam some years ago, called for an art which is slow, dark, and difficult. Art always lived from symbols more than from facts. The question of art is not one of technological tools but of conceptions and ideas.

Looking back at historical art, we are now in a position to rephrase the discourse in such areas as well. In any pragmatic study, new experiences generate new questions. It is clear that art history had entertained an all-too-naïve notion of art and thus generated a useless argument over whether a given work only belonged to the sphere of art or also served in terms of a public medium in society. This false argument, which meant art versus society or the other way around, turned up in the course of a development in which the discipline tended to claim everything in the past for being art, regardless of whether such items ever had been created with the notion of art. Today, the solution might be a new type of iconology (if I may use this term, not in Erwin Panofsky's sense but in the way W. J. T. Mitchell used it), which would integrate the art topic in a larger context. Such an approach will also do justice to visual media in general, whether they would or could be called art or not. If this view is accepted, then art could be called a historical and therefore changing phenomenon in the same way that we speak of the history of art collection or art theory which did not exist at any time. In my book *Likeness and Presence* I therefore distinguished the era of the image from the era of art, as I suggested in the subtitle of the book. This means that the notion of art, after antiquity, became again a driving force in the production of art from the Renaissance on. Since any discussion of this kind is still subject to doubts and controversy (medievalists are not concerned with placing their topics in such perspective, while modernists usually do not care for studying anything prior to modernity), I will illustrate the point with a few examples.

In a seventeenth-century catalog of works that testifies to the early history of art collections, David Teniers the Younger wrote of a "theater of painters" in which art was performed like on a stage: art as exhibited in an art collection. It is precisely this type of staging art whose continuity today causes endless discussions. While art still had to be introduced or justified as a topic of its own in the century of Teniers, today on the other hand it meets "the dilemma of its own existence," as Harold

Rosenberg had put it. In his view, "new media have taken over most of its former functions." In 1950, Jean Cassou called film "a perfect expression of the modern mind," which, as a medium, still dealt with contemporary reality that had been completely abandoned in painting of the abstract manner. Already in 1936 Walter Benjamin had declared photography and film to serve modern society better than painting, which still seemed infected with an aura rooted in its religious prehistory. Since then, the discussion has never ceased to touch the functions and the respective media branches of art while the discipline still resisted this opening of the discourse successfully. Cinema, too, has been taken over by the ubiquity of television whose accepted form as a medium already seems to be on the edge of a new era in which the public will select its own programs. The public sphere also lost its traditional meaning in the age of the Internet. Given such experiences, we may be prepared to agree on the view that, when all the perceptual media are in a constant flux of change, art alone cannot be kept apart from this condition of temporal aspects.

Contemporary art however has also found new ways of keeping its presence even in the era of mass culture. Ever since it allowed new kinds of realism (such as those of pop art) to enter its repertory, art restored figuration, which once had been declared dead, and thus regained new territories on both sides of the boundaries between what has been called "art and life." Where the arts were sent into a momentary exile, they returned with a new profile and an extended scope, even if their methods at first seemed unexpected and unfamiliar. They still are credited with an authority and freedom of which the entertainment and advertising areas only can dream. Their freedom, to be sure, lives at the expense of their limited importance in the sense of social and economic acceptance.

The discontinuity in art practice existing between the traditional and the present type favors the view that art, as we understand it today, was a phenomenon not present at all times and at all places and does not give the guarantee to exist forever. Instead of accepting its existence as a matter of fact, we may meanwhile ask ourselves how art entered certain periods and societies and in which sense it was possible to become accepted. As long as art was not put into question (which means in the period of museums, galleries, and the art market, which certainly is not over), it was sufficient to narrate this history with praise of its achievements or complaints about its decadence. But when art no longer is a matter of course or no longer is accepted as something given forever, we

may again engage in a new way of tracing its history. Already Benjamin asked the question as to what art could mean in the era of mass media and how it was subject to change. The current discourse, which reiterates Benjamin's argument, tends to accept his view of the year 1936 like an article of faith while forgetting to ask Benjamin's question again under the present circumstances. He wanted to inquire into the changing cultural significance of art in its given environment. Such a question takes on a completely new meaning in our days where we experience the dawn of a world no longer Euro-centric and not even Western. Benjamin was a faithful advocate of high modernism with which he shared his enthusiasm and his innocence. We therefore need a new Benjamin who could explain our world to us today.

17 The Myth of Modernism in the Mirror of Art History

The rise of modernism in Europe produced two disparate reactions. The guardians of history feared the dawn of art, while the partisans declared modernism to be a logical continuation on the path of art. Seen from today's perspective, both reactions missed an important part and yet revealed a partial truth. Art did not come to an end but took a new and different course, the course of modernism. The farewell from traditional genres like painting implied the loss of an ideal such genres had long represented. Abstraction seemed to lose sight of the real world, Dada revolted against art as a concept, and Duchamp unmasked art as a bourgeois fiction. Such reactions not only distinguished progressives from conservatives but were ultimately concerned with a canon of art history, which was defended by the opponents and ignored by the advocates of modernism, for whom the new revealed a historical necessity. The rise of modernism inaugurated the debate whether art history could or even should continue to accompany a living history of art. Conservatives in the German universities such as Henry Thode and Hans Sedlmayr lamented the loss of a historical heritage in whose mirror modernism looked distorted. Progressive critics and writers such as Julius Meier-Graefe and Carl Einstein hailed modernism as a fulfilled promise of past traditions which from their viewpoint had prepared such a development.

Both medieval and even primitive art, which had no real stance in academic art history, were now cited by artists as distant and even true models, since they contradicted traditional art as much as modernism did. It does seem reasonable to establish new guidelines for writing art history and to create analogies which served both sides for their conflicting issues. The battle also involved the possession or loss of what art historians felt was threatened by the exodus of artists from common territory. The further course of art historical research immediately took a defensive direction. What had not become a standard of art history by then would not become one for long, since, in the face of continuously shifting boundaries between old and new, it seemed impossible to process all the materials that had not already become art history's property.

For some the problem seemed to coincide with the history of the avant-garde, which had engaged in a kind of alternative history of art