

The following paper was written for the GLAADH conference, *Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History? Debating Approaches to Curriculum Change in the UK* held at Goodenough College, London, September 2003. All rights are reserved and no part of this paper should be reproduced or published in any form without prior permission in writing from the author.

Grasping the World: Conceptualizing Ethics After Aesthetics

Donald Preziosi, UCLA & Oxford

[A] divine teleology secures the political economy of the Fine-Arts...

Jacques Derrida, 'Economimesis,' tr. R.Klein, *Diacritics* II.2 (1981) 5.

The following remarks are predicated on the belief that pragmatic revisions and rethinking of academic curricula are grounded, however implicitly or covertly, in deep-seated assumptions about the nature of the art historical object of study and of the subject positions such an object has entailed. And this belief is a product of my own very pragmatic experience of helping to refashion and reframe an art history curriculum at UCLA which, when I came to it over a decade and a half ago, was already deeply enmeshed in debates about multiculturalism and the social and political responsibilities of disciplinary practice.

So I want to thank the organizers of our conference for the invitation to speak at this concluding meeting. I wish I had been here at the beginning of things, three years ago, which by coincidence was about the time my own academic department in California had been celebrating a quarter-century of being 'globalized.' An event, however, that was simultaneously celebratory and funereal, like one of those perpetually oscillating optical illusions, about which it has since come to seem more important to try and discover what was common to these two reactions rather than to be satisfied by one or the other. I'll talk about some of our experiences at UCLA in our discussions later on, but I'd like to begin here in a more general way by addressing some issues that I feel underlie many of our efforts at instituting what may be called 'situated knowledges' in art historical practice.

Situated knowledge is knowledge that surrenders its global pretensions, its reach being limited to its *loci* and conditions of emergence,¹ renouncing mastery as such, as well as the subtle mixture of monotheist discourse and enlightenment rationalism we call modernity, its relations with others governed by ethical considerations. It was the anthropologist Clifford Geertz who once put this most succinctly in speaking of the ways in which otherness, thematized as

cultural diversity, not only calls for the respect the analyst is expected to grant it, but in a self-reflexive gesture is further expected to relativize the position of the analyst. He said²

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If (interpretative anthropology) has any general office in the world it is to keep re-teaching this fugitive truth.

It seems to me that our concern for the fate of academic art history has been at a crossroads for some time; at a fork in the road beyond which a broader avenue beckons to procure for the faithful their official entry into a disciplinary field, where they may be pigeonholed within a hierarchy of domains of knowledge and of positions (“Pre-columbian” art history; ‘Jewish art;’ ‘Bangladeshi postmodernism’ etc.), and thus finally be ‘established.’ The narrower road ahead promises us only that ‘identity’ freezes the ability to question that order, and, in the words of Michel de Certeau³, inhibits the capacity ‘to wonder what made it possible, to seek, in passing over its landscape, traces of the movement that formed it; to discover in histories supposedly laid to rest’ “how and to what extent it would be possible to think otherwise.”⁴

The former path corresponds, in my experience on the other side of the Atlantic, to the massively commodified ‘globalization’ of departments of art history. The latter path goes in a different direction and recalls to my mind some of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who in several decades of writing consistently argued against a notion of the truth as the instrument of a mastery being exercised by the knower over areas of the unknown as she or he brings them within the fold of the same, insisting that there is a form of truth that is totally alien to us, that we do not discover within ourselves, but that calls on us from beyond us, requiring that we leave the realms of the known and of the same.⁵ It is that otherness, the recognition of otherness as such, he argued, that constitutes us as ethical beings.

What would an ‘art history’ that attended to otherness not simply ‘look like’, but how would it actually work? What would it mean to actually practice such an art history? What would it mean, today, to practice an ‘ethical’ art history from within and against globalization? Is it even conceivable any longer to link together ethics and the discursive practice of art history; to speak of them, honestly, in the same breath? I want to try and address this in what follows. But it must be emphasized that these are no idle, ‘academic’ questions, after all: everything we do and think is at stake. And there may in fact be no ‘answers’ in the terms in which we have been accustomed to asking such questions in recent years. The following is divided into four parts.

1.

First, some cards to lay on the table. *At the heart of that two-century-old practice of the modern self we call art, the 'science' of which we would have liked to have called art history (or perhaps museology, art history's chief allomorph, or even 'visual culture,' that now hyper-commodified method of avoiding the impossibility of representation), and the 'theory' of which we may still wish to call aesthetics, or sociology, or even philosophy, [at the heart of all this] lie a series of knots and conundrums, the denial of which constitutes the very relationship between 'subjects and objects' naturalized in circular fashion and kept in perpetual play by the disciplinary machinery; the epistemological technology, of art history.*

It was precisely that *denial* that grounded, legitimized, and institutionalized that shadow discourse of aesthetic philosophy or theory which the art historical imagination, in varying ways over these two centuries, has continued to project as a 'transcendence' of its own (simultaneously co-constructed) disciplinary abjection. We need not be surprised that a discipline can be grounded in denial, since disciplinarity as such is founded upon the occlusion of difference and heterogeneity; on quite explicit but insufficiently acknowledged channelings and fragmentings of vision.

It was critical theorist Samuel Weber who observed, in his 1996 book *Mass Mediauras*⁶, a study commissioned by the Australian Commission on the Reform of Higher Education (in a 'multicultural' or postcolonial environment):

If the institutionalization of the subject/object relation - the matrix of representational thinking - is the result of the emplacement that goes on in and as modern technology, then those same goings-on undermine the objectivity upon which the matrix depends. By determining reality as standing stock, representational thinking treats objects as calculable 'data,' as 'information' to be taken into account or accounted for. Thus, whether in economic practice or in modern art, objects are de-objectified by becoming increasingly subject to the calculations of a subjective will struggling to realize its representations and thereby to place itself in security.

He then went on to say: *But...there are no secure places. Emplacement itself remains tributary to that movement of unsecuring that it ostensibly seeks to escape or to ignore.*

The ontological question as to whether or not there really are 'secure places,' I might add, may however obscure the co-determinacy of both. The academic discipline of art history, from one perspective the most rigorous and encyclopedic 'institutionalization of the subject/object

relation' as such, to borrow Weber's words, has evolved historically by living in a virtual future, in a curious space-time of the future perfect tense - *as if* (as an institution) *it shall have been* the magisterial 'practice' of a philosophy (or a concept or theory which some may continue to call aesthetics), and in so doing, in approaching (whilst never quite reaching) its asymptotic point or horizon of completion, it perpetually reconstitutes and reiterates the problematic of its unresolvable foundational dilemma. *Which is, precisely, its ambivalence about the constitution of the self in its relation to and entailment with objects; with its object-world.* This repetition-compulsion is played out as attempts to keep in play contrary theories of that relationship, as I've just noted, much like the endless and irresolvable oscillations of an optical illusion. (The form of your stuff - the stuff you either produce or consume or both - either *is* the figure of your truth; and/or it is *not...*).⁷

It is consequently no mean task to conceive of articulating a critically adroit historiography of a discipline built around such doubly-compounded phantasms, let alone project for it a better institutional future. It has certainly been not a little problematic to articulate the evolutionary development of the academic field as if it were some singular evolution of concepts or 'theories' 'of' 'art.' That is, the idea that 'art' itself was historically the evolution of a certain *residue in all things* - once you subtract the instrumental and utilitarian (and for some the political, social-historical, or sectarian religious) meanings of things, as so clearly and explicitly articulated in connection with the founding of the Louvre and other early national museums. That is, a 'residue' linked together (as a genealogy or 'history' one might say) to serve ethical and political functions in the present in the new modern nation-state. It would behoove us to step back and try and reconstruct the conditions that led to the invention and naturalization of this remarkable *practice* of the modern subject; of the modern 'citizen,' we call art.

If what we call 'the history of art' is to be framed as an *answer*, what then were the original *questions* to which our quite remarkable profession purported to address? And what was 'art,' that uncanny invention of the European Enlightenment, and more specifically, it might be argued, of post-Revolutionary French museology (and even more specifically, it can be argued, of post-Revolutionary French and British and American and German and Swedish and Austrian Freemasonry (but that's another paper) - what was this 'art' itself the answer to? What circumstances, problems, or dilemmas did 'art' and art's 'history' (and theory, and criticism, and production, and marketing) purport to address? Of what were they the demonstration? What purposes were served by art history's massive and simultaneous metonymizing and metaphorizing or fetishizing of the built environment; its accumulating and reformatting the relics of the past into episodic chains of objects, wherein the significance or meaning of a thing came to be staged *either* as a function of its position relative to others that come before or after, whether temporally, stylistically, or thematically, *or* as a function of its uniqueness and irreproducibility? [Is

this any more than an allomorph of the unresolvable tensions between individuality and community in (Western) modernity?] And where access into this wickerwork of object-time could be made to seem 'free' to all as material for use in articulating the solipsistic dramaturgy of the mournfully adrift and ever more lonely modern self?

In trying to imagine, then, what exactly it might mean to 'conceptualize' art history, the following cautions might not be out of place:

(First) As the protracted debates constituting disciplinary historiography continue to demonstrate so acutely, to speak of 'art history' as if it were – or as if it had ever been – a coherent singular practice, let alone the performance of a consistent method or theory, is of course historically reductive. 'Visual Culture' is not an answer to this problem but rather, as we've learned over the past two decades, a restatement of the problem itself. Despite its modern academic reification, art history is a *deponent* practice; having always been one of a *series of allomorphic institutions and practices* which arose historically both in tandem and *seriatim* in connection with attempts to deal with some very specific problems of a social, cultural, political, and epistemological nature. Its allomorphs include museology, art criticism, the heritage industry, tourism, the fashion industry, history-writing, and (as Michel de Certeau once brilliantly argued)⁸ history-writing's unacknowledged sibling psychoanalysis, archaeology, theatre, anthropology, aesthetic philosophy, and art-making. It has indeed taken a certain quite rigorously enforced 'discipline' to reify and separate out these facets of the modern practice of the self as distinct professions or institutions. The time is long past due when these complexities; this romance of lost siblings, should have been acknowledged, let alone engaged with.

(Second) To speak of 'art' as if it *is* an 'it' (rather than, say, a *when*, or, as the ancient Greeks and Romans had it, a *how*) that not only pre-exists early modernity or exists outside Europe and its extensions is to perform an ideological demonstration of using a module or measure to delineate and account for the unity and diversity of human groups over space and time. 'Art' in this sense was (and academically remains) an instrument; a 'practical science' for defining and demonstrating a wide variety of political and ethical hypotheses about individuals, nations, races, genders, religions, economies, classes, and peoples. Art as a measure of humanness. As *the* measure of the human...

(Third) The 'order' that art history as a human science seeks *in* the vast variety of artifacts constituting the human object-world constitutes as much a meditation on classification and affinity as it is about its ostensible objects of study themselves. It will have always been necessary to ask what ethical and political ends were served by a belief in a temporal continuity amongst humanly-made objects. A belief grounded in an imputed fundamental analogy between

ourselves as temporally-continuous organisms and the object-permanence (and continuity) of objects. What functions has the belief in a 'structure' in art's history, or a 'shape' in (art historical) time, served? What benefits have accrued, and for whom, with such beliefs? (The short answer is that they have almost invariably been nasty.)

The 'orders' of art history and the 'shapes' of the time of the art of art history constitute as much ideological or philosophical demonstrations of implicit or explicit transcendent truths as they are fabrications or constructions of such truths. It has been noticed that histories, museologies, or philosophies 'of' art appear more and more inconceivable apart from the ideologies of *representation* and of race and character which have underlain and motivated such practices for over two centuries in every modern nation-state. Are the racist essentialisms (or the specious cultural relativisms they co-construct and bring in tow) that have molded the foundation blocks of art history (and aesthetic theory) from Winckelmann to Warburg, or from Herder to Hegel to Hippolyte Taine, 'removable' without taking apart the whole house? (The short answer, once again, is No. Most of our attempts to engage with this rarely evince an awareness either of just how profoundly entailed art historical theories and practices are with this.)

(Fourth) It is necessary in this connection to foreground the embeddedness of the aesthetic in all facets of modern social life since the Enlightenment; the fact that, to speak about art in modern Europe was perforce to speak of freedom, spontaneity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality; those matters that were at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony. 'Art,' as the founders of the Louvre quite literally argued, being that 'liberating' *residue in all things* that provided the ethical justification for the 'liberation' of objects held in 'captivity' by unacceptable classes, religious orders, and inferior (usually non-European) peoples. An ideology perfectly replicated by the recent joint declaration by the directors of 19 major museums in Europe and America of their 'right' not to return indigenous cultural patrimony because of their status as 'world museums' bearing what can only be called a postmodern white man's burden of 'showing the world to the world.' The reified construction of 'art,' then, as the romance of the soul of the bourgeoisie, was inseparable from the construction not only of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society but also from metamorphoses of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order, many of which constituted inversions or sublimations of earlier religious beliefs. From a strictly instrumentalist perspective, these were some of the things that this 'thing' called art; art as *a kind of thing*, was to be *for* in the new modern state. Yet the question remains, what did the invention of 'art' replace or cover over? (what did the invention of the discipline of art history serve to erase, obscure, or marginalize?)

Effectively rereading and rethinking our predecessors in what might be called a Benjaminian manner by radically reinventing them as in fact they customarily did to their own

predecessors (contrary to what one reads even today in art history's hagiographic bibles of begatting) might very well afford the possibility of bringing back to light what the Enlightenment (re)invention of 'art' has *hidden* for so long: that is, what the growth of modern aesthetic philosophy has caused to be *forgotten* – namely, and to give that multiply-layered package a single name, the ancient Aristotelian notions of *artifice* and *decorum*. Our historiographies have yet to contend effectively with the art of art history (and the history of art history's art) as *amnesiac phenomena*. Art history (or visual culture studies) as modes of re-membering the past and of simultaneously acting against any past which does not conform to an image of that from which we would wish to be descended. More on artifice, decorum, and amnesia a bit later if time permits.

2.

*Art is troublesome not because it is not delightful, but because it is not more delightful: we accustom ourselves to the failure of gardens to make our lives as paradisiacal as their prospects.*⁹

This observation by Robert Harbison poignantly articulated not only one of the main expectations for *art* in modern times, but also one of the main aspirations of *museums* - that they would somehow both ground and transform our lives: that they would, in short, *make us better*. By 'liberating' the aesthetic potential in all made things, we afford the possibility of what we are induced to believe is our own 'spiritual' liberation. The placement of such an expectation on art is one of the keystones in an overarching system of quasi-secular beliefs that distinguishes our post-Enlightenment age from earlier times, resting upon certain assumptions about the nature of meaningful relationships between (*what might thereby be distinguished as*) subjects and objects; between individuals or peoples and the worlds they weave about themselves and which in turn weave them into place. Assumptions, in short, about the adequacy of 'representation.'

Art history, museology, and aesthetic philosophy as we know them today owe their existence to the *hypothesis* – to the willed belief - that artifacts offer *significant insights* (and works of 'fine art' finer and even *more* significant insights) into the mind and character of their makers as well as their users. The notion that the *character* of individuals or peoples is homologous with (and more than circumstantially *entailed* with) their products and possessions is a reflex of the lingering theological desire that there *should* exist a concordance between them, as between all things under a heaven imagined to have fashioned them in the first place; the world as artifact of a divine artificer. (Art history, perhaps, as a product of a certain (more than Masonic) monotheism...) Individuals are thereby taken as inextricably linked to the forms, materials and affordances of their object-worlds. The problem of the origins and evolution of this *transformative* thesis about art and about museums as an art of demonstrating and delineating

identities; as an art of framing and staging memory and history; and as an art of weaving together and superimposing ethics and aesthetics, is entailed at every point with ongoing and dynamically changing projections of its possible futures or fates.

That the enterprises of art history, museology, and aesthetic philosophy, not to speak of art-making itself, are themselves artifacts and amplifications of these hypotheses should be perfectly evident. Art, in the modern sense this word acquired in the 18th century but not earlier, was the correlative and indispensable *means* by which the modern Euro-American subject and its consequent notions of agency have fabricated, sustained, and transformed the rest of the world in its image. The art of art history was crafted in this sense as what might be called the Esperanto of modernity: a universal language, measure and module by which to compare and contrast, and with which to speak 'scientifically,' about all peoples, including one's own.

The 'failure of gardens' or houses, cities, artworks, clothing, lovers, cars, etc, 'to make our lives as paradis[ic]al as their prospects,' in Harbison's telling words, is less the occasion in modern life for doubt than for inciting the desire for more of the same. His claim that we really do 'accustom ourselves to the failure of gardens' (or art) is of course an ironic one; we simultaneously learn never to be quite accustomed to such failures. Taken together with the presumed entailment of ourselves with our object-worlds, it will be clear that we live in a world in which you 'are' your stuff; a world designed to induce us to believe that, as art critic and aesthetic philosopher Arthur Danto once remarked, at the conclusion of his *Nation* magazine review of the 1997 biennale of the Whitney Museum of American Art, "You may not like the art, but it is probably closer to the heart of our period than other art we might prefer." He then added, "*Not knowing what you are looking at is the artistic counterpart of not altogether knowing who you are.*" – a restatement of the core of the ideology of the modernist aesthetic – that the work of art is as autonomous and self-determining as the paradigm of the bourgeois subject, and that, indeed, they are not merely 'reflective' of each other but co-determinative. The operative word here is 'as;' an 'as' that masks and renders mute and invisible an 'as-if,' to echo Judith Butler's famous observations about the masquerades and phantasmatic identifications constituting gender in modernity.¹⁰

One could modify this disciplined and continually cultivated desire for an isomorphic correspondence between style and value, ethics and aesthetics, by saying (as art historians and merchandizers of all kinds do) that not knowing what we're looking at is, equally, the equivalent of not knowing *when* and *where* we are (relative to others who always seem either in advance or behind the here and now). We live in a world defined by corporate entities committed above all to prescribing disciplined and predictable linkages between individuals and their object-worlds. In our world, in short, you are made to be desirous of being convinced that you are your stuff, so

that you will become even more desirous of becoming that which even 'better' stuff can say even more clearly to others and to yourselves about your continually evolving truth – that is, *what you shall have been for what you are in the process of becoming*. (The Crystal Palace – which I've argued at length elsewhere was the midwife of modern art historicism) has much to answer for). To sin in modernity is to be untrue to your 'style' (however prefabricated), as every teenager on the planet knows perfectly well, without having to read Proust. Artworks and other commodities ostensify and shape into harmonious unity (for those willing to submit to their logic) the turbulent content of the subject's appetites and inclinations.¹¹

This linkage of psychology, physiognomy, genealogy, and teleology is no mere by-product or contingent accident of modernity; it is modernity's topological core. The modern academic discipline of art history is one among several instrumental articulations of this capitalist allomorph of the Enlightenment dream of *commensurability* which sustained a desire (itself the performance of what I'll call a *secular theologism*¹²) for articulating *congruities* between subjects in respect to their object-worlds and among objects with respect to their subjects. This is a complex and multifaceted syllogistic topology, and is precisely the core concept; the phantasm of art history. Once again, the problem; the dilemma, if you will, of representational 'adequacy' vs. representational 'truth.' No art historian should find fundamentalist iconoclasm shocking; Derrida's statement that "(a) divine teleology secures the political economy of the Fine-Arts" is as true on the streets outside here as it is in the streets of Kabul, even if the modalities of iconoclasm and its iconolatrive obverse, fetishism, may differ.

This dream, a key ideological desideratum of the modern nation-state, has for two centuries oscillated in art historical practice between coeval contextualist and formalist modalities of interpretation and explanation; between Flatlandish 'social' histories of art or of 'visual culture' and equally fundamentalist 'returns to the object' (code words for the antipathy to 'theory' or, to put it more plainly, to questioning of authority) and to the veneration of what one American art writer a few years ago called the 'intelligence' of art.¹³ These poles are not always (as they happen to be at the moment) politically aligned, respectively, with left and right.

3.

I want to say a few words about the 'hard-wired' protocols of signification; the perennial impasse, of the modernist 'matrix of representation,' to use Sam Weber's phrase, constituting the academic discipline of art history in its various modalities. As our time is short, I'll synopsise the main thrust of the argument, which is more fully laid out in a recent publication.¹⁴

Art History and museology are epistemological technologies for shaping the present and determining the future through the transformation of the past into an image of that from which we

would wish to be descended, projected onto an horizon of future fulfillment. The present is configured as the product or effect of the past, so that in understanding the past we may claim to understand ourselves and our present circumstances. Museums exist in a tense and tentative space-time between two absences - the past and the future; between what is absent because it no longer exists, and what is absent because it doesn't yet exist. A museum, then, is a choreographic machine for transforming the past into the future. As is the rhetorical machinery of art history.

Museums as we know them today are the result of the confluence of a series of disparate practices and techniques of visualization, demonstration, evidence, and proof. One of the most important of these practices is what has come to be called by the seemingly innocent name of art history. Is it any longer possible to conceive of art history as a singular 'discipline,' practice, or institution? Is there a way of conceiving art history that takes into account its full and complex relationships with other modern modes of knowledge-production, and not only museums? Is it still possible to consider art history an 'it' rather than a 'when'?

There is a certain paradox in conceptualizing a discipline built to stage and frame an analytic domain whose objects are at base radically unconceptualizable. The conundrums of this situation, which derive from the very origins of the modern discourse on the history, theory, and criticism of art, remain no less striking today, as art history reanimates and perpetually circumnavigates its foundational dilemmas. Of course, 'art history' may be no less a taxonomic fiction than other academic disciplines one might name, and its mythomorphic career of configuring and constituting as if they were pre-existent *data* what are in fact *capta* in the service of one or another ideological demonstration may also be hardly remarkable.

As art historians we seem to be continuously reliving debates that are insoluble in the terms on which we habitually express them, so it may not be untoward here to recall an essay that became a classic of contemporary criticism nearly four decades ago, namely Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which distinguished between *two interpretations of interpretation*:

*'The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin that transcends play and the order of the sign, and for it the necessity of interpretation is lived as a kind of exile. The other, no longer oriented towards origin, affirms play and strives to pass beyond man and humanism, man being the name of that being which, throughout the history of metaphysics or of onto-theology...has dreamed of the plenitude of presence, of reassuring foundations, of origin and the end of play.'*¹⁵

These two interpretations of interpretation, Derrida wrote (in 1966), are *'absolutely irreconcilable, even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy.'* What is less clearly remembered of Derrida's famous essay was his insistence that this is *not* a question of choice, of embracing one over the other – which it became clear to some back then was the future anterior of the *cul-de-sac* of 'postmodernism' - but rather that what was at stake was the need to reflect on the 'common ground' (*sol commun*) of the two absolutely irreconcilable modes of interpretation, of what in fact keeps in play these two perpetually oscillating perspectives. The principle of affordance, of any unresolvable oscillation.

One name for the 'obscure economy' of that *lived simultaneity of irreconcilability*, as I argued recently in my Slade Lectures at Oxford,¹⁶ is 'art history,' which appears destined to be permanently in thrall to its foundational conundrums and contradictions. Like a colloidal dispersion in chemistry, this keeping in play in the same epistemological frame of (in one of its key manifestations) historicism and ahistoricism constitutes what we might call *the* 'concept' of art history as a modern institution and profession. Two modes of knowing may be seen to be embodied in the work of those calling themselves art historians; two kinds of propositional or interrogative frameworks: one which relies on a metonymic encoding of phenomena, and one deeply imbued with a metaphoric orientation on the things of this world, grounded in analogical reasoning. With the former, facticity and evidence are formatted syntactically, metonymically, differentially, the very chronological order of the system projecting and legitimizing questions that might be 'put' to 'data' that turn out to be astonishingly sympathetic. With the latter, however, form and content are construed as being deeply and essentially congruent, the *form* of the work being the *figure* of its truth.

And once again, it's not a question of 'choosing;' it seems to me that we need to both foreground these oppositions and find ways to highlight what the poles in these oppositions share in common; what animates them as oppositions in the first place, as Derrida rightly insisted. Sadly, the historiography of our discipline has yet to engage the epistemological technologies afforded by the dyadic dispersion of apparent oppositions.

Yet is precisely here that we may perhaps begin to understand the foundational dilemma that would have confronted the formation of a discipline such as art history: how to fabricate a 'science' of objects ('art works') simultaneously construed as unique and irreducible *and* as *specimens* of a class of like phenomena. The 'solution' to this dilemma has been the modern *discursive field* on visual artifice; a series of intersecting and deponent institutions - academic art history, art criticism, visual culture, museology, the art market, connoisseurship, tourism, fashion, the heritage industry (the list is long but it is finite) – a 'field' that maintains in play contrasting systems of evidence and proof, demonstration and explication, analysis and contemplation, with

respect to objects *both* semantically complete *and* differential (or deponent) in signification. The dilemma is itself an artifact and effect of contested concepts of representational 'truth' and of criteria of representational adequacy in the early modern period.

It might be refreshing on the occasion of this conference as a climax to the extensive and intensive efforts by GLAADH to diversify art historical academic practice in British universities to re-engage with earlier debates on knowledge-production in Europe and America wherein distinctions between 'theory' and 'practice' came to play a role in political efforts at social reform that relied on the need to keep at arm's length 'history' and 'fiction,' with 'history' (like 'science,' taking the systemic place of religion in modernity) supposedly on the side of 'truth,' fiction (and in modernity, 'religion') its opposition or distortion. We seem to be poised (yet again) on a threshold which can lead equally to departure from as much as to entry into something called 'art history.' Perhaps it may be time to begin attending to precisely that very conundrum.

I said earlier that my remarks aimed to address the paradoxical notion of conceptualizing a discipline built to stage and frame a domain of objects of analysis that were at base radically unconceptualizable. {Such a situation is in fact not unusual, and indeed is not unlike that faced, for example, by Ferdinand de Saussure, in whose *Cours de linguistique generale* we may now more clearly see what he himself had asserted at the time but which came to be marginalized by the professional project of modern linguistics – namely the future anterior of a discipline that in its essentials represented an *impasse* rather than a resolution or a beginning, as Giorgio Agamben quite clearly articulated not so long ago, when de Saussure's complete oeuvre had finally been published.¹⁷ The idea, in short, as I argued in the book *Rethinking Art History* a decade or so ago, of the sign as ambiguously referential and Eucharistic.¹⁸} This constitutes one of the key problems facing all of our endeavors here today, as well as being the fundamental conundrum that not only faces 'art history,' but constitutes it in its essence.

4.

I'd like to conclude by repeating the phrase I used at the beginning of the first section of my paper:

At the heart of that two-century-old practice of the modern self we call art, the 'science' of which we would have liked to have called art history, and the 'theory' of which we may still wish to call aesthetics, or even philosophy, lie a series of knots and conundrums, the denial of which constitutes the very relationship between 'subjects and objects' naturalized in circular fashion and kept in perpetual play by the 'disciplinary' machinery; the epistemological technology, of art history.

It is precisely this denial that has grounded and institutionalized that shadow discourse of aesthetic philosophy or 'theory' which the art historical imagination, in varying ways over these two centuries, has continued to project as a 'transcendence' of its own (simultaneously co-constructed) 'disciplinary' abjection. (We need not be surprised that a discipline can be grounded in denial, since disciplinarity as such is founded upon the occlusion of difference and heterogeneity.)

The issue, of course, is the problem of *representation* (which, not so coincidentally, is an allomorph of the problem of social and political representation), and specifically of representational 'adequacy.' In what way and to what degree may an artifact be said to 'represent' truth; the truth of an individual, community, class, gender, 'race,' nation, place, or period? As I've tried to articulate here, modern discourses of the visual are grounded upon positions taken implicitly or explicitly with respect to the concept of representation, including (in the parochial case of art history) their frequent historical amnesia about the history of the concept and its relation to 'truth;' the fact that not a little contemporary discourse within the discipline with regard to representation is more often than not surrounded by the waters of historical forgetfulness.

The key term here is the *relational* one of adequacy – from *adaequatio* or 'adequation,' which means 'fitting' or 'adjustment;' it contrasts with the term *aequatio* and its adjective *aequalis*, with the root meaning of 'equal' or 'identical.' The truth – the *veritas* – in words or things is always one of *adaequatio* or approximation or a tending-toward; an 'as-if:' [*veritas est adaequatio verbi et rei*] *Aequatio* admits only of true or false; by contrast *adaequatio* is not a formal or quantifiable identity, but an imputed or virtual likeness between two non-identities; a going toward (in Greek, *pros to(n) ison*). In a study published in 1990, Mary Carruthers observed¹⁹ that *adaequatio* has 'more in common with a metaphor or heuristic uses of modeling than with an equal sign.' This recalls the critique by Roman Jakobson in the 1960s of modernist paradigms of signification in which he foregrounded the remarkable aporia in contemporary notions of representation, the occlusion of a 'missing' modality of signification which he named 'artifice,' harking back to the Aristotelian, scholastic, and early humanist mode of significative relationships marked by the term 'adequation.' Or, in a word, the '*presentation*' root covered by the concept and term of *re*-presentation. It was the rich and subtle notion of artifice that was historically covered over, displaced, and flattened by the paradigm of 'representation' central to modern art historical conceptions of 'art.'²⁰ By what Sam Weber (drawing upon Derrida) termed the 'matrix of representation.' I am drawn to this concept of 'artifice' in no small measure because it allows us to deal with the extraordinary complexities – the fluid and open-ended relativities - of visual

meaning in a clear yet non-reductive manner. But this is only a work point; a suggestion to be pursued; it is time to bring this talk to a close.

As professional institutions, art history and museology have been grounded in *the repression of the impossibility of representation*. The dilemma of *representation* (as *aequatio*) is consequently the key conundrum of art history and museology, which perforce admits of no resolution except, I would suggest, by *historicizing its deponency*; its dependency upon an adequation which is its occluded substrate. We need to do more than reframe art history; we need to step off the historiographic carousel that continues to return our 'rethinkings' back to the same starting points. But can we unhinge our profession from its Hegelian binarisms without bringing down the whole art historical edifice?

The short answer, once again, is No: - not without radically re-engaging what it was that art history *replaced*, but not so as to take up some better 'pre-' art history, but rather to appreciate more effectively what was deeply at stake in the early modern invention of 'art' and its 'histories.' And not without a clearer recognition of the epistemological *impasse* that has not simply somehow befallen art history but which in fact *constituted* it in its disciplinarity in the first place; what in its institutionalization has constituted an impasse and barrier between us and a past it renders unthinkable, invisible, and mute. *Art history as an artifact of this impasse of conceptualization*. Modern art history and museology were themselves inconceivable apart from the contexts and subtexts of that secular theologism which was the co-implicative obverse of the theological aestheticism that imputed authorship to the *world taken as* (not 'as if' but indeed, one might say, quite eucharistically, *as*) *an artifact*. (one may glimpse here the precise semiological sleights-of-hand that afford and make possible in the first place any belief in spirits and divinities). In practice, theological aestheticism and secular theologism relate to each other like the two poles of an oscillating optical illusion.

Leaving behind this disciplinary double bind and thinking otherwise, as I've suggested, would indeed entail a kind of radical reappropriating, recasting, and proactively refashioning our connections with other as well as older traditions of 'subject-object' relations buried and occluded, at least to art history as an academic discipline, as one of our modernity's key service industries, by developments essential to the establishment, legitimization, and maintenance of the soulful civilities of the modern nation-state. If we wish our practices to have a viable future, it may well be with our rediscovery of what the discipline's invention (imagined as a facet of aesthetic philosophy) *occluded* - rather than with our discovering ever more sophistic accommodations to ever more sophisticated and ever more agonistic forms of identity politics, as happened, catastrophically, in academic art history in the US. If art history and its allomorphs were absolutely essential to the success of the social revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in

I subtitled this paper 'Conceptualising Ethics after Aesthetics'. I hope it will have become clear that doing so must begin with the recognition that aesthetics was, precisely, *the* ethics of modernity, and that the task ahead is to own up to the theologisms grounding and governing such phantasms.

¹ W. Godzich, 'Foreward' to Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. xv.

² Quoted by Godzich; *op.cit.*, p. xiv.

³ Michel de Certeau, *op.cit.*, p.194.

⁴ Id., quoting Michel Foucault, responding to a questioner at a lecture in Brazil asking him about his own intellectual formation; where he was 'coming from.'

⁵ Levinas references _____

⁶ S. Weber, *Mass Mediauras. Form. Technics. Media* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 73 f.

⁷ See below on the Aristotelian perspective on this, and the question of 'artifice.'

⁸ Michel de Certeau, 'Psychoanalysis and its History,' in

Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces* (New York: Knopf, 1977), Ch. 1

¹⁰ See especially Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 93-120.

¹¹ To paraphrase Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), p.23.

¹² Discussed at length in Part III of D. Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body*.

¹³ T. Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1999).

¹⁴ See below, n. 16

¹⁵ J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 427.

¹⁶ D. Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis & London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹⁷ See Giorgio Agamben's account of this in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, tr. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 141-151.

¹⁸ See below, n. 15.

¹⁹ M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Mediaeval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 24 f.

²⁰ This is the opposition between 'artifice' in Jakobson's sense, and 'icon.' An iconic sign-relationship (and we need to be very clear that all of these terms, all these signs, refer to *relationships between things*, not *kinds* of things) is primarily one of factual or literal similarity; an artific(i)al sign is one of imputed similarity; of adequation rather than equality. Of course once again these terms are all 'relative', and in practice objects and things necessarily differ from each other in respect to what kinds of sign-relationships are dominant and which are subordinate. All of that can reach a degree of complexity which is beyond the scope of these remarks to more than simply hint at, and which I must leave to your imagination. It is possible that one of the proximate sources for Jakobson's ideas about artifice was the remarkable Czech art and architectural historian Jan Mukarovsky, a fellow member of the Prague group in the 1930s, who at the time was developing a 'multi-horizon' model of visual signification (not published until the late 1950s) which aimed at portraying the dynamically variable complexities of artistic meaning-construction and construal. See further in D. Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), Chapter 4, 'The Coy Science,' pp. 80-121, and 'The Art of Art History,' in D. Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 507-525.