Keith Moxey

Response

‹Response› has become ubiquitous in our disciplinary discourse ever since what might be called the ‹ontological› turn. Rather than regard the work of art as an inert object, scholars devote increasingly more attention to the way it ‹works›. ‹Contextualize, always contextualize›, the cry that dominated discussions of method until relatively recently, now echoes faintly in the distance. The morally-inflected imperative that art historians ascertain the date, location, patron, audience, the cultural circumstances, religious, philosophical and social significance of a work, has softened somewhat as we are now urged to articulate the ways in which the work affects us physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. What is gained and what is lost under the new dispensation? To what theories is the current call indebted? The following is a reflection on the changing nature of what we understand by response as well as an interrogation of its role in the current art historical scene.

A history of the use of the term would probably trace it back to the ‹fathers› of the discipline. Mention should be made of Alois Riegl's discussion of attention (both that of the represented figures and our own) in *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1902) and of Ernst H. Gombrich's appeal to gestalt psychology in speaking of the ‹beholder's share› in *Art and Illusion* (1960).[1] For brevity's sake however, it will suffice to trace the term back to Wolfgang Kemp's influential volume *Der Anteil des Betrachters* (1983).[2] Inspired by the literary theorists of the Constance school, Hans Robert Jauß and Wolfgang Iser, Kemp sought to make reception aesthetic – the ways in which a work is imbued with a set of values that change constantly throughout the course of its historical reception – relevant to art historical interpretation. The point of this intervention was to argue that art historical activity is reductive if it emphasizes only the objective qualities of the work – its physical characteristics, authorship, patronage, historical context, etc. – over the ways in which it affects and moves the spectator. Distinguished Anglo-American art historians, such as Svetlana Alpers (1983) and Michael Fried (1980), shared Kemp's concern.[3] Their work places the role of response, both of those who first beheld the work in its original historical horizon and those who experience it today, at the center of art historical interpretation. Whereas Kemp's thesis is grounded in reception aesthetics, Alpers and Fried were less theoretically explicit. Fried's texts, however, reflect the philosophical insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For him, the importance of response has less to do with a desire to track the changing fortunes of the work through time than with the need to recognize the demands placed by the work on the beholder in the present. The distinction between ‹absorption› and ‹theatricality› is used to distinguish works that support the fiction that no one is looking at what they represent as opposed to those that actively appeal to the beholder's presence. This binary opposition becomes the means by which to analyze and evaluate what Fried regards as painting's essential features.

Nevertheless, the dominant mode of art historical writing in the Anglophone world remains dedicated to the social history of art. This type of writing has two powerful models. On the one hand, there is T. J. Clark's book on *Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973), in which paintings become agents of social change in revolutionary situations, and on the other, Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Renaissance Florence* (1972) in which paintings, while remaining passive, offer the art historian access to the mind-set or ‹period eye› of another historical horizon.[4] The absence of a strong Marxist tradition in American art history and political culture have made it inevitable, perhaps, that Baxandall's model should prove especially influential in the United States.

David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (1989) departed from this paradigm.[5] This book introduced another approach to response by claiming that our need to respond to images depends on qualities inherent in human nature. Freedberg expanded the scope of his study to consider

all images, not just those that have been graced with the denomination ‹art›. While the power of images is said to lie not so much in their alleged aesthetic value but in the way in which they engage our emotional and psychic life, Freedberg implies that all images, even those that have been accorded the exalted status of aesthetic, have the power to move us in ways that are both conscious and unconscious.

Today, the issue of response has become central in the phenomenologically inspired work of, for example, Georges Didi-Huberman (1995), and Joseph L. Koerner (1993).[6] Didi-Huberman's writing depends on the work of Merleau-Ponty by insisting on the immediacy of perceptual experience, one that focuses on the intensity of the dynamic relationship between the work of art and the beholding subject. Indeed, it is at the moment when that relation is strongest, when subject and object are no longer distinguishable, that the greatest aesthetic insights arise. Indebted to Martin Heidegger, Koerner, like Didi-Huberman, makes the direct personal experience of the viewing subject the basis of art historical interpretation. Experience of the work is central to defining the ‹essence› of the work or the artist under consideration. Didi-Huberman's book on Fra Angelico leads him to a profound meditation on the materiality of painting as a metaphor of the incarnation, the way in which visual artists make visible Christian mysteries that are beyond rational comprehension. Rendering Christian narratives in paint becomes analogous to the theological transformation of the divine into the human. For Koerner, Dürer's self-portrait inaugurates the age of ‹art›. Dürer's self-conscious presentation of self as creator manipulates the religious connotations associated with that role in Christianity in order to make a statement about the new status and ambition of the Renaissance artist.

Most recently, response figures prominently in the work of Alfred Gell, an anthropologist, and W. J. T. Mitchell, a literary scholar. Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998) suggests that human beings from a variety of cultures tend to attribute ‹secondary agency› to the images or works of art they create.[7] These artifacts function as shadow, or substitute, for humans by performing a spectrum of different social and cultural roles as stand-ins for their masters. The construction and manipulation of images thus depends on the intensity of human response. We would not make them unless they possessed this compelling fascination. Mitchell's book entitled *What do Pictures Want?* (2005), plays with the subject-object distinction in order to suggest that while humans may well create images, images in turn have a life of their own.[8] Images breed other images, and our response to those metamorphoses cannot be determined at the moment of their creation. We react to them differently from one moment and context to another. Is this variability to be attributed to our own motives or to that of images?

How do we account for the renewed popularity of art historical writing that focuses on response? This development, it could be argued, is linked to the death of ‹objectivity› in post-structural theory. The ‹linguistic turn› led historical disciplines to recognize that far from providing transparent access to the past their discourse was invested with contemporary interests and concerns. The epistemological foundations of art history were shaken by the realization that that the past remained forever opaque to the historian and that the validity of received interpretations depended on the dominant values of contemporary culture.

The discipline was subjected to critical scrutiny by many who demanded that that its histories be rewritten to incorporate the fate of those who had been neglected by the so-called ‹master narratives›. We are now familiar with histories that attempt to tell the stories of those ‹who have no history› – of the poor and the illiterate, of women, of ethnic minorities, of the colonized, of homosexuals. The cacophonous mingling of voices, the often incommensurate nature of the knowledge claims that have ensued, has made art historical writing more ambitious, complex, spirited, and vital. In opening the doors to the rich and varied panoply of human experience, these

theoretical initiatives also encouraged the development of unique authorial voices, voices that were no longer content to hide their particularity behind the myth that knowledge production is a universal enterprise.

Yet there is another, more recent intellectual tradition that affects the current situation. The rise of science studies, the work of Bruno Latour (1999), Peter Galison (2003), Lorraine Daston (2004) and others exploits the collapse of the subject-object distinction in a different way.[9] They argue that even if we recognize the indeterminacy of linguistic signification, its incapacity to stabilize meaning, we must not ignore its ontological power. Far from constituting a mediating layer that separates us from the world around us – a medium we apply to the world in order to understand it – these authors accord language the potential to discover reality at the same time as it constructs it. On this view objects have as much of a role to play in shaping language as language has in shaping objects.

What is lost and what is gained by this ontological turn? What are the implications of response studies for the future of the history of art? If works of art are unique – in the sense that their status as objects involves them in a complicated transaction with those who would use language to understand them – then attempts to organize them into categories such as those proposed by the established practices of attribution, stylistic analysis, iconographic types, and so forth, become a less interesting disciplinary activity than initiatives that seek to articulate what makes them singular and special.

Whereas one set of techniques assumes that there is such a thing as a work of art and that its specifically ‹artistic› quality needs no further articulation, the other finds it imperative to establish what it is about a work that enables it to affect us culturally, emotionally, and psychically. In one view it is important to relate the work to an established historical progression, to locate it within the framework of a pre-established chronology, and thus to use ‹history› to tame it, in the other, the work has no history until the negotiation between past artifact and present beholder has begun. Attending to response calls for an allegorical rather than a narrative mode of historical writing. Stories about art become metaphors of our relation to objects and to the past, metaphors in which emotional and psychic factors are acknowledged to play as important a role as those traditionally considered rational.

Can our disciplinary protocols accommodate the radical demands implicit in this new conception of response? Will it be possible for art history to rethink its relation to the art object in order to conceive it as something living, a seductive partner in the dance of meaning?

Notes

1 Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. Evelyn Kain and David Britt, Los Angeles 1999 (Prague 1902). Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York 1960.

2 Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Anteil des Betrachters: Rezeptionsästhetik. Studien zur Malerei d. 19. Jh.*, Munich 1983; *Der Betrachter ist im Bild: Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, ed. id., Cologne 1985.

3 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago 1983. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley 1980.

4 T. J. Clark, *Image of the people: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London 1973. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford 1972.

5 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1989.

6 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Chicago 1995. Joseph L. Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago 1993.

7 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998.

8 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Picture Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005.

9 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge Mass. 1999). Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks and Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time*, New York 2003. *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science, ed. Lorraine Daston*, New York 2004.