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Right About Now.... And then?

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"Even if [a work of art] isn't exhausted by the analysis of its meaning, by its thematics and semantics, it is there in addition to all that it means. And this excess obviously provokes discourse *ad infinitum*" – Jacques Derrida¹

At the time this issue of *jongHolland* was being conceived, none of the editors realized they were not alone in their desire to examine the impact of so-called "New Art History" on the discipline, and to look at what "theory" might mean for us today and in the future.² As it turned out, *Texte zur Kunst* was to devote its entire spring issue to this very subject, with essays by such prominent figures as Caroline M. Jones, Werner Busch, and Judith Butler, and a questionnaire addressed to various kinds of practitioners in Europe and the US.³ The fact that so many of us seem to have a need for retrospect at this particular moment in time may be meaningful in itself: it has become a commonplace to speak of our changed perception of the world and the place and import of images since "9/11" and the war in Iraq. But it may also have been prompted to a large extent by the publication last year of *Art since 1900*, which to many has managed in an instant to place the "October group" at the very heart of the institution it once professed to critique.⁴ The "radical" and "new" now seems codified (reified? ossified?) and ready for consumption; ready, perhaps, to become the new orthodoxy.⁵ For a number of reasons, then, the question of "Where do we go from here?" seems to be a pressing one.

In their preface to *Kunstgeschichte: The Means of Art History*, the editors of *Texte zur Kunst* outline their reasons for undertaking a critical reexamination now. Although over the last ten to fifteen years there has undoubtedly been much change, with the discipline becoming at least somewhat less conservative and focused on its traditional areas of interest, the results have been disturbingly paradoxical. On the one hand, art-historical practice today is characterized by a multiplicity of accepted methods and approaches, as well as subjects and objects of research. On the other, the field has essentially failed to become truly interdisciplinary. Instead, under economic and university policy-related pressure (issues of third-party funding, the Bologna Accords), some art historians are now calling for a return to the discipline's

"core competences" in an effort to regain the initiative (and thus the staff and funding) from other departments that deal with images in a broader sense. The dust has yet to settle over the issues of *Bildwissenschaft* and "visual studies," and competition rather than cooperation appears to rule the day (naturally with exceptions).

Similarly, while New Art History has managed to expand the discipline's scope, its second demand, namely the integration of the achievements of institutional critique and the development of a cultural analysis "oriented toward representation-theoretical and representation-political issues" into everyday art-historical research and practice, has yet to be fulfilled.⁶ Given art history's current status as "one of the showpieces of knowledge society," there is now more potential for the realization of this goal than ever before.⁷ The opportunity needs to be grasped, while at the same time remaining aware that such incorporation may latently be a mere means of feeding the more radical demands of New Art History into the reform processes of universities and the restructuring of mandates.⁸ All this makes a new debate about methodologies and theory necessary.

These issues resonate in the articles to follow, although some to a greater degree than others. Suffice it to say that while the situation described in *Texte zur Kunst* may be entirely applicable to Germany (despite the journal's internationalism still its main point of reference), it is much less so to the Netherlands. Here as elsewhere in the last decade, universities have become more accepting, and even encouraging, of non-traditional approaches. We are still, though, a long way from the moment when the critical potential of these approaches can be said to have been exhausted. There can as yet be no real question of institutionalization, with the accompanying threat of cooption and indifference that seem to go hand in hand with all neo-liberal forms of pluralism. As far as interdisciplinarity is concerned, there are still major gaps to be bridged between practitioners from other image-based fields and ("new") art historians in the narrower sense. Nor are Dutch institutions strangers to territorial infighting.

There seem, however, to be a number of moves afoot to ameliorate this situation, with more and more efforts being made to draw together scholars from a wide variety of fields to research and discuss images and image-making of all kinds.⁹ Although Dutch art history is sometimes described as a (nationalistic) theoretical desert, the lack of "official" status for new and newer art-historical methods –

particularly in combination with truly interdisciplinary activity – could be potentially enabling.¹⁰ If institutionalization is equivalent to academic *Gleichschaltung*, then operating from a marginal but strong position may actually be the position of choice. The margin, after all, is the center. The question then becomes not “what is the status of New Art History?” but rather: “what can New Art History do for us?” Which of its various approaches are useful, and how can its insights and methods be *combined* – if need be with older models and methods of analysis – to come to a new position of strength that is nonetheless open and without orthodoxies?¹¹

The essays commissioned for this issue of *jongHolland* are in the first instance, however, designed to provide an overview of several of the most important theoretical positions and questions in the field today. Where, for example, is semiotics now? The insights provided by semioticians – both by structuralists and post-structuralist thinkers – challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions in the humanities, and much of this critique has now been absorbed into everyday art-historical practice, at least in departments of modern art. But as Marga van Mechelen shows in her article, there are still issues in visual semiotics that need to be resolved, particularly as regards the meaning of such axiomatic semiotic terms as *icon* and *index*.

Looking back at two seminal exhibitions – one of them held exactly 20 years ago – Jennifer John illustrates the problematic nature of the (attempted) assimilation of feminist theory and discourse into museum praxis. Mirjam Westen, on the other hand, provides an overview of the history of women's studies and the seminal works of feminist art history, tracing the changes this disciplinary strand has undergone since its inception thirty-odd years ago. Her particular concern revolves around the question of why while abroad there are few publications that do not in some way address the feminist issue so little work is being done in this area in the Netherlands today. This is undoubtedly true, but I would suggest that the problem goes much deeper, and that it is one that affects not only the Netherlands. While older scholars like Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin or Abigail Solomon-Godeau continue to refine their theories and publish prolifically, the feminist cause seems largely lost on the younger generation as a whole. Given the images that surround us in our daily lives – everything from the photographs of Lindy England at Abu Ghraib to stereotype-

perpetuating television commercials – a (new) feminist critique seems more necessary at the moment than perhaps at any time since the early 1970s.¹²

It was thanks to the insights of semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism and of course Marxism that art historians began to look at visual objects outside the canon of the fine arts, to investigate “images” in general as well as (or sometimes instead of) works of art. Although there was a tradition within the discipline for this sort of activity – one need only think of Aby Warburg – the proponents of “visual culture” had no easy time convincing their colleagues that the field might do well to broaden its range of prospective objects of study.¹³ Today, although the vitriolic debates of the 1990s appear to be over, the question of the definition and scope of this “interdiscipline” has yet to be resolved, as Deborah Cherry clearly illustrates. Further, until now, the study of visual culture has tended to focus on vision and the visible at the expense of the other senses, even at the expense of the “culture” component of its name. Similarly, there has been an almost exclusive focus on the imagery of the west. Cherry finds both aspects problematic, suggesting not only that it may be time for a “sensory turn” (after the linguistic and pictorial “turns” of the last twenty years), but also that an expansion of the field and objects of study beyond the confines of Europe and America has already begun and that we ignore this trend at our peril. The latter in particular must impact on the conception of both art history and visual studies. This is perhaps an even more pressing issue than that of the relationship between the two approaches, although one can also argue that this, too, needs further articulation and clarification. What use, if any, can be made of the methodologies specific to art history? Can art history make a distinguishing contribution? Can it even survive as an autonomous discipline? Does it need to? Or have we now reached the point where we are able to give up our territory, without, however, giving up our characteristic skills?

Similar questions arise in relation to Belting’s *Bild-Anthropologie*, examined by Esther Cleven. Rejecting both “old” positivist art history and “new” art history’s anti-humanism and refusal of fixed meaning, Belting’s project is to restore to visual mediations of all kinds their phenomenological and human – and thus also essential and supra-temporal – dimension. In combination with recent, particularly American, British and German work on the concepts of the gaze and embodied vision there is in this approach both radical potential and a danger. Reclaiming the power of images, recognizing what it is in them that exceeds words, and examining them for universals

can give both the images themselves and their study a new ethical dimension and contemporary political relevance.¹⁴ The “iconic turn” (Gottfried Boehm), however, carries within itself a latent a-historicism and essentialism, an unquestioning acceptance of categories – for example that of “Man” – that have been under scrutiny since Michel Foucault appeared on the intellectual stage.¹⁵ If it is indeed possible to use Belting's method without falling into the essentialist trap, then this may be one of the most exciting directions in which the field is now moving.

One of the places where the premises and possibilities of visual studies/*Bildwissenschaft*, its range and limitations, are currently being explored is, of course, at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). In her contribution, Lian van der Krieke provides an overview of the development of cultural analysis as a method, further outlining the often-problematic relationship between this approach and traditional art history. Her examination of Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* from both a conventional viewpoint and that of Mieke Bal – one of the founding members of ASCA – makes the differences clear enough. Krieke does, however, suggest that art historians' critique of cultural analysis should be taken seriously, at the same time acknowledging the profound changes that have occurred in art history in recent times. The gap between the two fields appears to be narrowing, to such a degree in fact that in the future cultural analysis may no longer be seen as an alternative to art history, but will become an integral part of it. One can only hope that she is right; that things continue to move in this direction; and that territorialism does not spoil a liaison of such enormous intellectual significance.

The potential power of art is as important to Arjen Mulder as it is to Belting and other cultural analysts. His article examines the dialogue between medium transparency and medium reflexivity (“hypermediality”) from the work of the early avant-garde to today's networked game images. In rejecting the transparent and anecdotal in favor of medium specificity and autonomy, 20th-century art gave up the effort to reflect or capture anything outside the work of art itself. Art could only be about the medium with which or in which it was made. The result were works that could merely be worshiped as abstractions, not felt; an art that was authoritarian rather than empowering, where emptiness had replaced empathy. Mulder argues instead for an art of embodied aesthetic experience, which dares once again to address itself to the extra-medial and to engage with the world. Although Belting is not mentioned specifically, there is clearly a similarity. As far as the practice of art

history is concerned, Mulders offers an interesting perspective on the history of modern art, especially in its relation to moving images, from film to computer games.¹⁶

With the articles by Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier and Sven Lütticken, we move from academic to artistic and art-critical praxis. Both essays investigate the problematic relationship between "theory" and the art world in recent decades. Schavemaker and Rakier see this relationship as an almost obsessive one, with the appropriation and rejection of art theoretical positions as a defining characteristic of both art- and theory-making since the 1980s. The intimate connection between the journal *October* and a number of artists who came to prominence in this period, whereby the artists and scholars appear to have thrived on a kind of mutual dependency bordering on the dysfunctional, is a prime example. Familiarity, however, breeds contempt, but as in all family relationships it is difficult to break the ties that bind, and we find in the art of the 1990s and later an equally close, although somewhat different, relationship between theoreticians and artists. Art and theory seem thus to live in an inextricable and somewhat uncomfortable union, whereby the rhetorics of language versus vision, discourse versus experience, and autonomy versus engagement come to dominate by turns.

Again looking at the role of theory in relation to contemporary art, Lütticken shows that while it would seem that in art-making – as in art criticism and art display – discursiveness and transparency are the order of the day, a closer examination reveals that theoretical discourse, rather than serving to de-mystify art, works instead to obscure it once again. Since the advent of the "aesthetic regime" (Jacques Rancière) around 1800, art has no longer needed to obey rules, being instead regarded as an "object of thought" or "problem," consisting of a mixture of *logos* and *mythos*, of conscious and unconscious elements. The article traces the vicissitudes of the unconscious and symbolic in art through the metaphor of the eternally returning sphinx, suggesting that there has always been a play between those who championed the rational in art (Hegel) and those who sought to reinsert reason's Other into the aesthetic realm (the Surrealists). Today, *logos* seems once again to dominate, but what critics fail to acknowledge is that theoretical writing itself can never be free of elements of the unconscious. This leads to obscurantism rather than consciousness, a re-mystification of art that goes entirely against the clarity theory is

supposed to provide. This can in fact be taken as a warning to art historians as well. To rephrase Lütticken's final point: the acknowledgement of the unconscious can be used in the production of an *art history* that while not free of logocentric elements, nonetheless deploys these against *logos* itself, creating riddles that are self-reflexive rather than abstruse.

None of the theories discussed in this issue can stand alone, nor do they in the work of most scholars who see themselves as in some sense indebted to New Art History. As the terms "cultural diversity" and "multiculturalism" have now been replaced with the notion of "inter-culture," perhaps we, too, should adopt the term "inter-theoretical" to describe our practice today.¹⁷ This clearly entails not the dogmatic devotion to one particular method or "school" but rather allowing objects to speak to us in such a way that we can divine the best theory with which to approach them. The object is the determining factor; our openness to it – on all levels: visual, physical, intellectual – is the key.

I would like to end with a quotation from a recent publication by art historian and critic Camiel van Winkel that will serve as both a caution and inspiration, both for ourselves and the generation we are now teaching. A caution in that it admonishes us to a kind of modesty, but also inspirational, because it suggests that even moments of crisis – such as the one I suggested at the beginning we may now be living through – can be productive:

“(In)competence and (un)professionalism represent just as much a problem for critics as for the artists they write about; the notion of a ‘professional quality judgment’ is equally dubious as a critique presented as dilettante. What is more, the context of their subject leads critics into territories like film, fashion and advertising photography, where their specialist knowledge offers little or no clues. Instead of calling on artists to deliver more workmanship, or imposing on them a particular agenda, it would be better to admit that the critic is stranded in the same morass in which the artist necessarily operates. The impossible demarcation of their own expertise, which nevertheless is always by definition a limited one, forms a structural fact that both artists and critics urgently need to face.”¹⁸

Notes:

* The title of this essay is drawn from the recent series of lectures (*Right About Now*), organized jointly in the spring of 2006 by the Universiteit van Amsterdam, the Stedelijk Museum and W139. A publication of the lectures, edited by Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier, is forthcoming.

1 Quoted in Peter Brunette and David Wills, 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in idem (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, New York 1993, p. 17.

2 I am using the term New Art History in its very broadest sense, encompassing a variety of disciplinary practices and approaches, from semiotics to visual culture and beyond, which have entered into, transformed, and in many cases fundamentally challenged art history. On the implications of the term, however, see Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, London/New York 2001, pp. 6-10.

3 See *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (June 2006): *Kunstgeschichte: The Means of Art History*.

4 Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900*, London 2005.

5 A large number of reviewers have expressed this opinion, which the present author shares. See my review in *jongHolland* 21 (2005) 4, pp. 44-45, and, more recently, the series of examinations published in *The Art Bulletin* 88 (June 2006). It is extremely telling in this context that *October* has of late become the object of satire: the perhaps-periodical *November*, published by an anonymous collective known as Eleventh Month (October in the lunar calendar), is a brilliantly executed lampoon featuring articles such as "'A Better Everyday Life": Neo-Avantgarde, Culture Industry, and Ikea's Historic Amnesia' (by one Lukás G.C. Hechnoh), and 'Golf in the Expanded Field (of Surveillance)', with further abundant references to the *flâneur*, Boiffard's big toe, and Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois' *informe*. The publication is available from Printed Matter in New York: www.printedmatter.org.

6 Sabeth Buchmann et al., 'Preface', *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (June 2006), p. 154.

7 Ibid., p. 155

8 Ibidem.

9 A recent example at the Universiteit van Amsterdam is the Photography, Film and Displacement research project, coordinated by Marie-Ode Baronian, Sophie Berrebi and Julia Noordegraaf under the auspices of ASCA (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis).

10 It was Sven Lüttiken who described Dutch art history as a nationalist enterprise with little or no interest in theory in his controversial article 'Holland op zijn Hollandst', *jongHolland* 21 (2005) 2, pp. 35-38.

11 Caroline M. Jones, for example, writes of creating a kind of "critical formalism," which would combine the sensual appreciation of objects, new kinds of phenomenology and the Foucauldian concept of "the visibility" in order to examine how specific works form viewers as subjects at particular historical moments, and to specify (without closing off) those object's own historical and performative complexities; see *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (June 2006), p. 161.

12 One can only hope that the appointment of Deborah Cherry, one of the field's most prominent feminists, as chair of the modern art department at the Universiteit van Amsterdam will bring some change in this regard. Another event that may prove inspirational will be Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly's upcoming exhibition of contemporary feminist art at the Brooklyn Museum (2007), an echo of Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris's widely celebrated and discourse-producing *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, held at the same institution in 1976.

13 The literature on the visual culture debate is vast; essential reading remains the essays and commentary published in *October* 77 (Summer 1996).

14 In this regard see the work of French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, in particular his recent publication on four surviving images of Auschwitz, *Images malgré tout*, Paris 2004.

15 For some very pertinent remarks on this subject see Sven Lütticken, 'New Adventures in Idolatry: Art History and Criticism in Interesting Times', *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (June 2006), p. 172. **[or pp. ... start and endpage? JOS: He only talks about this particular issue on *that* page, that's why the specific reference]**

16 The relationship of 20th-century art to moving images is the subject of a fascinating show currently on view at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (until January 2007), *Le mouvement des images*, curated by film historian and Warburg scholar Philippe-Alain Michaud. Although it is impossible to go into detail here, Michaud's approach – both in general and in this exhibition – seems to me to offer an extremely interesting means of reassessing the history of 20th-century art, one that is highly relevant to both teaching and research in this area. See Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Le mouvement des images*, Paris 2006, as well as idem, *Sketches. Histoire de l'art*,

cinema, Paris 2006. For Michaud's work on Warburg see idem, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes, New York 2004.

17 I am indebted to Deborah Cherry for this term.

18 Camiel van Winkel, *The Regime of Visibility*, Rotterdam 2006, p. 201.