

Dogma days

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Review of *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh

Until the 1970s, the story of twentieth-century art was hinged on painting: Cézanne “led to” Cubism, Cubism to abstraction, culminating in New York. But once that relay of progress ceased to be credible, the role of painting became a contentious issue, and the entire Modernist canon an arena for gladiatorial blood-letting.

To explore these past 100 years not in terms of “movements”, or even of individual artists, but simply year by year, does seem a promising approach, especially when divided among four authors described, in the publisher’s blurb for *Art Since 1900*, as “the most important and influential art historians of our time”, who have “collectively transformed the study of modern art”. Those claims are not entirely bombast. Rosalind Krauss, for example, has written brilliantly, sometimes poetically, on both Picasso and Surrealism; Yve-Alain Bois no less spiritedly on Matisse and Mondrian; while Benjamin H.D. Buchloh’s dialogues with Gerhard Richter make fascinating reading, even if, like me, you happen not to care greatly for that artist’s work. When I first heard about this project from its commissioning editor, the late Nikos Stangos (to whom this book is dedicated), I had imagined that each author might select one work for each year, exploring it in depth. But the typical entry among the 107 here is not a sustained focus so much as a swift-moving survey. The contributions read too often like a succession of breathless twenty-minute conference papers – with all that implies by way of academic display, as well as audience frustration and cumulative exhaustion. *Art Since 1900* opens with four essays on theoretical method. No authorship is given, though each employs the first person; if the cast is “in order of appearance”, Hal Foster takes the psychoanalytical, Krauss the social-historical, Bois the formalist, and Buchloh the post-structuralist and deconstructionist. That variety of contrasted approaches is further articulated in the authors’ round-table discussions that punctuate the text. Read consecutively, each entry does come at its subject from a different angle, whether it’s Bois on Moscow Constructivists in 1921, Buchloh on

Socialist Realism in 1934, or Yve-Alain Bois again, in Britain in 1937, attacking Naum Gabo's tame version of geometric abstraction. What emerges is often more about critical positions, patrons and art-world polemics than about artists and works of art.

It was only when I had reached some way into the 1950s in this book that I looked back, and realised that I had traversed a terrain almost unrecognisably different from my own experience of art; a strangely bare one, from which almost half the known landmarks had been erased. This is a twentieth century without, say, a Max Beckmann triptych or a Bonnard self-portrait; where Douanier Rousseau and early Chagall both go unillustrated; where Balthus and Edward Hopper remain resolutely unmentioned. Even for those artists who make the cut, only one moment in their trajectory is usually selected: an early Léger, for example, but no "Great Parade". Despite the authors' rhetoric of internal debate, it seems to me that none quite spells out the shared agenda which has led directly to these exclusions: their conviction that art should be "challenging", and, by extension, their special sympathy for those who – from the Russian Constructivists to the Situationists – have attempted to alter the role of art in the world. The photomontages of John Heartfield would be one such exemplar: art should take on "a variety of productive functions such as information and education or political enlightenment". As Buchloh puts it (referring to the 1970s),

such an art will embody the effort to escape from the aesthetic container, to break the chains of the institutional frame, to challenge the assumptions (and indeed the implicit power relations) established by the art world's presuppositions.

The mid-1970s marked the moment when the grand progress of Greenbergian abstract painting faltered, and the austerities of conceptual art – opposed to the medium of painting per se – appeared all-conquering. It was also the foundational moment for *October*, the MIT-based magazine with which all four authors have been closely associated. Krauss's own account is embedded here (under the year 1962) within a box dedicated to *Artforum*, a journal "committed to a more muscular writing than the vaporous belle-lettristic style of the other magazines". However,

two of the most productive writers, Max Kozloff and Lawrence Alloway, were hostile to what they characterized as the "formalist" drift of the magazine. On the other side of the struggle were Fried, Michelson and Krauss. The latter two resigned from the board in

1975 to start their own magazine, *October*, named after the Sergei Eisenstein film that suffered from the Soviet assault against “formalism”.

So the *October* authors were from the beginning a bristling, embattled breakaway group, and for the next thirty years they sustained a protest, however quixotic, at the corrupt values of the mainstream art world, even if, with their professorships at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, they inevitably became pretty much an “institutional frame” in themselves. But *Art Since 1900* feels both blander and less disinterested than other *October* texts: something of an academic textbook, and a bid for the canon – as well as an attempted coup by a kind of fundamentalist sect.

At its worst, *Art Since 1900* might be subtitled “The Revenge of the Seventies”. For that heyday of minimalist/conceptualist austerities was of course overtaken by the eruption of a “refigured” painting – a decade still difficult to assess, the “Embarrassing Eighties”, when painting seemed to return to centre stage. That episode is dealt with very cursorily, with much the same horrified contempt that Clement Greenberg brought to the emergence of “Pop”, and is here glibly identified by Foster with Reaganite neoconservatism. “The reactionary turn in politics was accompanied by one in aesthetics, as was manifest in the resurrection of old forms like oil painting”. Anselm Kiefer (arguably the most achieved of the Europeans) is represented not by a painting at all, but only by a photograph of 1969, in which he makes a Nazi salute. Among several surprising errors one stands out. In Foster’s entry for 1963, he includes among the international exemplars for the early paintings of Georg Baselitz, “the American Philip Guston, whose then recent conversion from Abstract Expressionism to Figuration had also been achieved at the price of depicting the human body in pieces or in grotesque cartoonish configurations”. In fact Guston’s new imagery did not yet exist, and Hal Foster has skewed what most would reckon a key date in the chronology of recent art. Exhibited in 1970, Guston’s pictures were initially rejected by the New York art establishment, only to become by far the most generally admired paintings of our time. In *Art Since 1900*, not a single Guston is reproduced.

The near-absence of paintings in the final third of this book (none at all after 1990) is simply misleading. Perhaps the most lasting development of the 1980s was the reassessment of the figurative painters of the 1920s and 30s such as Balthus and Hopper, or, in Britain, Stanley Spencer. Many images,

largely invisible during the years when Abstraction and Modernism appeared synonymous, were now released back into historical consciousness. This has greatly and, I suggest, permanently altered and expanded the twentieth-century range. But *Art Since 1900* often reads as a belated attempt to reinstate the old oppressions, to “disappear” those artists once again. Repeatedly, the authors crudely equate between-the-wars figuration with Fascism. Photography is brought into play as a weapon against “the return to the patriarchal supremacy of painting”, and the conflict is read back by Buchloh into the Weimar years, with August Sander declared “the true genius of Neue Sachlichkeit portraiture”, in such a way as to negate Grosz, Otto Dix and Christian Schad. The genre of Selbstkunst, the self-representation singled out by German critics of the period, is nowhere explored; Edvard Munch, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Lovis Corinth all remain unillustrated, and Beckmann is taken to task for his “superannuated probing of the self”. The later work of Léger will be condemned by Bois as simply a “retreat”, as well as a craven capitulation to the Communist Party line.

In all this, there’s a whiff of fanaticism – I think of hardline neoclassicists ranting against the Romantics – and it can seem as though all four authors, in their different ways, are aiming to put the runaway horse of twentieth-century art back into the Enlightenment stable. In 1999, in a lecture given at the National Gallery, I heard Rosalind Krauss refer to painting as “that etiolated pursuit” – which is to say, pallid, sickly, exhausted. But as I leaf through *Art Since 1900*, I’m struck by how visually impoverished, how dreary, large chunks of the twentieth century appear when stripped of painting. It is not difficult to share their anger at a contemporary “culture industry” that renders every image into marketable “spectacle”; but their solution seems a new iconoclasm. Applied to history, this Taliban approach is a betrayal of all that was meant by “modernism”. The earliest use of “modernist” was theological, signifying a freedom from fundamentalist dogma – and in art too, the thrust of early Modernism was mostly libertarian (hence the links of so many artists to anarchist ideas, mostly unexplored here).

By contrast, *Art Since 1900* imposes an Inquisition, authoritarian and exclusionary. Benjamin Buchloh says here of Greenberg, “though his omissions were disastrous, he deals with the artists he selects more profoundly and more precisely than anyone else does”. I would like to concede something of the kind to these authors. But their amputations

eventually became so obtrusive that I ended up seeing only the bleeding corpse.

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