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CHAPTER SIX

The End(s) of Art History

We have heard before of the end of the history of art: the end both of art itself and of the scholarly study of art. Yet every time that apparently inevitable end was lamented, things nevertheless carried on, and usually in an entirely new direction. Art is produced today in undiminished volume; the academic discipline, too, survives, although with less vitality and more self-doubt than ever.

—H. Belting

The problem here is essentially this: to which zone do we ascribe the sign? to which side does painting belong—to the base? to the superstructure? I do not believe an answer to the question of the relation of art to power can be answered in this chicken-or-egg way. . . . What we have to understand is that the act of recognition that painting galvanizes is a production, rather than a perception, of meaning. Viewing is an activity of transforming the material of the painting into meanings, and that transformation is perpetual: nothing can arrest it. . . . The viewer is an interpreter, and the point is that since interpretation changes as the world changes, art history cannot lay claim to final or absolute knowledge of its object.

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—N. Bryson

I. Seeing through Art History

In this study, we have made provisional soundings in the archaeology of art history: test trenches through the tangled roots below the surface of the modern discipline. A full excavation must perforce be a collective and concerted enterprise, mounted dialectically over time and through the many spaces of that history that are still invisible: stories only hinted at by what has been exposed here.¹

We have followed some of the lines of fracture visible on the surface, and our soundings have made it plain that a history of art history along already familiar lines—as a genealogical account of theoretical or methodological schools or as a biographical account of the practices of prominent practi-

tioners—inadequately lays bare (indeed, often significantly masks) more fundamental issues, problems, and critical debates.²

The preceding chapters have served as probes into particular lines of fracture: the question of artistic signification or meaning; the integrity of the Subject and Object; the confabulation of proper distances between analyst and analysand; and the problem of origins. The probes have often intersected below the surface, giving hints as to the structural connections among guiding metaphors in art historical practice. We have seen how certain dominant metaphors in the discourse have determined attitudes toward issues: the problem of the limits and boundaries of the discipline; ideas concerning the roles and directions of disciplinary practice (who is served? toward what ends?); and assumptions regarding the roles and relationships among artist, critic, and historian (who speaks? to whom? under what conditions?). In addition, we have considered certain aspects of the nature of historical causality—an issue to which we will return shortly. These issues have been extensively and variously examined as they emerged and reemerged throughout the text.

An attempt to articulate a kind of stereoscopic attention to these issues has resulted in an oscillation between portrayals of the discipline as a singular body of knowledge and practice and as a heterotopic space of contradictory practices and theoretical positions. As we have tried to demonstrate, this oscillation is grounded in the ironic status of the discipline of art history as a form of institutionalized knowledge.

Indeed, modern art history could be said to have the status of an Ames Room or a Foucauldian heterotopia:³ an illusory unity and coherence; an ideological matrix of projections from disparate sources onto a common screen. We have tried to read its history synchronically and its spaces diachronically. We have focused seriatim on the interior logic of the discipline constru(ct)ed as a body of knowledge and praxis and on a variety of guiding assumptions, tropes, and metaphors. And we have endeavored to articulate the simultaneous truth and falsity of the discipline's homogeneity and heterogeneity.

The place of art history was always multiple: The disciplinary practices lazily parceled out by the casual observer among various schools or methodologies turn out to be multiple and often contradictory. Each method is a spectrum of idealisms and materialisms. Prodded and questioned on certain key points—signification, the integrity of the Object and of the Subject—one can begin to discern deeper divisions and alignments. On balance, such divisions may be more important for our sense of the future prospects and possibilities of a history of art than the surface scenography on stage today.⁴ The rhetorical battles between formalism and contextualism, between social history and connoisseurship, between modernist and poststructuralist

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semiotics, owe their marching orders as much to the agonistic fragmentation naturalized by modern disciplinary knowledge as to substantive theoretical differences: As we have seen, the art historian is as much an artifact of the discipline as are its ostensible objects of study. Disciplines, as Foucault has poignantly reminded us, work above all to discipline desire. Our task here has been, in the final instance, to understand the history of the desires disciplined by art history. Clearly, we have only just begun.

It was noted in passing that the various schools of art historical practice could be seen as representing the staging of theoretical perspectives ranging from materialism to idealism. But this spectrum is not simple and straightforward in a historical sense. A case in point is the conflict between the secular semiology of Locke and the eucharistic semiologies of Port-Royal: The subsequent fate of the former is bound up with the latter, and both threads run through Taine, Saussure, and modern structuralism.⁵ In seeing through the rhetorical and theoretical claims of particular art historical methodologies on stage today, and by attending more closely to the configurations of underlying complicity between apparently opposed modes of practice, we may be in a stronger position to articulate an archaeology of the discipline more useful to the current rethinking of art history than the Debrett's Peerages still dominating the market.

Such an archaeology would entail a close attention to the forms and protocols of practice and to the language and tropic scenography of art historians. This latter attention has guided the fabrication of the present study and explains why we have devoted space to seemingly minor or marginal questions: the topographical configuration of historical and critical study of artworks; the spaces of practice; and the manner whereby the historian-critic and archive are characteristically formatted together. There is still work to be done on many subjects—the history of lantern-slide projection, for example, or the history of the organization, housing, and protocols of access to documents, libraries, and visual or verbal archives. In this regard, the Fogg institution at Harvard is seen as prototypical of the question of formatting the discipline in a singular, designed space (at least for North America).⁶ But other tasks remain, such as uncovering many of the arguments and justifications for the academic creation of art history as a university or institutionalized discipline; as a profession or science outside of the museum.⁷

Let us now take an oblique look back at our several probes into the corpus of the discipline: an anamorphic reading of our own arguments; a holding-up of our text to a raking light.

The following sections will serve as two such glances that may fulfill the rhetorically expected function of concluding our remarks. We shall first

consider the fact—implicit all along—that if the disciplinary panopticon is not singular or homogeneous, neither is it innocent or neutral. Beyond the palpable legitimization of certain idealist and even theologistic perspectives on artistic production and construal fabricated by the formatting of art historical knowledge, who benefits from the discipline of art history?

The third and final section will provide a glance at a historical example of (much of) what we have “meant” in this text. In so doing, we shall return to the rhetorical roots of the discipline itself: an emblem of the possibility of art history in the broadest sense.

2. Seeing through the Social History of Art

Everything, for Darwin no less than for Nietzsche, is just what it appears to be—but what things appear to be are data inscribed under the aspect of mere contiguity in space (all the facts gathered by naturalists all over the world) and time (the records of domestic breeders and the geological record). As the elements of a problem (or rather, of a puzzle . . .), the facts of natural history are conceived to exist in that mode of relationship which is presupposed in the operation of the linguistic trope of metonymy, which is the favored trope of all modern scientific discourse. . . . This metonymizing of the world, this preliminary encoding of the facts in terms of merely contiguous relationships, is necessary to the removal of metaphor and teleology from phenomena which every modern science seeks to effect.
—Hayden White

The disciplinary enterprise commonly appearing under the rubric of “the social history of art”⁸ in the Anglo-American academic world has been one of the more ambitious of contemporary enterprises and, rather lamentably and ironically, among the most shortsighted and ahistorical. Compare the following observation:

There is thus a general question which cannot be avoided, though the means of access to it must be particular: whether we can discover in the complex and specific material of a single artist's historical situation and experience the foundation of his unique subject matter and “style”⁹;

with this remark:

For the Marxist art historian this is the crucial point: the original meaning of a work of art is inseparable from the conditions under which it

was produced and first used. This original social context determines almost everything: the work's form, its subject matter, its first but not necessarily its only set of meanings¹⁰;

or with this claim:

If we can qualify our techniques of investigation and pursue them with consistency, we won't need the abstraction of current "theories" in order to write a straightforward social and political history of art¹¹;

and with this lament:

For the most part, Marxist art historians have not had too much to say about the fundamental premises underlying their work.¹²

It might be proposed that the most fundamental concern of the discipline of art history, as well as the most common object of art historical study, is *the social production of meaning*, which may be saying both too little and too much. It constitutes too little in that this generic concern is common to a wide spectrum of humanistic and social-science study in the modern world: What, then, would comprise a specifically art historical inflection of this concern?

In another sense, the claim may be too strong, for such an object may merely constitute the distant horizon rather than the most immediate problematic of disciplinary practice: Indeed, there are those who might claim that such a concern is not the business of art historians at all and that it is better left to historians, sociologists, or anthropologists. For some, as we have seen, such issues are pragmatically external to the history of art.¹³

Social historians of art have taken pains to deconstruct the internal-external hierarchy of disciplinary concerns, with both stronger and weaker claims as to the role "social context" might play in conditioning the "subject matter and 'style'" or forms of an artist's work. Reviewing the first three statements, we might discern a certain difference in attitude toward the strength of the claim. The first, staged as a question of "whether we can discover" the traces of historical specificity and moment in artwork, would appear to contrast significantly with a Marxist perspective, which purports that "the original social context determines almost everything." Are we discerning here a contrast between a social-historical project of subtlety and historical sensitivity and another social history that, beneath the outward trappings of radical agendas, is simply an inflection of the idealisms of some bourgeois art history the latter seeks to oppose? Is this yet another lugubrious "dream of scientificity"?¹⁴

Over the past decade and a half, the self-proclaimed Marxist social history of art has had its waking hours haunted with these dreams: to wit, the third

quotation above.¹⁵ In rhetorical opposition to a bourgeois art history—an art history of formalist sensibility, wherein the history of art seemed to have a life of its own, apart from some external social and historical conditions¹⁶—Marxist art history countered with designs for a science whose primary tenets seemed quite direct and coherent: If the historical facts were to be fully assembled in an orderly and lucid manner, then the transparency of social determinations would be established. By expanding the lenses of our historical eyes, the visible would become legible; what seems to have melted into air would once again become solid, condensed, and palpable.

Articulating such issues at this late date may seem strange but, indeed, appears to confirm the observation made by Hubert Damisch some time ago: namely, that Marxist theory had entered into art history only in its most reductionist and caricatured forms.¹⁷ The project for a "Marxist art history" was mounted in response to the social movements and upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s and reflected a passionate desire by many academic art historians for a socially responsible form of disciplinary practice. It was also a reaction to a rediscovery of Marxist perspectives on art from the 1930s, forgotten or marginalized by the intellectual repressions accompanying the Cold War and McCarthyism.¹⁸ The early writings of art historians working to elaborate a Marxist social history of art reveal a palpable nostalgia for the 1930s and for work begun but put aside with the onslaught of World War II.¹⁹

The projection of social-historical programs of work in the early 1970s was not, however, made in a disciplinary vacuum, and the discipline itself at that time, particularly in the United States, was in no way theoretically or methodologically monolithic. Apart from the partly conflicting enterprises of iconography and connoisseurship, that period also saw the emergence of feminist and structuralist perspectives on artwork²⁰ and the beginnings of postmodernism in the arts. From the beginning, social-historical perspectives on the discipline exhibited an ambition shared by these two other fields—that of realigning art historical scholarship to a superordinate set of protocols and to a set of practices that sought, in various ways, to revolutionize the discipline. Like nascent structuralism, the perspective of social history was generic and encyclopedic; it represented a diachronic science to counter ahistorical formalism or synchronic structuralism.²¹

The bourgeois art history set up in opposition to an emerging Marxist art history was mostly an ill-defined and simplistic bogeyman. But if its straw men were nebulous, its oppositional programmatics were similarly sketchy and hasty. The lament in the fourth quotation reflects a sad state of affairs: Marxist writing in art history did not match its rich tradition in other fields; there was no art historical Lefebvre or Macherey, no Eagleton or Williams.²²

This state of affairs could be seen largely as a function of the nature of art historical education itself and of the constraints of specialist training and practice that all but precluded even the most basic literacy in history, philosophy, or critical thought in the other arts, notably literature.²³

A case in point is a text considered by some Marxist art historians as a watershed in contemporary social-historical perspectives: Nicos Hadjinicolaou's *Art History and Class Struggle*. Published in Paris in 1973, it could well have been written in a monastery: Its omission of contemporary critical debates centering around the work of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and others is nothing short of astounding.²⁴ In reaching for paradigms of a science of art history along materialist lines, early Marxist writings in the discipline seem to have become immediately mired in a nostalgic nineteenth-century positivism. Sadly, energies motivated by passionately felt projections for a socially responsible discipline were spent on hammering together a charette without wheels.

Concurrent with Hadjinicolaou's work, two books by Timothy J. Clark were to have a more lasting rhetorical impact on the projected social history of art in the discipline: *The Image of the People* and *The Absolute Bourgeois*. In the first work, Clark devoted the opening chapter to outlining a social-historical agenda. Entitled "On the Social History of Art,"²⁵ the chapter became for many professionals and students (Marxists and others) a rallying point for the articulation of questions regarding the relationships between art and politics in specific historical contexts. In uncovering an "unimaginable time"—Paris of the mid-nineteenth century—when the connections between art and political life were open and on the surface of social consciousness, Clark delineated some of the specificities of history and moment that would provide a fuller understanding of the corpus of an artist:

The encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting. How, in a particular case, a content of experience becomes a form, an event becomes an image, boredom becomes its representation, despair becomes spleen: these are the problems. . . . The making of a work of art is one historical process among other acts, events, and structures—it is a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt these structures.²⁶

Clark's overriding contention in his two books was that the grand master narratives of the history of art, the great traditions, were not false in any simple sense; rather, they were but fragments of the story:

What we need, and what a study of any one period or problem in detail suggests, is a multiplicity of perspectives.

Just because [the social history of art] invites us to more contexts than usual—to a material denser than the great tradition—it may lead us far from the "work" itself. But the work itself may appear in curious, unexpected places; and . . . may never look the same again.²⁷

The latter remarks can be seen as one founding motivation and intention of the work—to make it impossible to ever again see the work in the same way. And just as Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* could be thus transformed, so, too, would the discipline itself never be the same again, becoming forever inseparable from *history*. Social-historical research would accomplish, in effect, a dissolution of the internal-external hierarchy of art historical attention.²⁸

Within the frameworks and protocols of the traditional discipline, this was taken by some as a provocative agenda and was quickly appreciated as such in the Anglo-American art historical world.²⁹ "If the social history of art has a specific field of study," he writes, "it is exactly this—the process of conversion and relation, which so much art history takes for granted. I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of 'reflection,' to know *how* 'background' becomes 'foreground;' *instead of analogy between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two*" (italics mine).³⁰

On the face of it, this was a laudable and apparently self-evident proposition: What could be more worthwhile than discovering "the network of real, complex relations" between form and content, between "foreground" and "background"? Yet Clark's vision of a social history of art was frequently met with a hostility of almost hysterical proportions, engendering attacks that continued for a long time.³¹ But beneath the rhetorical landscape of the controversies surrounding Clark's work, there are important issues to be addressed if we are to understand the place of social history of art within or in opposition to the contemporary discipline. Here, as we shall see, there are problems that have not yet been effectively dealt with in the critical debates regarding "social" art history.

The most important of these issues relates to the sentence italicized in the preceding quotation. Here, it may be possible to read the central problematic pertaining to the potential of a social history of art as a factual history. The problem is succinctly characterized in an essay by historian Hayden White entitled "Fictions of Factual Representation."³² White's essay, which appeared three years after Clark's works, addressed the possibilities of a discipline of history and the relationship of the modern discipline to critical debates in

the nineteenth century that gave rise to the methodologies and protocols of history writing as a systematic and scientific endeavor.

His quotation at the head of this section highlights the issues at stake and the problems faced by historical discourse. White calls attention to one of the principal characteristics of modern disciplinary discourse: It metonymizes the world and encodes facts in terms of contiguous relationships in space and time. "Considerations of *semblance* are tacitly retired in the employment of this trope, and so are considerations of *difference* and *contrast*," he writes. He shows how Darwin in his work justified the metonymic encodation of reality in order to "discharge the errors and confusion which a *merely* metaphorical profile of it has produced."³³ A palpable complementarity exists between the model of causality elaborated, in White's analysis, by Darwin, and that proposed, in quite another context, by Clark: "Instead of analogy between form and content," a network of relations of spatiotemporal contiguities must be substituted, the "specificities" of history and moment. These constitute the causal "background" within which the artwork, as historical act and event, emerges.

In this regard, Clark's project was thoroughly modernist, resonating with the paradigmatic assumptions of modern scientific discourse, over and against the premodernist theories of causality in the traditional discipline of art history: analogies between form and content; metaphorical relationships; webs of conversazioni among forms, themes, and techniques. Compared to the bricolage of the latter, a social history of art would be practiced by engineers or, in a Marxist view, scientists of the history of art.

We have seen enough of the "dreams of scientificity" in our probes into the modern discipline to recognize the stated underpinnings of this new social history of art: its complete compatibility with a wide variety of practices in art history.³⁴ Rather than being revolutionary, the program for the social history of art, as articulated by Clark in the early 1970s, enlarged traditional disciplinary programs rather than substantively altering them. The grand tradition is seen, in the final analysis, as incomplete and fragmented—not the full picture.

To extend or enlarge the analytic frame is not necessarily to alter perspective, even though the artwork might seem "forever changed" to our understanding. The problem, of course, as Derrida reminded us, was precisely the frame.³⁵ Was the social history of art really different from those practices it had sought to replace? Was its dream of objectivity substantially different from the questionable program of "putting oneself in the place of past agents, seeing things from their point of view," in Hayden White's words?³⁶

The Marxist program for the social history of art can be seen as part of the

modernist project to distinguish history from fiction, and as a reaffirmation of the Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry, leading to an affirmation of the ironic fiction that the stories historians tell are simply found in the evidence. It constituted, in the words of Valesio, a "rhetoric of anti-rhetoric."³⁷ And the social history of art called for, in effect, a disciplining of the historical imagination, a setting of limits on what could be seen as constituting a historical event.³⁸

In this regard, Clark's remarks might be seen as a counterclaim to statements that art history constitutes a special kind of discipline: Art history is always, everywhere, a subset of history, not a privileged domain in which the rules and determinations of the latter do not apply. The problem, however, is with the kind of history envisioned. As White observes:

Since the constitution of historical studies as a discipline was carried out in the modern period in the service of political values and regimes that were in general antirevolutionary and conservative, the burden for establishing the feasibility and desirability of treating history as the object of a possible science falls upon those who would so treat it. This means that the politics of interpretation in modern historical studies turns upon the question of the political uses to which a knowledge thought to be specifically "historical" can or ought conceivably to be put.³⁹

In proposing a fuller or more realistic reconstitution of the specificities of history and moment, the project for a social history of art came to involve a dilemma: a recommendation that history be viewed objectively and realistically by using the tools of a discourse fabricated out of a matrix of ideologies that a socially responsible art history must perforce oppose. And underlying this is a further problem: the fact that its picture of historical causality (Clark's relationship between background and foreground) is a discursive trope among others, the metonymization of the world as constituting a modern science.

This is hardly to deny the existence of factual specificities of history and moment; it points up, however, the problems to be faced when such data are spun into a causal, historical narrative, along with the irony that any such data are invariably in some sense *capta* of an already fabricated web of hypotheses as to their interrelationships. In short, the problem encountered by the social-historical program in art history was its unfailing literalism in reading the historical record. It is precisely the question of signification, and of assumptions regarding the conditions of artistic production and construal, that any adequate social history of art must address. Without a theory of meaning beyond a simplistic reflectionism inherited from the bourgeois

practices it would oppose, the program for a social history of art could remain, on balance, yet another perspective within the discipline rather than a blueprint of a discipline, or a reorientation on all facets of "the social production of meaning."⁴⁰

Ironically, as our understandings of artworks have become denser, more complex, and more problematical because of disciplinary efforts to uncover the complexities of artistic creation, the discipline itself has remained framed in the same old ways. Has the social history of art, then, become yet another framed *veduta* in the art historical panopticon, yet another indifference to the complexities and contradictions of history?⁴¹

The question cannot be answered simply, for the social history of art was not merely a school among others, existing in some happy (or lamentable) pluralism of disciplinary methodology. It was, in all its multiplicity and plurality, not a school but a watershed: an interface between modernism and postmodernism composed of diverse tendencies, uneven growths, and conflicting agendas and analyses. Such diversity can be seen both between and within particular practitioners. Furthermore, the situation of the 1970s is very different from that of the late 1980s. More accurately, the current programs and problematics of the social history of art projected by writers in the mid-1970s have been subsumed under the rubric of contemporary critical theory, understanding the latter term to refer to the rich confluence of debates emerging within feminism, deconstruction, poststructuralist semiology, and psychoanalytic theory.⁴²

There was, of course, a sensitivity by writers such as Clark to the inevitability of disciplinary co-option. The *Times Literary Supplement* of May 24, 1974, published an essay by Clark entitled "The Conditions of Artistic Creation."⁴³ The article included the following observations, which have been quoted verbatim in a number of other writings since that time:

It ought to be clear by now that I'm not interested in the social history of art as part of a cheerful diversification of the subject, taking its place alongside of the other varieties—formalist, modernist, sub-Freudian, filmic, feminist, radical. For diversification read disintegration. And what we need is the opposite: concentration, the possibility of argument instead of this deadly co-existence, a means of access to the old debates. This is what the social history of art has to offer: *it is the place where the questions have to be asked*, but where they cannot be asked in the old way (*italics mine*).⁴⁴

Yet thirteen years later, in a 1987 lecture at UCLA, Clark took the social history of art to task in its current state of disarray, asserting that it had in fact ceased to be "the place" where questions are being asked, having yielded

that place in the contemporary world to feminist theory.⁴⁵ Castigating what he termed "Neanderthal" Marxist art history for its deterministic, mechanistic, and theoretically naive analyses of complex historical events, he called for an engagement by social historians with contemporary critical and theoretical debates: "It's the feminists," he said, who are now asking "the *real* questions."⁴⁶

In the quotation above, I have highlighted the last sentence, with its focus upon the term *place*, to bring up a telling parallel with Clark's comments of 1987. Spanning a decade and a half, the remarks could be seen as emblematic of a peculiarly panoptical mentality carpentered into the discipline in its modernist origins: the desire to establish a privileged vantage point the positionality of which would render relationships transparent—in other words, to render the visible legible. As a poignant reminder of what is at stake in envisioning a discipline of art history, let us consider the following observations made in 1986 by John Tagg. In answering his own rhetorical question, "Should art historians know their place?" Tagg responds:

NO: if it means declaring a position and raising a flag—to The New Art History or The Social History of Art, for example, as *the* privileged critique which will give rise to a coherent practice; if it means staking out a theoretical site, a place for miracles and healing, a place for pilgrimage, which will also be a place in the sun, a piece of the territory of the discipline for defense and possession. . . . [And again] NO: if it means repeating the claims of an Anglo-American social history of art which, almost 15 years ago, drawing strength from renewed theoretical debate on the left and in the women's movement, sought to rally the discipline around new unifying ambitions, rejecting diversifying debate as diversionary and claiming, in T. J. Clark's words, to be "the place where the questions have to be asked."⁴⁷

It is necessary to recognize, as Tagg goes on to say in the following passage, that "this 'place where the questions have to be asked' was always inscribed within the institutional limits and power relations which cannot be reduced to methodological positions." Or, as we have seen elsewhere in this study, it was inscribed within the privileged positions of (instrumentalist) observation and mastery of the panoptic gaze and the anamorphic archive fabricated by art history as a modernist discipline: where, as Locke put it, things can "lie so orderly as to be found,"⁴⁸ with their meanings (trans)fixed and held in place.

We need not, however, construe Clark's substitution of social history in 1974 with feminist theory in 1987 as a simple perpetuation of the logocentric fantasy that there is one place where the only significant questions can be asked. Such an *Ansatzpunkt*, as we have seen, would be coincident with

that of the patriarchal gaze that feminist research has sought to deconstruct. Feminist art history needs panopticons the way fish need bicycles (to paraphrase a saying current not long ago). One could hear Clark's words as primarily a lament for the current disarray of certain facets of social history, in particular the reductivist forms of Marxist art history in which issues of gender construction and gender relations had been marginalized.⁴⁹

We can discern with increasing clarity (that of hindsight, of course) that the social history of art was a highly diverse and internally conflicted enterprise, ranging from critical-historical studies fully engaged with contemporary critical issues to designs for a Marxiant art history deeply complicit with the idealisms of bourgeois practice. What emerged, sadly, was often like that cramped and ultimately reactionary version of Marxism of the 1930s whose practitioners were sorely taxed by artwork that swerved too much from the norms of social realism:⁵⁰ a form of *feng-shui* geomancy, itself a product of disciplinary historicism.

In the final analysis (one says that with some irony), any useful forms of opposition to the excesses of late capitalism are not compatible with historicism. As we have sought to demonstrate throughout this volume, if it is patent that any form of intellection or artistic activity is a mode of political activity, then the pertinent problem might be this: Could a socially responsible art history demonstrate and articulate, in its finest details, what cultural domination is about (a) without relegitimizing historicist narrative knowledge and (b) without merely erecting alternate schemes of transcendence?⁵¹

Surely the fate of such a discipline rests upon facing such questions directly and upon rereading its history not simply oppositionally, as an arm-chair straw man, but rather anamorphically, ironically, and nonreductively, as, of course, even Marx himself well understood.

3. Seeing beyond the Panopticon

Metaphor circulates in the city; it conveys us like its inhabitants, along all sorts of passages, with intersections, red lights, one-way streets, crossroads or crossings, patrolled zones and speed limits. We are in a certain way—metaphorically of course, and as concerns the mode of habitation—the content and tenor of the vehicle: passengers, comprehended and displaced by metaphor.

—J. Derrida

Let us end, then, not by tying together the loose threads of the two previous sections but by superimposing them. Let us call that montage

an emblem of where we have been in this text. And let us site that emblem of the possibility and impossibility of art history where it belongs historically: on the Athenian akropolis. We end with a story winding us back full circle.

Looking back in our text, we recall the following. Visual environments orchestrate signification, deploy and stage relations of power, and construct and embody ideologies through the establishment of frameworks of legibility.⁵² Such frameworks incorporate and fabricate cues as to how they are to be reckoned with by individual subjects and groups.

In all its marks, traces, and images, we do not, however, simply read that world. Rather, we *reckon* with it. This term may be more apt because of its double meaning: to think with and to cope with. Two of the most characteristic modes of reckoning with the visual environment are the anaphoric and the anamorphic.⁵³ By the anaphoric, a given portion of a built environment (a mark, form, image, or object) is apprehended as significant by its connectivity to or contrasts with other portions of that environment. Such relationships may involve contiguity (metonymy), similarity (metaphor), or some combination of the two. A given formation may thus be said to index adjacent or absent others by contiguity or semblance. What constitutes semblance is necessarily a function of given historical, social, or cultural conditions.⁵⁴

The second and complementary device, anamorphism, involves the establishment of legibilities from particular and often surprisingly oblique perspectives.⁵⁵ As with anaphora, it operates within specific existing codes of formation. Any articulated intervention into a given visual environment induces altered relationships among such elements, causing them to be re-narrativized or reread: to be seen differently. What results is a picture of a visual environment as a dynamically unfolding, fluid, rhetorical stage, filled with revelations and oclusions, lucidities and undecidabilities. All tableaux are momentary and transitory; any genius loci is migratory, always subject to critique. Meaning is continually subject to displacement and deferral, and subjects are always subject to such displacements and migratory fixities: subjectivity, like objecthood, is a fictitious fact; a dialectical and ideological negotiation, a provisional homestead. And every city is thereby a hall of mirrors, an envelope of theses for a Subject.

The Periclean building program for the Athenian akropolis, begun in the middle of the fifth century B.C.,⁵⁶ engendered and worked to sustain a matrix of complementary and interrelated narratives: an ideology of the polis and its relationships to the individual. It operated as a prism through which the contradictions of Athenian social and political life might be resolved into an imaginary⁵⁷ homogeneity. As we shall see, it was a theory of the city, a *theatron* for seeing the city and its history, a machine for the manufacture of a history (fig. 4).

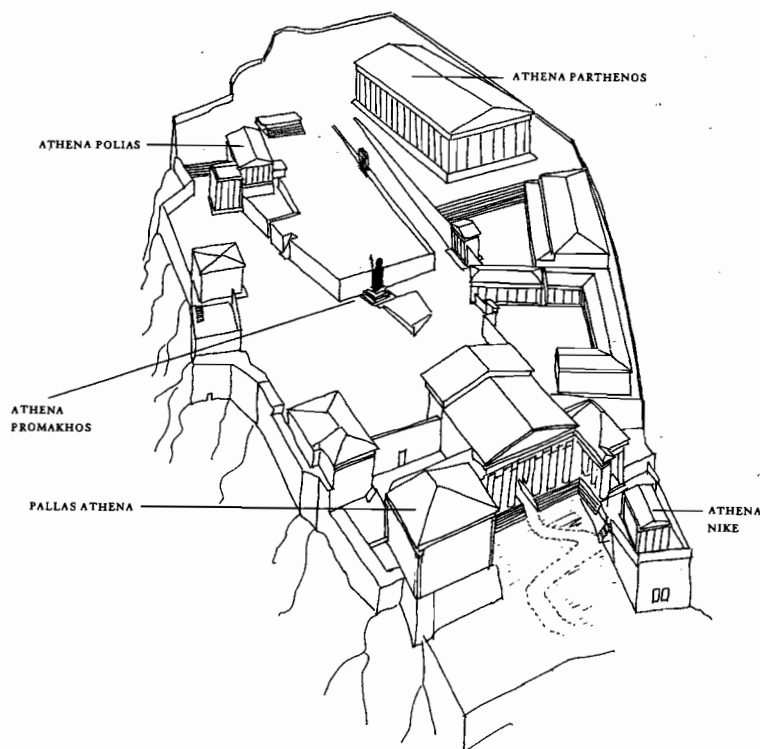


FIGURE 4. *Athens: Akropolis Reconstruction.*
(Adapted from G. P. Stevens, *Hesperia* 15 [1946], fig. 1.)

One of the principal functions of cities has been the staging of relations of power through the orchestration and manipulation of desire. In this sense, every city is a utopic fiction (or a conglomerate of fictions), working simultaneously to reveal and to mask social contradictions and individual differences. In my intended use of the term here, power operates through everyone in pervasive, though discontinuous, gridworks, out of which knowledge and desire are manufactured. Accordingly, visual environments establish concerted distributions of bodies, boundaries, surfaces, visibilities and occlusions, both over space and time and in arrangements whose internal mechanisms produce and sustain the relationships in which individuals are caught up.

A city's geometric, topological, and temporal economies purport to operate as grids of certainties within historically specific codes of visibility or legibility. This order is spatiotemporal: Cities act as devices to track, stabilize, control, and predict behavior over space and time, thereby marking, demar-

cating, and defining what shall constitute appropriate behavior. Such an order is composed of webs of anaphoric relationships, both metonymically and metaphorically. And this wickerwork order weaves together larger shaped unities: One of the principal strategies of the city as an apparatus for generating and sustaining power relations is that when viewed from the right distance and proper perspective (that is, anamorphically), a profound visibility—a *legibility*—emerges. Indeed, it might be suggested that the visual environment is for the fabrication of the world as legible; it is a set of templates for constru(ct)ing the social self.

As we understand more fully the nature of the images of cities that subjects come to form,⁵⁸ we see that one of the primary functions of cities is precisely to engender and replicate images of themselves, thereby providing the means whereby life worlds and their perspectival imagery—which is perforce to say their ideologies—must be reckoned with. In this regard, the history of the visual environment can be understood as the ongoing, dynamic, and frequently contradictory generation of imaginary textual systems—of ideologies. And the individual Subject is precisely the *site* where ideology is actively enacted and maintained (or critiqued).

It is thus misleadingly simplistic to speak of visual environments and their components as literally representing some absent, ineffable, or immaterial content, and equally inappropriate to speak of reading that environment or its elements (even when they purport to be static tableaux to be scanned). What is galvanized is a production: a reckoning-with.⁵⁹

Anaphora and anamorphism are social technologies, achieving their power and poignancy through the orchestration of tensions between ambiguity or disorder and clarity or canonically construable order. There is no legibility outside of historically specific codes of formations, and all such codes are carpented out of ideologically prefabricated materials. It is necessary to stress here that such prefabrication involves the replication of metaphors whose metaphoricality has been forgotten: In that *aporia* lies the possibility of re-reading and thereby the potential for change and critique; this is always a rhetorical economy.⁶⁰

Both anaphora and anamorphism refer to relationships established and postulated among objects and images. They are dependent upon understanding perceptual or cognitive systems as working actively to resolve ambiguity and to order apparent disorder. Without rehearsing a very large and complex subject here,⁶¹ such an observation can be taken as reasonably pertinent, with two important provisos. First, whatever might constitute perceptual disambiguity or order in an artifactual environment is always dependent upon social, cultural, and historical conditions. Second, balanced with this is (again, a historically conditioned and specific) need for stimulation (or

non-fatigue), which can be accomplished through the construction or construal of contrasts between order and ambiguity.

All this is by way of saying that no perception is innocent or neutral but is always invested in the [re]cognition of a "real" that individuals might be socially prepared to accept as such. This means, of course, that the perceptual facet of intellection is necessarily politically invested.⁶² We do not perceive objects; instead we see meaningful or meaningless objects, what objects afford or preclude.

The Periclean akropolis was designed to function as a perfectly canonical religious sanctuary, despite some of its architectonic oddities. These include the unusual size and proportions of the temple dedicated to the *parthenos* aspect of Athena,⁶³ the bizarre shape and internal organization of that temple of arcana known as the Erechtheion, which also included space for commemoration of the *polias* aspect of Athena,⁶⁴ and the large, grandly built, and oddly shaped gatehouse on the western end, the Propylaia.⁶⁵

Athena was deployed on the akropolis in several interrelated transmutations—as *parthenos* (virgin), *polias* (city emblem-protectress), *promakhos* (warrior), and *nikē* (victory).⁶⁶ We are presented, then, with various manifestations of a goddess whose name echoes that of the city itself: emblems of various [re]presentations which the *polis* purports to make of itself. In this regard, Athena is multiply present: in a sculptured image in the Parthenon, at an altar in the Erechtheion, in the guise of a colossal statue in the forecourt of the akropolis to the east of the Propylaia, and in an image⁶⁷ in the Nike temple. In addition, she appears as a victory figure⁶⁸ on the frieze and balustrade of the latter and on the pedimental and frieze sculpture of the Parthenon.⁶⁹ She is thus omnipresent in a variety of perspectives: as anamorphic images of the polis itself. Yet no one image stages the totality of her identity and powers, and we see her refracted through the prism of the akropolis.⁷⁰

Within this prism that disperses the aspects of Athena throughout the sanctuary, individuals (re)cognize her as facets of their own civic roles. Rather than synthesizing all these roles and visions in a single sumptuary image, like some Ephesian Artemis, the akropolis *refracts* Athena (and Athens) into her socially and culturally meaningful personae. She becomes a pantheon in her own right, a metaphor of the city, and the akropolis multiplies Athena across a web of synecdoches.

This is an extremely clever and subtle fiction. And yet it is at odds with our usual understanding of classicism in art and architecture.⁷¹ This may be apprehended precisely at the point of transition from outside to inside: at the Propylaia. In order to understand this contradiction, we need to look more closely at the building as it reflects the codes of artistic practice begun

during the fifth century. Half a millennium later, following the rhetoric of Roman art criticism, we have come to refer to this code as the classical style in art and architecture.⁷²

Classicism is a large and complex subject, and we shall use the term specifically in connection with one of the essential principles of Greek and Roman criticism. This is the notion of *summētria*, from which our term *symmetry* derives. The modern term refers primarily to a geometric order or formal balance among component parts in any visual object or composition. In antiquity, however, *summētria* meant a commensurability among parts of some whole—a relational property among elements of a figural or architectonic composition, articulated, commonly, by means of a set of integrated ratios or proportions.

And yet the term appears to have had wider connotations, beyond that of an abstract correlation of measures or modules. Its referential field is metaphoric, evoking the perception of relationships among elements in a composition that could be construed as complementary to or equivalent to the relationships among parts of organic bodies—in particular, the human body. In other words, artifacts that we might term classical, and that a fifth-century Greek might have seen as embodying *summētria*, would be those composed and articulated within an organic metaphor—an organicism in which natural objects or the human body provided, by analogy, the principles of composition and construction. "Man is the measure" of all things, and conversely all well-made objects should embody the proportions, harmonies, and symmetries to be found (read) in organic bodies and forms.

In that sense, the temple dedicated to Athena *parthenos* could be seen as composed within a grammar of *summētria* not only with respect to its internal proportional details,⁷³ but also because its overall three-dimensional mass has approximately the same palpable proportions as the akropolis rock on whose highest point it stands. *Summētria* thus provided a series of protocols for the legibility of the artifactual environment: a certain coherent visual or architectonic logic whereby made forms could be read and understood. One might call this a grammar of sense.⁷⁴

Let us look at the Propylaia in this context. Taken as a whole, the structure is not bilaterally symmetrical, particularly on its western front. The southern wing, in plan, is somewhat truncated (fig. 5): There is no southern chamber to echo that known in antiquity as the *pinakotheka*, or picture gallery. The commonly accepted explanation for this truncation is the existence of a piece of the old Mycenaean fortification wall on the south that, for reasons not fully understood, could not be taken down to make way for Mnesikles's supposedly full plan.⁷⁵ The southeastern angle of the southern portico is built directly against that old enceinte.

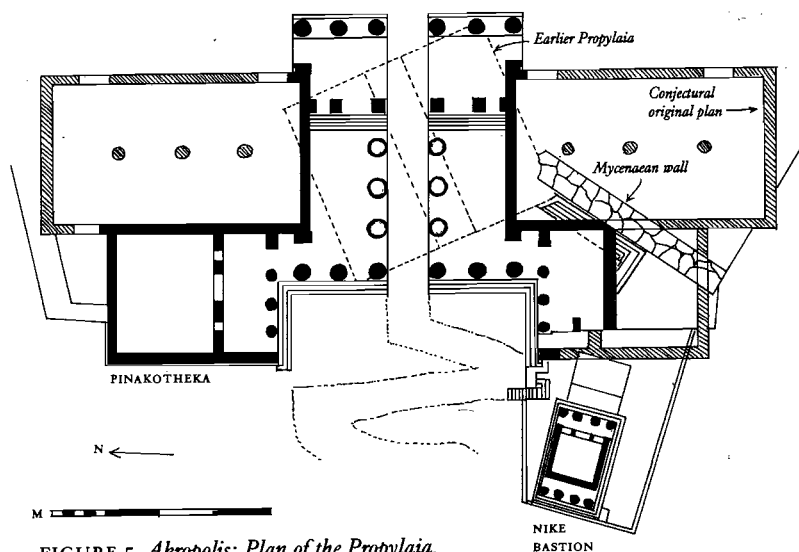


FIGURE 5. *Acropolis: Plan of the Propylaea.*
(Adapted from Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens*, fig. 614.)

A good deal of controversy remains as to the original intentions of the builders, and various reconstructions of possible objectives have been mounted over the years.⁷⁶ We will not be concerned with these here. Suffice it to note that whatever distortion in plans might have occurred (if any at all), the west front of the Propylaea appears palpably balanced and symmetrical in its frontal elevation along the U-shaped arms of the outer colonnade. As actually constructed, the components project an impression of mirror-image symmetry to one ascending toward the central east-west passageway onto the akropolis platform.

All of this is preparatory and, to some extent, secondary to the following problem. One feature of the building abruptly and radically departs from the expected canons of classicism: the oddly skewed placement of the door and flanking windows of the northern chamber, or the *pinakotheka*.⁷⁷ The door is not centered on its wall, and the two flanking windows are not evenly apportioned within the space. Moreover, these openings are not centered on the intercolumniar spaces of the fronting portico when viewed head-on.⁷⁸ This situation contrasts with that of the east frontage of the temple known as the Erechtheion when viewed from an equivalent position, outside its prostyle portico;⁷⁹ and it contrasts with similar practice throughout the history of Greek building. There is no such bilateral symmetry here with respect to the

principles of *summētria*, nor do there appear to be any structural or material reasons why these elements are placed in this skewed position.⁸⁰

But if one examines the plan carefully, there is indeed a point—and only one point—from which the door and flanking windows appear in their expected or canonical positions. This is precisely at the point where the arrowed lines converge in figure 6: that is, on the ascent to the western front of the Propylaea. Only at this point are the three elements fully and precisely framed by the columns of the portico in front of the *pinakotheka*.⁸¹ And this point of resolution is coterminous with a position exactly on axis with the central passageway beginning on the western side of the main body of the Propylaea. In this regard, the south wall of the *pinakotheka* is in an anamorphic relationship to its viewers: Its components lock into a classically canonical position only when viewed from this skewed or oblique perspective—the perspective of one entering at the center of the embracing arms of the Propylaea's portico, on axis with the building's central and widest intercolumniation on the west.

But what is to be seen at this point, aside from a locking into place of an expected facade? Is this anything more than a visual pun—like so many “Aha!” points in recent postmodernist architecture? Is this building, at the supreme moment of classicism, yet another instance of postmodernist play *avant la lettre*?

If we consider this anamorphic perspective more carefully, however, we see that two additional visual phenomena occur at precisely this point. It is here that the entrant, ascending the steep slope toward the Propylaea, would evidently first see the head of the colossal statue of the *promakhos* Athena, standing to the east of that building.⁸² She would be seen framed by the central passageway of the Propylaea, rendering that intercolumniar space a tableau or picture. In antiquity, the visibility of the *promakhos* statue had great significance. Its colossal size and brilliant material served as a landmark to sailors far out on the Saronic Gulf: Athena, with the sunlight flashing off her upright spear and shield, was the first glimpse of home.⁸³ To one entering the akropolis, this emblem of civic vigilance and military power first appears as a framed picture in an otherwise unfigured facade.

Thus, at this anamorphic point two striking things happen: The asymmetries of the picture gallery are resolved into a canonical symmetry, and Athena appears as the central framed picture of the facade of the Propylaea. At the same time, a third image is revealed, this time directly to the west, behind the entrant: the first clear view of the island of Salamis over the low hills to the west of the akropolis rock. This island was the site of the naval victory by the Greeks over the Persians in 480 B.C.—a battle that marked a decisive turning

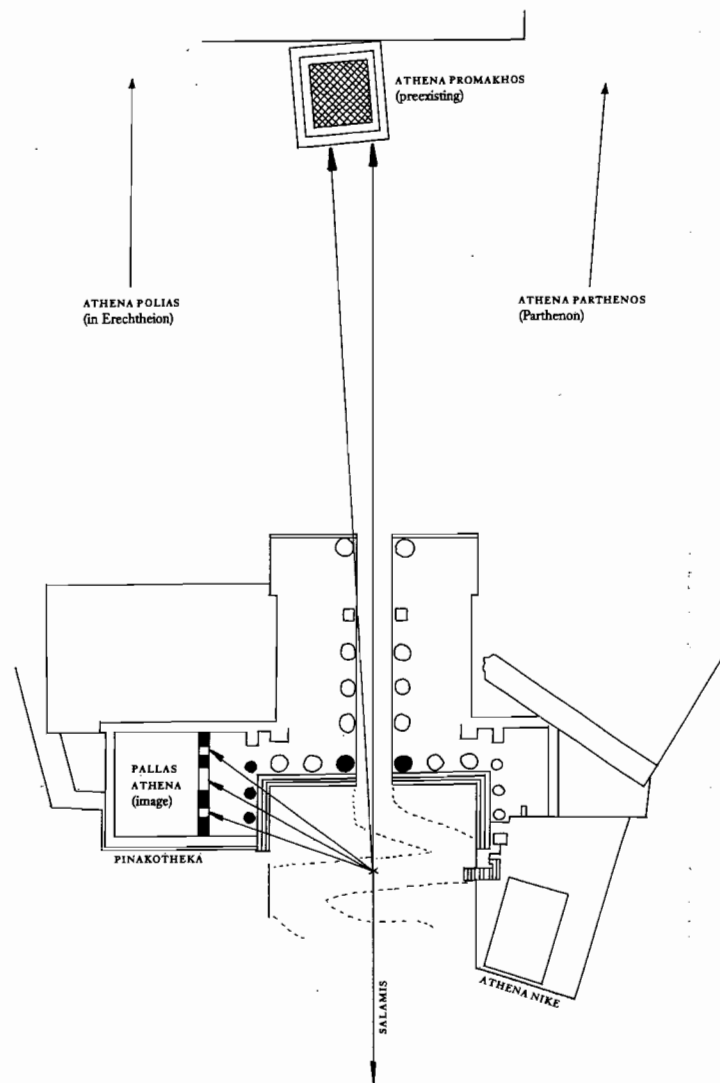


FIGURE 6. *Propylaia: Anamorphic Resolutions.*
Drawing by author.

point in the defense of the mainland, precipitating the withdrawal of the Persian imperial forces. A strong link has been created between the roles of Athena and Athens in that victory.

This connection is more than a one-dimensional statement by a city pointing with civic pride to its role in turning back the tides of Persian imperialism on behalf of Greece. It is legible as a political statement regarding the relative roles of Athens and of Sparta in that war as well as an emblem of contemporary Athenian hegemony amongst its allies and client city-states.⁸⁴ In short, it was a carefully orchestrated ambiguous tableau with variant political, historical, and ideological connotations. Is it Athens or Athena making the historical claim as to the cause of the victory? Does one pay tribute to Athenian cleverness or that of Athena? To have said Athens would, it seems safe to assume, have been politically provocative in the deteriorating climate of the time. The Peloponnesian Wars, that great struggle between Athens and Sparta for political and territorial hegemony over Greece, began the year after the completion of the Propylaia. We do not know the extent to which the tableau fabricated here should be factored into our understanding of the immediate causes of that war; most likely, for anyone (or any Spartan) attentive to this fabrication, reading Athens rather than Athena here would be just one more manifestation of Athenian hubris, one more demonstration that the Athenian *dēmokratia* was, in fact, an imperium.⁸⁵ And the Propylaia would have been one more reminder of the ways in which the Athenian state had reappropriated the taxes on its client-states for self-embellishment, rather than spending the money on a common defensive shield for the allies against possible later Persian intervention.⁸⁶

What does all this have to do with classicism or with the principles of *summētria* with which we began? Apart from the referential aspects of the tableau constructed here, there are other contradictions that go to the heart of the practices under discussion. The most important of these is the fact that for this tableau to be legible at all, the organic wholeness of the object under discussion was deconstructed. In other words, the object orchestrated a kind of fictive classicism: Instead of being a complete, harmonious, and self-identical entity, a metaphor of organic wholeness, the Propylaia must depend upon an extrinsic, anaphoric reference to articulate any such canonical wholeness. By literally playing upon the perceptual expectancies of the beholder, it cues that subject into the only place from which the composition would grammatically read within the codes of classicism. The *pinakotheka* facade thereby fixes the subject at a singular site that is coincident with the viewing of a political-ideological tableau.

This reveals the Propylaia as more than a grand gate-house with a picture gallery wing; it is disclosed, in fact, as a kind of *theatron*, a place for seeing, a

place for constru(ct)ing meaning. It is the central point in a panoptic machinery from which, and only from which, the world is put into a telling and narrative order. This *theatron* does not simply render the subject a passive spectator on a tier of seats. Indeed, it is the obverse of the Greek theater, articulating the visual environment in such a way as to make of the Subject the site where meaning is produced and ideology enacted. The gaze and perspective of the subject here “measure” all things.

The Propylaia is thus a place of reckoning, in the double sense of the term. For meaning to be made legible, the subject must be sub-jected to a specific economy of constraints.⁸⁷ Upon entering into the sacral and religious core of the polis, the participant becomes a fixed and situated fiction, a democratic myth, a supporting player in a political and ideological drama scripted by a polis projecting itself as a democracy. The akropolis, then, in its prismatic economy, enframes the subject by articulating objects for its subjects.

The classical period, astutely termed by Pollitt a “moment,”⁸⁸ was, in fact, an instant of precarious balance. Even as its founding metaphors were being articulated, they were being unraveled. In their finest details, the marks of the chisel were never fully erased.

Which calls to mind the following from Calvino:

“I have neither desires nor fears,” the [Kublai] Khan declared, “and my dreams are composed either by my mind or by chance.”

“Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance [Marco Polo replied], but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls. You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.”

“Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.”⁸⁹

Or, as I have tried to articulate here, like Athens through the frame of the Propylaia: the very archetype of the theater of memory.⁹⁰

Or, like art history through the frames of its history. We are today in a position to see beyond theory or history in their modernist, panoptical forms. And in this study we have begun to see something of the design and construction of art history’s “history” as itself a *theory of history* with very particular ideological and metaphysical investments and naturalizations—an address to the present, transforming it into the fulfillment of a past we would wish to have descended from. And we have also seen just how precarious and solid that *theatron*, that discursive space, has been: metony-

mies perpetually working to fabricate the same metaphor, the same geomantic scenography.

Beyond the prefabricated places where questions have had to be asked, there are no metalanguages, only infralanguages that, like waves on an ocean, are vantage points, which are always part and parcel of what they arise to stand for or against. On that horizon, “art history” might be the history, theory, and criticism of the multiplicity of cultural processes that can be constru(ct)ed as enframing: an accounting for objects and their subjects, with all that that might entail.

A disciplinary practice that attends to all this—whether we name that art history or not—would itself be worth attending to.