

The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization. *Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community*¹

... academics must work without alibis.

*Bill Readings, The University in Ruins*²

Do academics belong to an identifiable community? The labels «left» and «right» seem quaint, even antiquarian, in the face of the contemporary political realities that Agamben describes. The oppositional logic of modernist discourse is inadequate and the current situation in which we find ourselves has nothing to do with social opposition to the State. The State can recognize (therefore target and control) any claim for identity, Agamben, Alan Badiou, and others have recently argued, even an identity as nebulous as «terrorism». What the State absolutely cannot tolerate is a community «without any representable condition of belonging».³

What could be the politics of a community not mediated by any condition of belonging? (And what *is* belonging if it can be «represented»?) In the current era of globalization, all of humanity (except the exceedingly wealthy, i.e. the CEOs and major stockholders of enormous transnational corporations) becomes the non-State threatened by the State. In the current political climate in the United States of America and elsewhere, the extent of our responsibilities as academics and intellectuals to link museology, history, theory, and criticism to contemporary social conditions is an urgent and painfully obvious question. To what extent is it our responsibility as scholars operating in these circumstances to feel responsibility for the effects of the knowledge we produce? What has been at stake in the writing of art history is the control of «modes of explaining» – that is to say, the legitimization of the «reality» of history has often been cast in terms of legitimizing a single interpretative truth. Fundamental to the re-conceptualization of all the humanistic disciplines as intellectual pursuits – museology, art history, the social sciences, philosophy, psychoanalysis etc. – is the question of what constitutes their ethical practice today in the professional setting of Academia. Art historians assume the role of «managers of consciousness» who fabricate, maintain, and naturalize the individual and collective identities of modern subjects.⁴ Adequate solutions to cultural and ethnic misrepresentation, Sam Weber emphasizes, can no longer justifiably consist of «equalizing» the quantity or quality of «content» among peoples and cultures in museums and history books. The problem, in other words, is no longer simply one of «adequate» representation, but of «representation» itself imagined as being unproblematic.

There is a pressing need to revise disciplinary practices at an epistemological level. The fundamental lesson for historians today is the responsibility to recognize the undigested projections of past generations in our present-day theoretical extensions of existing scholarship. Cultural historian Bell Hooks addresses the crucial issue of self-reflexivity in one's enunciative position to the field of cultural

studies in the following blunt way: «Participants in contemporary discussions of culture highlighting difference and otherness who have not interrogated their perspective, the location from which they write in a culture of domination» create «a field of study where old practices are simultaneously critiqued, re-enacted, and sustained».⁵

In his re-reading of Marx, Jacques Derrida observed that «if a work of art can become a commodity, and if this process seems fated to occur, it is also because the commodity began [historically] by putting to work, in one way or another, the principle of art itself».⁶ There are two fundamental ways in which the concrete work of art, in its distinctly modern sense that the word acquired by the late fifteenth century, anticipates the nineteenth-century commodity. First, because works of art commanded price and prestige beyond the cost of their manufacture, they illustrate Marx's concept of surplus value, source of both the capitalist's profit and the worker's exploitation. Second, because the work of art is too complex to be explained in terms of base and superstructure alone, it provided Marx with a test case for developing a theoretical model sufficiently complex to explain the political economy. The majority of writing on art in the Marxian critical tradition obscures the relations and oppositions between artwork and commodity, however, and pressures to erase these distinctions entirely (thereby maintaining their conflation) persist in all fields, including art history, art criticism, museology, and visual and material culture studies.

What is the relationship of ideology to commerce within the frame of academic practices? Historians commonly argue that scholarly publications are not driven by profit motives in theory or fact. From the standpoint of the intellectual's ethical responsibilities to society, however, it matters not at all whether the profit is going directly into the pockets of publishers or scholars. What matters is our complicity with those who service capital at the expense of those whose labor is thereby exploited. We are already always politicized. Putting partisan politics aside to speak of fundamental issues of social justice, who labors on this planet who does not deserve adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, education, and so on? Most if not all academics *qua* academics are complicit with the position occupied by the capitalist in the political economy. To cite a concrete example: consider how the entertainment industry and the mass media perpetuate the racial stereotypes on which the modern discipline of art history was founded in the nineteenth century. Consider how.

Would it not be a serious short circuit of logic to dodge our responsibilities as producers of contemporary knowledge due to the common presence of dated ideas in popular culture? Then what can explain why the discipline of art history continues to rely on categories rooted in theories of cultural evolutionism? If we forget that the discipline is our own creation, we not only exploit ourselves, we produce a world of dead relations instead of the living conditions that made our objects of study possible in the first place. In the Romanticist reading of fetishism, clearly audible in Marx's arguments, when «the mind ceases to realize that it has itself created the outward images of things to which it subsequently posits itself as in some sort of subservient relation», it lapses into passivity, «seeing a world of dead relations rather than living images».⁷ Marx's explanation of value is based on the essential contradiction between «variable capital», i.e. labor-power, which adds more than it costs in the production process, and «constant capital» which

refers to the objective factors (such as the machinery needed to produce more commodities at a faster rate in order to compete successfully in the marketplace). Viewing profit in these terms, writes Teresa Brennan in an analysis of the role of time in Marx's theory of the political economy, ultimately «depends on the difference a living subject makes to a dead object».⁸ By definition, then, art historians are the labor-power in the production process of art history, just as artists are the labor-power in the production of art.

The subdisciplinary boundaries that, for example, divide the study of Italian Renaissance art from English Renaissance art from Spanish Colonial art from Native American art – the list of compartmentalizations within the field of art history goes on and on – renders the complicities of historians with nation-state ideology invisible to the individual scholars working in the specialized subfields in which academic practice is encouraged and to which it is largely confined. We may tend, therefore, to discount the sorry history of imperialism or make it out to be trivial or disconnected to us by hindsight, but it is certainly not invisible, trivial or a *fait accompli* on all sides of the social equation.

Could the moral urgency of the indignation of those who have suffered at the hands of victors and colonizers be the starting point of constructive involvements with an ethical politics? The notion that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained areas is questionable when one considers the demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization that actually go on in the world. We are now witnessing in the postcolonial, globalizing world a return to the kind of para-state collectivities that belonged to the shifting multicultural empires that preceded monopoly capitalism. How are we to respond to this situation today, in our work, in our teaching, in passing on our legacy to our students? In the words of anthropologist Serge Gruzinski:

If we knew the sixteenth century better – the century of Iberian expansion – we would no longer discuss globalization as though it were a new, recent situation. Nor are the phenomena of hybridization and rejection that we now see on a worldwide scale the novelty they are often claimed to be.⁹

Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak suggests that we might configure ourselves as planetary, rather than continental, global, or worldly, as a way of overwriting globalization, the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere, and recognize the local differences that arise everywhere. The issues I raise for the field of art history are the current preoccupation of philosophers and cultural critics elsewhere. For Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler, who insist upon «acknowledging our complicity in the law that we oppose», «there is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this is not an essence or properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*».¹⁰

What are the methodological implications for writing history in an ethically responsible manner? For Walter Benjamin, the manner in which art and cultural history were to be integrated was the subject of investigation rather than its methodological premise.¹¹ Unlike the position of the humanist Aby Warburg, who viewed works of art as privileged sites for the harmonious reconciliation of psychological tensions in society, Benjamin understood cultural production in more explicitly Marxist terms as the document of economic oppression: «art and science owe their existence not only to the great geniuses who created them, but also, in

one degree or another, to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries».¹² Art, as Benjamin recognized in 1937, is not a timeless, universal category. Acknowledging that the category «art» emerged in specific cultural and historical circumstances, he challenged the separation of specialized fields of history. He put into question the integrity of a discipline that decides in advance on the nature of objects and practices as «art». He further argued that the work of art is never complete because it is by virtue of its after-history that the work of art's fore-history is recognizable. Since the process of embodying and distinguishing itself from the world is continued in the interpretations of the work, the work of art is never completely present. Consequently, objects of the past cannot be fully possessed and they will always disrupt the efforts of the present to contain them within its categories or forms of narrative.

It is in this sense of history's unavoidable incompleteness that the experience of the past exceeds both individual and collective remembrance (*Eindenken*). Benjamin writes: «history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance».¹³ This condition of the artwork's dynamic ongoing production makes the work of art an exemplary case of the impossibility of ever possessing the past. As such, Benjamin's critique is also addressed to the empiricist methodology of art history practiced as a «science» of objects. For Benjamin, the possibility of a dialectical cultural history depends on utilizing the «destructive element» of the past's effect on the present. The «reserve of the past» enables the past to destroy aspects of the present and open it to the future.¹⁴

Against an Enlightenment notion of truth as the instrument of mastery exercised by the knower over the unknown to bring it within the fold of the same, is the concept of situated knowledge which, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, surrenders its global pretensions, its reach being limited to its places and conditions of emergence. This is the epistemological relativism that drives Bill Readings' arguments when he advises against the rebirth of the university: better to think within its ruins «as the sedimentation of historical differences», for «change comes neither from within nor from without, but from the difficult space – neither inside nor outside – where one is».¹⁵

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis and London 1993, p. 85–86.
- 2 Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Cambridge 1996, p. 171.
- 3 Agamben 1993 (as note 1), p. 86; adding: «Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear», p. 87.
- 4 The term «managers of consciousness» was introduced by Hans Haacke, «Museums: Managers of Consciousness», in: *Parachute* 1987, vol. 46, March–May, p. 84–88.
- 5 Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Boston 1990, p. 125.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, New York and London 1994, citing p. 162.
- 7 David E. Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad*, Baltimore 1982, p. XIII.
- 8 Teresa Brennan, «Why the Time Is Out of Joint: Marx's Political Economy without the Subject», in: *Strategies for Theory from Marx to Madonna*, ed. R. L. Rutsky and Bradley J. MacDonald, Albany 2003, p. 23–38.
- 9 Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinerre, New York and London 2002, p. 4.
- 10 Judith Butler, *Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford 1997, p. 130–132, citing Agamben 1993 (as note 1), p. 43.
- 11 Howard Caygill, «Walter Benjamin's Concept of Cultural History», in: *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, Cambridge 2004, p. 73–96, here p. 79, as the basis of Benjamin's critique of the leading Marxist cultural historian of the time Eduard Fuchs.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, «Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian» (1937), in: *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., Cambridge and London 2002, p. 267, cited by Caygill 2004 (as note 11), p. 92, who notes that the unacknowledged labor implicit in objects of culture is the context for Benjamin's famous claim, following in the text, that «there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism». I have discussed Warburg's problematic ideas on primitive religious imagery in «Letting Objects Rot,» in: *Artwork through the Market*, ed. Ján Bakoš, Bratislava 2004, p. 239–262; and «Re(f)using Art: Warburg and the Ethics of Scholarship», in: Claire Farago, Donna Pierce et al., *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds*, University Park 2006, p. 259–273.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans.

Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 471, cited in Caygill 2004 (as note 11), p. 94.

14 Benjamin 2002 (as note 12), p. 268.

15 Readings 1996 (as note 2), p. 171. Readings argues against a rebirth of the University, which would mean returning the tradition to a new unity and vitality; rather, we should think the University's ruins as «the sedimentation of historical differences that remind us that Thought cannot be present to itself».

