

and vernacular usage for additional examples. While this paradigmatic shift has been more difficult for the visual artist, similar manifestations have been analyzed in both “folk” and “high” art. In a consideration of the former Judith McWillie has noted that “the assimilation of African aesthetic and spiritual resources in the South is a cross-cultural phenomenon that continues to mold the consciousness of African Americans and Euro-Americans alike. Out of a symbiosis of Western and non-Western traditions, a distinct regional identity has emerged.”<sup>18</sup> In mainstream art history, the recent reconsiderations of the New York School during the 1940s by scholars such as David Craven, Ann Gibson, and Michael Leja have resulted in a reexamination of the issue of the primitivist sources of Abstract Expressionism. The work of these scholars not only critiques the dislocation between artistic enterprise and social reality, but also takes into consideration the input of “indigenous” primitivists.<sup>19</sup> Thus the presence of individuals such as Wifredo Lam and Norman Lewis, who had been excised from this context, implicitly declare the centrality of African—as well as Latino and Native American—culture to the artistic mainstream at the time.

This type of critical reorientation will expand the dialogue about ethnically focused aesthetics to include not only issues of style and subject matter, but also the psychological and social interactions of American demographics. As the work of

these individuals demonstrates, prevailing hegemonic relationships within global culture are outdated. It is clear that the history of art in general and that of modernism in particular needs to be reworked after the model of encounters rather than conquests, so that mutual interactions between Europe and Africa, America and Africa, Asia and Europe, Africa and Asia, and America and Asia are acknowledged. In this vein critic Gerardo Mosquera has called for a realignment of the center/periphery nexus in world culture, envisioning a situation “whereby the periphery ceases to be a reservoir of tradition.”<sup>20</sup> As the art world moves toward “a polyfocal, multi-ethnic, decentralization of ‘international’ culture,” the result would be to create an art history “open to an intercultural understanding.”<sup>21</sup> The goal is to make apparent what Russell Ferguson calls the “invisible center,”<sup>22</sup> that is, the vast resources that lie beyond Europe and the European world to elucidate a more cogent sense of human cultural history.

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18. Judith McWillie, “Introduction,” in *Another Face of the Diamond: Pathways through the Black Atlantic South*, exh. cat., INTAR Latin American Gallery, New York, 1989, 5–6.

19. See David Craven, “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to

‘American’ Art,” *Oxford Art Journal*, xiv, no. 1, 1990, 44–65; Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Race and Gender*, New Haven, forthcoming; and Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, New Haven/London, 1993).

20. Gerardo Mosquera, “Modernity and Africa:

Wifredo Lam on his Island,” in *Wifredo Lam*, exh. cat. Barcelona, 1993, 174.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Russell Ferguson, “Invisible Center,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al., New York, 1990, 9.

## On the Histories of Artifacts

*David Summers*

The subject of the history of art should include all human making. I will argue that primary concern with making raises the possibility of any number of histories of art, each pursuable in its own terms, but all comparable to one another as alternative kinds of making fitted to different social purposes.

As for the subject *in* art history, it would be useful first of all to write a history of the “subject-object problem,” especially as it bears on our thinking about art. We have come to give little thought to this modern polarity, and acknowledgment that it is in fact historical would contribute to our own self-understanding at the same time that it also opened new paths for the understanding of art and its meanings in other traditions.

The “subject-object problem” is closely related to the assumption that art is essentially perceptual, aesthetic, and formal-expressive. I shall leave this assumption to one side and argue that inference from facture provides the indispensable base upon which a more inclusive postformalist art history may be constructed.

In terms that have become familiar, C. S. Peirce distinguished three kinds of “signs,” which he called icons, indexes, and symbols.<sup>1</sup> Icons represent by a shared quality, such as appearance. A compass-drawn circle may be an icon for a geometric circle, from which it differs, however, in possessing many other characteristics than circularity. An index entails actual contiguity. From footprints, for example, we infer the former presence of a human being, and an experienced tracker (which most of us are not) might draw many highly probable inferences about the person who had made the footprints. A symbol is an “arbitrary” sign, like most words, which do not share qualities with, or stand in immediate relation to, what they represent. Symbols are conventional and rule-bound. In order for verbal communication to take place, people must be as if in agreement that certain sounds mean certain things when used in certain ways.

Such basic semiotic distinctions (problematical in their own right) have become important for the history of art because what Peirce called the symbol is the paradigm for

both structuralist and poststructuralist theory and interpretation, and, as these language-defined and literature-developed notions have diffused into the history of art, the strong tendency has been toward the reduction of icon and index to symbol. In the essay "Semiotics and Art History," for example, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson offered a Derridean argument based on the principle that "symbolic interpretation . . . always underlies other kinds of interpretation."<sup>2</sup>

In the same essay Bal and Bryson exemplify indexicality by features of subject matter implying spatial or temporal contiguity. So Francis Bacon's popes suggest the stimuli to which their screams are responses. The dimension of temporality and implicit narrative in what are presumed to be naturalistic images and their viewing opened up by this understanding of indexicality is very valuable, but indexicality may also be much more broadly and simply understood, and the importance, force, and peculiarly fruitful problems of this broader and simpler understanding are entirely lost in the totalizing reduction of indexicality to "symbolicity."

What Peirce called "indexes" used to be called "signs," and from the beginning they had a temporal dimension. Aristotle initiated a long discussion when he wrote "that which coexists with something else, or before or after whose happening something else has happened, is a sign [*semeion*] of that something's having happened or being."<sup>3</sup> "Signs" became "natural signs," contrasted to the "conventional signs" of language (Peirce's "symbols").

Carlo Ginzburg has written of the origin of an ancient art of natural signs as "venatic";<sup>4</sup> our hunting and gathering forebears saw and acted upon, and taught others to see and act upon, a great many things we never notice at all. This "conjectural" art was further developed in many kinds of divination and medical diagnosis. Ginzburg was especially concerned with the origins of connoisseurship in the work of Giulio Mancini and Giovanni Morelli, medical doctors who, Ginzburg argues, turned their skills to the problems of distinguishing "hands" in painting. Dr. Freud acknowledged the great importance of Morelli's example for psychoanalysis in his essay on Michelangelo's *Moses*. Ginzburg suggests that the modern proliferation of techniques of indexical inference occurred together with the perfection of means of identification and control in bourgeois society through, for example, fingerprinting and photography.

Systematic indexical inference was also developed in other important ways on a broad front through the nineteenth century with truly revolutionary results for our view of ourselves in the twentieth. Stratigraphic inference, which is indexical, is fundamental to both geology and paleontology, which, although not without their own deep controversies, dead ends, and even falsifications, have yielded the firm outlines of a modern narrative the institutional consequences of which have only begun to dawn. The new discipline of archaeology belongs to this same general intellectual development.

Archaeology perhaps seems "old" because we associate it with early civilizations (which we need not do), but in fact rigorous archaeology is very modern indeed. Archaeology as a paradigm of indexical inference is not trouble-free. It disturbs (and has even destroyed) its own evidence, and it may tend to realize the vision of the past from which it begins. Moreover, archaeology (like art history, which has sometimes been little more than ethnic or nationalist rhetoric) has been deeply implicated in political ideology. Archaeology began under the aegis of modern imperialism; nations look for founding indigenous cultures, and colonizers look for justifying precedents. But however true and truly cautionary all this may be, ideological frameworks have not utterly defined archaeology, which has brought unknown cultures to light and shown us much new about known ones. Most important, it has provided a means by which history has been made to reach far beyond the boundaries of any text-centered tradition. If Classic Maya civilization was explained as the work of the lost tribes of the Old Testament, it has now taken its place among the world's great cultures, one of the culminations of wholly independent traditions, which may be interpreted with reference to rich historical detail. Even if such results have political implications (to my mind very positive ones), it would be better, rather than simply dismissing them as projections of current ideology, to accept a broader range of histories, among which our own histories should be numbered.

In fundamental respects the history of art also belongs to the modern disciplines of indexical inference, and, as the study of human making, occupies an irreducibly important place among them. This definition not only opens the way to many art histories, it also distances the history of art in general from the ingrained textual centrism that perpetuates an obsession with elite cultures and ensures the continued parochialism and derivativeness of art history's interpretative concerns.

An index points from a present unique state of affairs to an absent (past or future) state of affairs. From a footprint I must infer that *that* individual person was there in such-and-such a way, whoever that person might prove to have been, or to have been doing. Such a "clue" (from a word meaning a ball of twine, perhaps like the one given to Theseus by Ariadne) may be differently construed. But Theseus found his way both to the Minotaur and out of the labyrinth, and the fascination of a detective story lies in the convincing (if improbable) thread of right inferences from particular clues leading backward and forward to the one who "did it," as the tracks followed by Ginzburg's ancient hunter led to the prey. It is crucial in all cases that in order to explain our judgments and actions we be able to point to *that* particular state of affairs. The principle is the same whether we infer the relative chronology of a culture from the level at which its artifacts are found, or the sequence of execution of a fresco from the overlapping of *giornate*.

1. C. S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. J. Buchler, New York, 1955, 102–15. Michael Baxandall's "inferential criticism" is based on indexical inference, although he might wish to avoid Peirce's degree of generality. See M. Baxandall, "The Lan-

guage of Art Criticism," in *The Language of Art History*, ed. S. Kemal and I. Gaskell, Cambridge, 1991, 67–75; published in an earlier version as "The Language of Art History," *New Literary History*, X, 1979, 453–65.

2. M. Bal and N. Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin*, LXIII, 1991, 191.

3. Aristotle, *The Categories; On Interpretation; Prior Analytics*, trans. H. P. Cook and H. Tredennick, Cambridge/London, 1983, 524–25 (70a).

4. C. Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. J. and A. C. Tedeschi, Baltimore, 1992, 96–125.

Any work of art, taken as a whole, before it is regarded formally, aesthetically, or expressively, may also be regarded indexically, that is, in terms of its own *facture*, as the result and record of its having been made. A Paleolithic spear point is the result of striking a stone of a certain kind, then working it in certain ways with certain tools. With experience we can see how this was done, much as we infer a foot from a footprint. In doing so, as this simple account implies, we also infer a maker and the more or less culturally specific actions of a maker in a situation in which those actions were meaningful. At a more complex level, we may quite unexceptionably infer collective organization and labor from megalithic construction, and so on through the history of art, all art, all human artifacts. The appearance of modern works of art inevitably and significantly presupposes the vast networks of technology, industry, and commerce of the modern world. There is always much more to be seen in *facture* than the traces of individual "hands" and the values we associate with these traces.

The word "facture" is obviously related (like "artifact" itself) to the word "fact." All are from the past participle of the Latin word meaning "to make or do." To say that something has evidently been done, of course, is not to say what has been done or why. Peirce used the odd example of a piece of mold shot by a bullet to illustrate what he meant by an index. Such a "sign" need not be noticed at all, and, given an interest, might be variously explained, always, however, by indicating evident characteristics. Eventually agreement might be reached as to what had happened, although to reach such an agreement is not the same as to explain *why* it happened. *Someone* shot the mold, but who would do such a thing, and why? Even if we plainly see what was done, this question might demand complicated answers, either in terms of motivation or in terms of the more properly technological historical issues of how it came to be possible for someone to have the equipment necessary to perform such an act.

Peirce's odd paradigm may easily be expanded to more relevant examples. How and why did people shape a mountaintop, as they did at Monte Albán? How and why did other people make and bury thousands of life-size clay soldiers in ranks around the tomb of China's first emperor? In order to explain all that evidently was done in these and in any number of other cases we must consider many factors, not just individual or collective "imagination" but also social and political organization, traditions of observance and construction. In all cases it is essential that these explanations be open to the first level of indexical inference.

In the terms I am discussing, a text is paper made and marked in a certain way, fitted to certain uses, manufactured and distributed in certain ways, before it is *Housekeeping* or *Moby Dick*. Texts, because they may be presented in a number of ways, are relatively independent of their conditions of presentation, even if important inferences may be drawn from these conditions. As a text, Dante's *Commedia* is much the same whether it is a fourteenth-century manuscript or a modern paperback, even though the institutional uses and affiliations in each case are vastly different, and even if those differences are there to be gathered from the two

presentations. Works of art are never independent of their conditions of presentation; they are absolutely bound to these conditions, and the historical explanation of their appearances is therefore bound in basic respects to their first spaces of use. In order to explain why materials were shaped into a polyptych, for example, it is necessary to explain the liturgy for which the polyptych was made. (When we do that, we also help explain why there is a series of polyptychs: all were adaptations to more or less related circumstances and uses.) The polyptych is frontal in order to face observants and to present sacred images wholly. To explain why it is a large and elaborate polyptych we must consider its purpose more specifically—that, for example, it stood on a main altar; or we must consider its patron—a royal donation might be appropriately costly and splendid; or we must consider both. By the time we reach the level of images themselves, the altarpiece has already been thoroughly contextualized in the sense of having been placed in arguable relation to a number of concrete circumstances and traditions. It is only at this point that painters come into view as the persons responsible for the way in which material, format, and iconography were actually treated. The history of art has been overwhelmingly concerned with this last level of synthesis; but even if individual artists do things in recognizably different ways, it is not justifiable to proceed from the character of the work as an "aesthetic," "expressive" whole. To do so ignores the indexical evidence of the work as culturally specific work.

Given the continuity of traditions of artifacts, we should not be asking why people keep *imagining* things in the same way, but rather why they keep *making* things in the way they evidently did (or do). The answers to these questions are very different.

In this brief essay I have kept to one basic topic, about which there is certainly much more to be said. The separation of *facture* from its reduction to a certain understanding of language has very important implications. It means that art is always made by people in ways that are specific because of the actual circumstances of making; it also means that when we do art history we are not simply joining the flow of signs from the standpoint of our own interests without meaningful resistance from what others like us have done. It is this resistance, at once absolute and absolutely fragile, that must be respected. The discoverers of Paleolithic cave painting looked up and around at the "art" they had found, all the while disregarding and erasing the footprints of those who had been there long before them. All the traces of the past, of the myriad possible decisions, actions, and values of all those who have come before us, are fragile when they are not already irretrievably lost. At the same time, the footprints of modern historians and tourists tell us no less about the uses to which "art" is put now than ancient footprints might have told us about why it was made in the first place.

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