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Bully Pulpit: Is American Art History Conservative?

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“Conservative” is a deeply fickle word. Which aspects of our discipline might be hidebound, and which truly useful? If only teasing these strands apart were so simple. I was reminded of this while reading *The Argonauts*, by poet and critic Maggie Nelson, published in 2015, which manages to combine memoir, polemic, poststructural and queer theory, and a love story into one heady package. The title alludes to a quote from Roland Barthes that Nelson sends her lover early in their courtship. Barthes had mused that saying “I love you” is “like ‘the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name . . . the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.’”¹ I feel much the same about the putative conservatism of American art. In order to sustain love, or at least fondness, a statement of commitment and belonging must be made and renewed continually. The ship must have new parts.

But which ones to keep and which to jettison? In a field that has grown at such a fast clip, and in which the canon is continually challenged, expanded, and enriched in ways that are too diverse to record here, it can seem almost impossible to say. Despite this rapid pace of change, there is a conservatism that I have noted and discussed with colleagues, a resistance not necessarily to new ideas, but to new questions, to modes of knowledge and of communication. Has social art history and our attachment to discourse calcified from heterodoxy to orthodoxy? Have we reproduced what Lauren Berlant has called “the deadening, corporate norms of credentialization, utility, excellence, and sublimated creativity of the neoliberal university” in our scholarly apparatus?²

In his 2003 essay that appeared in *The Art Bulletin* summarizing the current state of the field, John Davis wrote of the swift decline in the kind of buoyant optimism that had characterized American art historical writing of the 1940s up to the 1980s.³ Since that time, wariness (of power and of grand narratives) has become an article of faith. So, too, has our consideration of social, historical, and cultural context. These are invaluable parts of our disciplinary Argo, but there are ways in which context can obscure rather than illuminate. How significant are bodies and emotions in this wide-angle, impersonal view, not only for the objects we study, but for the scholars that study them?

For the past few years, I have attended the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies Conference where the majority of attendees are, in fact, literary studies scholars. Not only do affect, trauma, and the “new materialisms” turn up with great

frequency, but there is a surprising willingness to play with the genre of the scholarly talk, to abandon the pose of expert, to acknowledge experimental or half-formed thoughts, as well as personal feelings or history. In comparison, the practice of reading aloud polished, twenty-minute papers verbatim, a practice that is alive and well in most gatherings of historians of American art where I have been in attendance, is more likely to seem positively Germanic.

If conservatism is predicated on a desire to preserve an existing thing, structure, or system, then it is no surprise, really, that the discipline of art history would be implicated in its web. Our broader disciplinary beginnings in antiquarianism and connoisseurship are rooted in a tradition of “keeping,” as suggested by the British corollary for the American “curator.” The art historian and historiographer Michael Ann Holly has taken this analysis further and has suggested recently that the field itself is profoundly shaped by a sense of melancholy or mourning, an awareness of monuments lost and found. As Holly has written, “In the sight of old objects that continue to exist materially in the present, but whose once noisy and busy existence has long since been silenced, there is something profoundly melancholy.”⁴

In many ways, this sets up a familiar debate that I have no intention of rehearsing between patient historian and adventurous critic, as well as a less-familiar contrast between the silence (or quiet) of the object and the chatter of the narrative text. Still, what is habitually called the “mute poetry” of objects can lead to lugubriousness. What a relief to undercut that cloying gloom with context and the social formation of identity! If there is a conservatism in the field of American art history, then perhaps it is this devotion to tough-minded skepticism. What reaction, other than skepticism, are we to feel to the words repeated recently by both Holly and Stephen Bann in the pages of *The Art Bulletin*, of the philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit: “How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it.”⁵

And yet, as Nelson so brilliantly shows, feelings and personal reactions do not necessarily have to be mediocre, sentimental, or weak-minded. By the same token, inserting (or acknowledging) contemporary concerns into the historical past need not be irresponsible or naive; however, as with so many things, the devil is in the details.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes as quoted in Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015), 5.

² Lauren Berlant, “Affect is the New Trauma,” *the minnesota review* 71–72. (2009): 134.

³ John Davis, “The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States,” *The Art Bulletin* 85 (Sept. 2003): 545.

⁴ Michael Ann Holly, “Mourning and Method,” *The Art Bulletin* 84 (December 2002): 661.

⁵ Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10, as quoted in Holly, “The Melancholy Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 89 (March 2007): 9 and Stephen Bann, “Response: Reasons to Be Cheerful,” *The Art Bulletin* 89 (March 2007): 38.