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## THE FUTURE OF WORLD ART HISTORY AS CULTURAL MEMORY

The idea of a contemporaneity of the present and the past has one final consequence: Not only does the past coexist with the present that has been, but, as it preserves itself in itself...it is *all* our past, which coexists with each present.

Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to continue the work of Dmitry Vladimirovich Sarabianov on cultural memory? We are today witnessing the expansion of the discourse of Art Studies to embrace a worldwide or global perspective that encompasses many kinds of cultural artefacts and activities. The new initiative embraces the challenge to theorize about the complexities of cultural interaction without imposing ethnocentric categories such as those that historically defined the discipline of art history on Euro-American terms. The global turn also inevitably means uniting the world's cultural productions which have been historically sorted into the separate domains of art history, archeology, and anthropology. A practical problem arises because everything and anything manufactured by humans potentially becomes

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Helen Hills for her comments on an earlier draft and to my students and colleagues at the University of Colorado Boulder who helped me develop the vision of a world art history that is sketched in this paper. My thanks also to Assistant Vice Chancellor Alphonse Keasley and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Community Engagement for funding the development of the course.

Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York: Zone Books, 1988, p. 59.

a legitimate object of study. How is this immense object domain to be organized?

I will try to address the question of Sarabianov's legacy through this topic of the global turn in the discipline of Art History. Only a small portion of his life's work is available to me in English, his *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Russian Avant-Garde* (Abrams, 1990), but in that widely read text, Sarabianov's stated aim was to insert Russian artistic achievements into the master narrative of European art. This type of intervention has a great deal in common with the efforts of feminist art historians in the 1960s and '70s who expanded the canon by inserting women artists into the all-male line-up of what they rightly perceived as a hegemonic discourse. Despite these attempts at recovery, the number of great women artists remained low. The second wave of feminist art historians questioned the enabling conditions of artistic practice – asking what social and institutional conditions prevented women from becoming successful. By questioning the framing conditions of knowledge production – beyond the knowledge produced – pioneering women opened up the field conceptually, encouraging productive new questions, new lines of investigation, and new debates on social justice that invigorated longstanding struggles for equality in society.

Still, the advances made during the ensuing “culture wars” through the 1990s did not go far enough in questioning the values that held in place art history's now destabilized object domain. Old hierarchies of aesthetic and ethical value, and of cognitive, cultural, and technological advancement, remained in place because the categories of “art,” “nation,” “culture,” “style,” “period,” “canon,” and so on were too often assumed to be unproblematic, not open to discussion, taken to be universally valid. These categories remain entrenched in the commercial world of the art industry – in museum exhibitions, commercial galleries, international biennales, popular culture. In his influential book, *Provincializing Europe* (2000), the sociologist Dipesh Chakrabarty describes growing up in a Marxist social and academic environment in postcolonial Calcutta. The European origins of Marx's thought and its undoubted international significance existed in tension with his own local lived reality where traces and effects of European rule were everywhere – in the traffic rules, the forms of soccer and cricket, his school uniforms, Bengali nationalist essays and poems critical of social inequality especially the caste system<sup>1</sup>. The “parochial” origins of Marx's thought was, at the time, invisible. It was not until Chakrabarty arrived in Australia to pursue doctoral studies that he could see European abstract concepts such as the idea of equality or democracy or even the dignity of human beings as something *other* than a universally applicable category. The idea that such abstract concepts could look “utterly different in different historical contexts” changed the way he thought.

<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, issued with new preface, 2008, p. ix.

These are also the normative values to which Dmitry Sarabianov addressed his survey of Russian art. What would it mean to continue Sarabianov's work today? The situation in which he articulated the traditions of Russian art and culture *differs* from the subaltern position occupied by women and others who are marginalized within the patriarchal structure of society. First, because the Russian artistic achievements that he wrote about had been suppressed by the State prior to the "Thaw period" in favour of an imaginary collective cultural memory visually symbolized as the triumph of the worker, which was hardly the actual case. Secondly, because Russia was widely considered by western European writers to lie outside Europe geographically and culturally during the formative period of art history in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Sarabianov's revisionist narrative begins. Russia was also in-between Europe and Asia politically during the Cold War era, when Sarabianov was in the prime of his youth, a time of ultra-nationalistic sentiment. This double, or even quadruple, construal of marginality both from within and from without was on my mind as I prepared the paper you are reading now. I lingered over one tantalizing phrase excerpted in the call for papers on which the present volume is based: "the intrinsic innermost national traditions... hidden from outside view." I was reminded of the Russian film classic, Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966) with its valorization of "knowledge acquired without reliance on authority"<sup>1</sup>.

Traditions that Sarabianov described as "capable of manifesting themselves at some stretch of history" and "against the artist's will" resonate with the arguments of Michel de Certeau in an essay entitled "Psychoanalysis and its History," which has long informed my practice as an art historian working in a complex network of institutionalized forms of power. Articulating the ways in which one is entangled with the imperatives of one's profession is no easy matter. De Certeau observes that history-writing and psychoanalysis contrast with each other as two modes of structuring or distributing the space of memory<sup>2</sup>. They constitute two strategies of time, two methods of formatting the relation between past and present. Both, he argued, developed to address analogous problems. While history juxtaposes past and present, psychoanalysis recognizes the past *in* the present. For conventional history-writing, this relationship is one of

<sup>1</sup> Jim Hoberman, "Andrei Rublev: The Criterion Collection," accessed on September 28, 2014, at Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei\\_Rublev\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Rublev_(film))

<sup>2</sup> Michel De Certeau. "Psychoanalysis and its History," *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi, foreword Wlad Godzich, Theory and History of Literature, v. 17, Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 3-16. De Certeau's concept of the mnemonic trace is an historical framework on the model of dialectical anachronism. Wlad Godzich, introduction to De Certeau, *Heterologies*, xx-xxi, writes that De Certeau's conception of discourse recognizes that discursive activity is a form of social activity, an activity in which we attempt to apply the rules of the discourses that we assume. These may not be heroic roles, but they place us much more squarely in front of our responsibility as historical actors.

succession (one thing after another), cause and effect (one thing following from another), and separation (the past as distinct from the present). Psychoanalysis on the other hand treats relations between past and present as one of imbrication (one thing in the place of the other) and repetition (one thing reproduces the other but in another form). Both, de Certeau argued, developed to address analogous problems – to understand the differences, or guarantee the continuities, between the organization of the actual and the formations of the past. That is, the historian’s task is to relate the representations of the past or present to the conditions which determined their production. As de Certeau phrased it so well, “memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the *mnemic trace*, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself.”<sup>1</sup>

Sarabianov’s account of Russian art also reminds me of the great nineteenth-century Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt’s praise for the enduring Italian national spirit as a natural bond that transcends any centralized bureaucratic structure. Burckhardt might also have been thinking of mnemic traces. At the time of its publication in 1860, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* was intended by its author as an implicit critique of current politics<sup>2</sup>. Sarabianov’s strategic utilizations of a Burckhardtian understanding of nationalism should not be understood as the belated embrace of an outmoded humanist paradigm. To the contrary, his strategic deployment of an essentializing model of cultural memory carried its own implicit political gesture. I am reminded of another famous Russian film, Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002). The ghost of a nineteenth-century French traveller (the Marquis de Custine), famously dismisses all Russian culture as “barbaric,” nothing but a thin veneer of European civilization covering a coarse Asiatic soul. Filmed in an uninterrupted 87-minute sequence of action – an extraordinary panoramic gesture in duration – *Russian Ark* is itself a gesture on a grand scale befitting the Hermitage’s unrivalled treasures that frame the action.

<sup>1</sup> De Certeau. “Psychoanalysis and its History.” Historical representations themselves, as de Certeau argued, bring into play past or distant regions from beyond a boundary line separating the present institution from those regions. History writing (what he termed historiography) and psychoanalysis contrast with each other as two modes of structuring or distributing the space of memory. Both developed to give the past explanatory value and/or make the present capable of explaining the past; to relate the representations of the past or present to the conditions which determined their production.

<sup>2</sup> Burckhardt took an active political role only through his scholarship, became deeply disillusioned with the increasing tendency of government to endanger individual freedom and creativity. An increasingly reclusive member of the Swiss intellectual elite, he opposed the impending formation of the German nation-state for these reasons. Far from being a disengaged aesthete, however, Burckhardt paid obsessive attention to contemporary politics, though he remained “fundamentally unpolitical if not apolitical,” according to Lionel Gossman, “Jacob Burckhardt: Cold War Liberal?,” *Journal of Modern History* 74 (September 2002): 538-572

Two ghosts from the past make believe that what they witness is not a dream. When Sarabianov's narrative of Russian art was published in English in 1990, Gorbachev was in the midst of restructuring the economy. Sarabianov's history of Russian art, like Sokurov's film, is the event that rethinks past cultural memory in the present, the only position in which action is possible. We face a similar challenge now of how to make visible the broader conceptual framework in which the sometimes deadly debates over cultural identities and cultural properties are conducted. The dilemma of all art, regardless of what we designate by that word – of all artifice – is that signs are by definition substitutions of a “this” for a “that,” and therefore art engenders a potentially endless process of semiosis that is inherently polyvalent, capable of signifying in multiple ways. This means that the most fundamental problem at hand for conceptualizing art history as the study of cultural memory is the notion of identity itself. Who decides it? Who benefits, who doesn't from those decisions? Whose futures are foreclosed? Currently, two contending models for understanding collective cultural memory are being played out in academic writings and these same models are utilized widely in the public sphere. One model is dependent upon neo-liberal notions of diversity, hybridity, and migratory and transitory identity; and the other, which might be termed a “nativist” model, emphasizes social cohesion, and the permanence and persistence of individual and group identity. The diaspora model is emphatically rejected by peoples whose collective identities are tied to ancestral territories, cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems, and ethnic identities. In nativist discourse, essentialism often plays a progressive role in forming a self-determined (or at least self-named) national identity.

Meanwhile, the opposite camp, in championing transitory identity that rejects essentializing constructs outright, remains indebted to the same epistemological underpinnings. That is to say, both models assume that each material body has one identity at a time, though identity may be lost and gained. And it doesn't matter whether we are talking about an individual or a collective because the structural relationship – one body, one identity at a time – remains the same. Few are aware of the oscillations between the two dominant accounts of collective cultural memory: being wedded to the one or the other renders its other invisible. What is unclear is that the positions are co-constructed and mutually defining, each existing primarily in relation to its other: a romance of unknown siblings<sup>1</sup>.

Another model of identity or cultural memory is needed, one that recognizes that multiple identities or cultural memories are simultaneously possible, that identities and diverse cultural memories can co-exist without being commensurable or reducible one into another. The subject position of the critic in the institution also needs to be considered *within* the framework of the interpretation: I am part of the same historical continuum

<sup>1</sup> Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, coined this felicitous phrase.

as my subject of study. If my vested position remains outside the framework of discussion, the most significant epistemological and ethical issues will remain unarticulated and unaddressed. The spectre is invisible in the mirror, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida put it, and this condition can either haunt us like the ghost of the French traveller perpetually performing Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, perpetually orbiting around the same issues emanating from European thought – or we can remember our past differently, learn from it in the present, and use the lessons to devise a better future for all concerned.

If Dmitry Sarabianov were just starting his career now, would he still insert Russian art seamlessly into the dominant European narrative of art historical time? Today he would have other alternatives. We might speak of the work of art as an event, the material trace of which remains forever open to interpretation<sup>1</sup>. To study the artwork as an artefact in this sense of an event is to seize the contending forces of past and future in the present where thought and action are possible<sup>2</sup>. We have to re-conceive writing history as a translational exercise if history writing is to be an ethical rather than an imperial practice. In his famous essay published in 1978, entitled “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” historian Hayden White criticized the assumptions of empirical historians who assumed that they eschewed ideology if they remained true to the facts, The nineteenth-century ideology that a value-neutral description of the facts prior to interpretation or analysis was possible, is an illusion, White remarks: “What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? But rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?”<sup>3</sup> 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.

There is nothing “natural” about construing time as chronology or privileging temporal succession above other forms of narration. The manner in which works of art exist “through” time deserves even more scrutiny, even more vigorous shaking of Art History's epistemological foundations. One fundamental problem with most existing attempts to re-think the discipline from a global perspective – a question that bears directly on the present volume's objectives to expand the boundaries of art history and provide a theoretical framework for interdisciplinary approaches – is that the organization of cultural production by nation-states, continents, religions, period styles, and other such monolithic entities, is part of the same historical

<sup>1</sup> Tony Bennett, *Making Culture, Changing Society*, London-New York: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Jae Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 1 (December 2009): 1–20, paraphrasing p. 3, where Emerling discusses the artwork marked with a “temporal index” that the historian/spectator witnesses at some remove.

<sup>3</sup> Hayden White. “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 121–130, citing p. .

process as the objects of art historical study: such categories cannot serve as premisses because they require historical explanation just as much as the “art” that is the primary object of study. The idea of “art” is itself a modern concept that evolved over several centuries, initially in western European writings, therefore also in need of historical explication. Our inherited monocultural and oppositional categories (Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, and West and Non-West) are also far from neutral or innocent. Like the historical idea of art itself, these categories of European origin also need to be understood historically, not applied unilaterally as if some universal idea of art existed outside of history.

A promising alternative to the schemes of periodization and national culture originally developed to account for continuity and rupture in western European art is emerging from current research initiatives to study regional trading networks. Trade networks historically enabled the circulation of raw materials, manufactured goods, people, and ideas. Many new and ongoing projects on maritime trading networks and other long distance exchanges are fundamentally reshaping inherited understandings of cultural transmission and exchange by moving away from questions of fixed identity to a multi-faceted understanding of the dynamic processes of identity formation. Such studies articulate historical alternatives to monolithic ideas of time and culture.

Attention to the circulation of goods and ideas – or we might, following Gilles Deleuze, better call them “assemblages” of heterogeneous bits and pieces – demands rethinking not only culture and “artworks,” but history itself. The study of regions historically defined by trade is producing something very different from conceptions of geography configured in modern terms of landmasses such as continents and modern nation-states. Coastal regions, islands, navigable rivers, and other geographical features define important points of exchange in trading regions<sup>1</sup>. Such a topographical approach also avoids hierarchal distinctions such as Western versus non-Western art, or art versus artefact, and similar categories that have historically privileged certain types of cultural production and excluded many others.

Regardless of how art history’s object domain is reconfigured, however, a radical reconceptualization of cultural space must accompany any serious discussion of how a world art history of the future might be organized. The ecological model of regional “connectivity” developed by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell in their account of the Mediterranean (*The Corrupting Sea*, 2000) argues that the stability of regions in the Mediterranean region

<sup>1</sup> The actor-network model conceived by sociologist Bruno Latour as a Deleuzian rhizomatic structure comprised of connections (in which material things are also “actants”) is useful because it connects diverse types of agents into “assemblages” without relying on metaphysical concepts of transcendence such as the distinction between materiality and immateriality. For a concise introduction, see Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47/4 (1996):369-381.

is sustained by systems of local exchange based on shared environmental, biological, and anthropological factors that maintain a delicate balance between separation and connection. Such a model of interconnectivity can be organized at different scales depending on the objectives of study. This approach is useful because it connects local perspectives with regional and ultimately globally interconnected systems of production and exchange.

A deterritorialized model for organizing the discipline according to networks of interaction also has the advantage of producing numerous regional chronologies, rather than a single linear chronology tied to European events. We might use Deleuze's materialist epistemology that connects all "actants" into "assemblages" conceived as a rhizomatic structure without top or bottom, centre or periphery, to develop a self-reflexive, historiographical art history that opens up a new, transcultural, pluralistic understanding of what has been effaced by concepts such as periodization and essentializing constructs of identity<sup>1</sup>. Such a "pluritope" model of interchange involves more complex notions of causality because it proceeds in many directions, continuously changing and connecting objects with makers and users in dynamic networks extending over vast areas of space and time<sup>2</sup>.

To have a productive conversation about cultural memory in any field of study, it is also important to consider *when* terms such as "identity" and "periodization" matter. In the current political climate in the United States, Russia, and elsewhere, the extent of our responsibilities as academics and intellectuals to link museology, history, theory, and criticism to contemporary social conditions and discursive formations is an urgent question. Conceiving of historical artefacts as the residues of events encourages an understanding of cultural commentary as a directly political act with the capacity to reshape the discursive ground on which cultural memory is shaped<sup>3</sup>. I could easily imagine that Sarabianov would be at the cutting edge of these developments.

<sup>1</sup> On Deleuze's materialist epistemology, see further, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2010, especially p. 32, where she notes that Jacques Derrida also offers as an alternative to consciousness-centered thinking about the work of art by figuring its trajectory as "messianicity," the open-ended promissory quality of a claim, image, or entity: the unspecified promise is for Derrida the very condition of possibility of phenomenality: things allude to a fullness that is elsewhere. For Derrida this promissory note is never to be redeemed. – he affirms the existence of a certain trajectory or drive to assemblages without insinuating intentionality or purposiveness.

<sup>2</sup> To cite Eva Hoffman, "Pathways of Portability," in *Remapping the Art of the Mediterranean, Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World*, ed. E. Hoffman, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Bennett, *Making Culture, Changing Society*, Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2013.