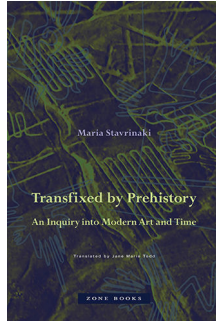


MARIA STAVRINAKI, *TRANSFIXED BY PREHISTORY. AN INQUIRY INTO MODERN ART AND TIME*

Translated by Jane Marie Todd

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Reviewed by
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This important study throws new light on the nineteenth-century European “discovery” of prehistory and the modern re-imaginings of time associated with such opening out to a deep past extending beyond the reach of established narratives of the history of the world and humankind. The phenomenon, Stavriniaki argues, had significant implications for subsequent radical questioning of humanist and historicist mappings of the past as a continuous, largely progressive linear development. Her study’s perspective is thus very much in tune with the contemporary preoccupation with the nonhuman and with a postmodern/poststructuralist dissolution of inherited notions of historical time. In contrast with much present day cultural and art theoretical speculation on such issues in cultural and modern art studies, however, her analysis grows out of a finely researched history of early European encounters with and scientific interpretation of natural formations and residues of human life originating from well before any previously imaginable past.

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Stavriniaki identifies three distinct concerns within this discovery of a distant and incommensurable past as it got underway in the earlier nineteenth century – prehistory as a term first gained currency in the 1830s. For a start there was the geological discovery of an extended prehuman past that threw into disarray established chronological reckonings of the origins of the world deriving from the Bible. Following on from this was speculation about humanity's prehistory based on the discovery of human relics in the more recent strata of an extended geological history of the earth. Finally came speculation about the prehistory of art as manifest in carved artefacts and cave paintings found alongside residues of very early human habitation. At stake in such encounters with a prehistorical past and the resulting imagining of a new *longue durée* of history were three origins, that of the world, that of humanity and that of art. It is Stavriniaki's central contention that such origins as they entered the modern European imaginary were of their essence shrouded in obscurity and were inconceivable as events anchored in chronological measures of time. The inherent obscurity of such projections of a deep time was in her view a source of both fascination and anxiety for the modern European mind, and in particular for an avant-garde receptive to the idea of a temporality that escaped humanist and historicising appropriation.

While detailing the history of modern engagement with the material residues of a prehistoric past forms a substantial portion of the book – namely much of the first two chapters – the main focus is more specific. In the end her central concern is with affect-laden responses to the artistic remains of prehistory, ones of astonishment, or being “transfixed” as the title has it. In the latter part of her book, the responses of this kind that receive the most attention are self-consciously modern or avant-garde ones in which the artefacts of prehistory were seen as testifying to an “originary” human capacity for artistic creativity, and to possibilities of unmediated immersion in the material fabric of a prehistoric world. Within the terms of this mindset, intensive engagement with the residues of prehistory went hand in hand with attempts to break out beyond the bounds of a discredited, historicised understanding of artistic precedent. The prehistoric was in this way brought into alignment with the radically modern and made integral to the latter's temporal imaginary. Towards the end, Stavriniaki's book, which begins as a broader study in cultural history and history of science, eventually devolves into a narrower examination of modern and contemporary art work in which a fascination with the material residues and *longues durées* of prehistory can be seen to play a formative role. Symptomatically, an introduction by Stavriniaki to the contents of her book appeared in the journal *Artforum* shortly before the book's publication in English.¹ This said, a substantial reward of the book in art historical terms is the distinction it establishes between artistic

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Maria Stavriniaki, *All the Time in the World*, in: *Artforum* 56, March 2018, 204–214.

engagement with issues of time and prehistory and the now much discredited fetishising of the archaic associated with primitivism.

Of the artists whose work Stavrinaki cites in making her case that the prehistoric mindset she has identified played a vital role in modern art, Robert Smithson stands out as the most compelling instance. With Smithson, a deeply held fascination with the prehistoric and a strong belief in the overriding predominance of the prehuman or nonhuman in the world's longer history and destiny are integral to his art's material processes and conception. Dubuffet's painting (and sculpture) and its uncompromisingly antihumanist materialism is another obvious case in point, and possibly too some of Cézanne's landscapes with their depopulated expanses and bare geological formations. In most other instances on which Stavrinaki dwells (Matisse, de Chirico, Ernst and Miro for example), the engagement with and immersion in the material residues and temporality of prehistory tends to be more indirect, by way of iconographical or representational reference, or collateral verbal explanation. The conjuncture between a prehistoric imaginary and an art work's formative logic and evident resonance can often seem a little tenuous. Such uncertainty hovers over the recent contemporary work by Thomas Hirschhorn and Pierre Huyghe featured in the book's conclusion.

The discovery of Palaeolithic cave painting that got underway in the 1890s functions in Stavrinaki's analysis as a symptomatic instance of the "astonishment" of coming face to face with the reality of a prehistory that defied conventional historical mapping. Smaller artefacts decorated with carvings could more readily be accommodated within traditional understandings of a history of art evolving from primitive or archaic beginnings to more elaborate and sophisticated formations. But the more striking cave paintings, particularly those discovered in Western Europe, brought such understandings up short. Here were ambitious works on a large scale exhibiting a vivid naturalism in their depiction of animals that defied standard notions of the archaic or primitive and that considerably predated the much more simplified abstract representations found in subsequent Stone Age work – and also in the earliest known artefacts and monuments of ancient Mediterranean civilisations. The cave paintings were works known to be from the earlier hunting-gathering Palaeolithic phase of human history, which saw the first human tool making and shaping of hard materials, prior to the later Neolithic phase and the advent of agricultural cultivation and settled communities.

What accounted for this outburst of a striking naturalism on a scale that seemed to have no historical precedent and no progeny in a known early history of artistic fabrication? What was the significance of these sophisticated works produced by a people about whom nothing was known, and whose existence was lost in the mists of a time far distant from the documented beginnings of human civilisation? Such questions acquired particular urgency in a moment when the foundations were being laid for a systematic history of

artistic development based on stylistic analysis of artistic form. Not only did the cave paintings defy mainstream assumptions that the earliest artistic forms would have evolved from simple archaic and abstract beginnings to more truthful naturalist representations. They did not sit easily either with recent attempts to incorporate the possibility of an inverse evolution from the naturalistic to the abstract alongside the widely recognised trajectory of ever-increasing naturalism. They lacked any evident historical framing. They could not be anchored as a phase within a long-term evolutionary development. Faced with them, the modern viewer seemed to be brought into direct contact with a naked prehistory unmediated by available forms of historical understanding. A similar response, as Stavrinaki examines in some detail, was activated by the great later Neolithic monuments, such as Stonehenge, by which a host of modern artists as diverse as Henry Moore and Robert Morris were at one time or another captivated.

The phenomenon of Palaeolithic European cave painting becomes less astonishing when seen through the lens of the more progressive forms of modern rethinking of the nature of so-called primitive art. Franz Boas in his *Primitive Art*,² published in the same year as Georges Bataille's meditations on Lascaux and the birth of art, finds no cause to see anything astonishing about the level of artistic achievement and vital naturalism of work such as the Lascaux cave paintings. The artefacts of hunter-gatherer societies, in his view, displayed varying degrees of abstraction and naturalism such that each had their own sophistication. Abstract symbolic representation and perspectival naturalist representation were two alternatives, neither inherently more or less artistically developed. The vivid representation of animals in the European cave art such as the Lascaux paintings was unusual and perhaps exceptional but not inexplicable, nor unique testimony to primordial origins by way of which, as Bataille put it, one could confront prehistory in a "feeling of presence – of clear burning presence".³

Stavrinaki's story takes a different more apocalyptic turn when dealing with the modern mindset that emerged in the postwar period in the wake of the inhuman destructiveness unleashed by the Second World War and the Nazi Holocaust, and culminating in the threat of total annihilation posed by the newly invented atomic bomb. In these circumstances, the immediate possibility of a post-historical, posthuman world presented itself in urgent terms. The dialectic of radical regression and radical modernisation at work within those currents of the modern imaginary that interest Stavrinaki was taken to more extreme lengths, issuing in present day thinking about the self-annihilating effects of human overreach that the onset of irreversible and lethal climate change has brought into

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Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, New York 1955, 77.

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Quoted in Stavrinaki, *Transfixed by History*, 284.

focus. Posthistory began to take over from prehistory as a basis for imagining the realities of a world without humans or human consciousness. The *longue durée* of a history empty of humanity was in effect closing the narrow temporal gap encompassing human presence in the world with its elaborate fabrications and its often self-destructive interventions in nature.

Stavrinaki's book leaves one with some questions about the mindset informing these apprehensions of history, particularly their radical negation of notions of human agency informing other conceptions of time and history originating in the nineteenth century – most notably perhaps Marx's vision of men making their own history (but not as he added, as they please, in circumstances of their own choosing). Signs of radical political impulse do make their appearance from time to time in the modern rethinkings of temporality that preoccupy Stavrinaki, but their implications for the case she is making remain unexplored. While she draws on thinkers such as Benjamin and Bloch, their revolutionary aspirations, being rather at odds with the general drift of her analysis, are largely left out of account. Stavrinaki's inclusion of the reactionary musings of Ernst Jünger and their rather disconcerting implications could be cited too in this connection.

One reason that the earlier phase of the modern discovery (and invention) of prehistory set out in Stavrinaki's study seems productive nowadays is the way it goes against the grain of subsequent more radical-seeming understandings. It keeps alive a dialectic between awareness of the impenetrable obscurity of the vast tracts of prehistory and actively engaged attempts to make historical sense of this "mute" past. It was a mindset that did not just remain transfixed by the prehistorical and linger on its visions of a nonhuman world. It still held onto prospects for active human intervention in and some level of understanding of the vast workings and *longues durées* of inhuman process and forces. Such a dialectic often erred on the side of a human overreach that without doubt had catastrophic consequences. At the same time, the mindset informing a radical modern (or postmodern) fascination with the prehistoric, and with the expanses of a prehuman and posthuman time, holds out little prospect for a human agency that might begin to tackle human-induced causes of disastrous climactic change.