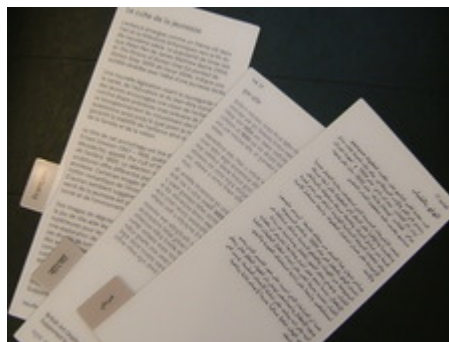


Interpretation, Theory & the Encounter

Friday 9 July 2010, 10.00–18.00

As interpretation becomes an increasingly conflicted site of meaning and representation within curatorial and museological practice this conference brings together key international speakers to consider the theoretical and philosophical issues which frame textual interpretation. Speakers include **Tony Bennett**, **Donald Preziosi**, **Griselda Pollock**, and **James Elkins**.



Abstracts

Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage, Critique **Tony Bennett**

My concerns in this paper focus on the relations between the interpretations of art associated with post-Kantian aesthetic theory and the project of critique as it has been elaborated in twentieth-century social and cultural theory. There are many versions of the relations between aesthetics and critique that might be considered for this purpose: Theodor Adorno, Edward Said, Terry Eagleton, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Rancière, for example. I shall look briefly at the respects in which, while strange bedfellows in many other ways, these theorists share a common set of concerns derived from the architecture of the person that Kant's account of the aesthetic proposed for the management of free and autonomous individuality. I shall, though, focus the greater part of my attention on Rancière's account of the relations between the aesthetic regime of art and critique as a form of metapolitics, and Foucault's account of the relations between critique and the aesthetics of existence. I shall interpret these as intellectual or cultural technologies which induct individuals into particular kinds of independent and critical reflexivity modelled – albeit at some distance in Foucault's case – on the autonomy of the work of art. While acknowledging the real and consequential historical force of these technologies, I shall be more concerned with their ethical and political limitations. The purpose of critique, Adorno once wrote, was to produce a politically mature individual who 'stands free of any guardian'. This neglects the distinctive kinds of tutelage that are exercised by intellectuals who embody, represent and superintend the forms of 'guided freedom' that critique enunciates. I shall argue that these forms of tutelary authority have two main limitations. First, they constitute a displaced form of priestly authority that is exercised within a conceptual space structured by the continuing role that Christian metaphysics plays in post-Kantian aesthetics. Second, while the ethics of critique are processual rather than substantive in the sense of comprising a particular styling of the self rather than a prescriptive moral code, the advocates of critique consistently fail to consider its virtues in relation to other kinds of processual ethics - the bureaucratic and the civic, for example. To do so, I shall suggest, results in a more cautious estimate of the value and validity of the traditions of social and cultural critique that have been fashioned in the slipstream of aesthetic constructions of the relations between art and freedom.

What if art desires to be interpreted? **Remodelling interpretation after the 'encounter-event'** **Griselda Pollock**

Writing as both an artist and an analyst-theorist, Bracha L Ettinger declares that it is the *destiny* and, one might say, the *desire* of artworks to be interpreted.

Artists continually introduce into culture all sorts of Trojan horses from the margins of their consciousness; in that way, the limits of the Symbolic are transgressed all the time by art. It is quite possible that many work-products carry subjective traces of their creators, but the specificity of works of art is that their materiality cannot be detached from ideas, perceptions, emotions, consciousness cultural meanings, etc, and that being interpreted and reinterpreted is their cultural destiny. This is one of the reasons why works of art are symbologenic. Artists inscribe traces of subjectivity, Oedipal or not in "external" cultural/symbolic territories (i.e. art works), and by analyzing these inscriptions, it is possible to create and forge concepts which indicate and elaborate traces of an-other Real and change aspects of the symbolic representation (and non-representation) of the feminine within culture. From time to time the artist's gaze is suddenly split and we find ourselves in the position of observer-interpreter. I see the inscription of oneself in the Symbolic and the recognition of one's own desire through the Symbolic as inter-related, self-organizing, continuous events. I believe, therefore, that the Symbolic must be penetrated by women even if choosing one name/concept will be considered phallic. In that way, alternative ideas, deviating from the Phallus, may enlarge the text of culture. Bracha L Ettinger, 'Matrix and Metramorphosis', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 4:5 (1992), 195-196.

Psychoanalysis clearly represents one of the formalized and modern cultural sites of interpretation as well as an incompletely explored and contested resource for aesthetic theory. From the moment of Freud's *Traumdeutung*, translated as the *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899 but identified with the century's turn in 1900, *interpretation* became a process of negotiating not merely the inherited opposition between word and image with its grand rhetorical traditions of ekphrasis and Lessing-type evaluation of literary versus the visual representation. It offered a novel means to trace the multi-levelled interplay of different, yet interrelating registers on which the subjective processes of producing meaning and becoming a subject in a world infused with, yet resistant to particular, orderings that we call meaning: conscious/unconscious as well as Imaginary/Symbolic, repressed/censored. In my presentation I want to use the 1992 text by Bracha Ettinger to perform a double intervention into the current museological and critical debates about interpretation of artworks as we encounter them in the exhibition space. Let me ask: to what extent is attention to suppressed, repressed, excluded or censored meanings and meaning-making processes, notably associated with the feminine in a phallic Imaginary/Symbolic, intimately related to contemporary aesthetic practices which we now encounter as invitations to something more than semiotic decipherment? Interpretation is not itself a static issue; the artistic practices which we currently encounter are, moreover, themselves neither fixed nor without their own historical indexicality. We undertake this questioning on shifting grounds shaped by historical pressures operating according to linear and monumental temporalities (Kristeva). Using another Ettingerian psychoanalytically-informed concept of *event-encounter* that has its own resonances with the very differently grounded Deleuzian invocation of the Spinozan 'encounter', I aim to move away from the deadlock of word/image, verbal/visual language, object/text into the politics of difference and into the concept of interpretation as a collaborative work solicited by the artwork as an event that precipitates an encounter with difference. Refusing dispassionate and disembodied objectifications, such a move results in an ethical-aesthetic complex that opens onto transformation. Matrixial interpretation as a complementary *working* (I invoke here the deep Freudian concept of the psyche as economy rather than contents) is then a partner-in-difference with the *poiesis* that artworking itself seeks to perform on behalf of the culture within which it moves. The intervention hopes to bring an increasingly forgotten or reburied feminist questioning of the potentiality of the aesthetic in cultural-subjective transformation back into the current debates and to remind us that the plane on which we communicate any of this is language which already inhabits us and on which we constantly work.

Palpable and Mute, as a Globed Fruit: Meaning and its (Dis)possession - Donald Preziosi

The hagiographic uses and effects of art museums have long overshadowed their essentially ethical functions as instruments for modelling, mimicking, and modifying individual and collective behaviour. As modes of interpretation, museums stage *parallaxic* relations between diverse domains of the sensible (such as objects and their framings in whatever medium, including verbal glossing) whilst simultaneously fixing in place those embeddings and juxtapositions as if they were tamely stereoscopic. Beyond their modern social status as architectonic phenomena, museums are more fundamentally a staging of occasions for relating sets of appropriated or invented phenomena, using diverse materials and methods. However, this invariably confers an ambivalent legibility to the visible entities ostensibly foregrounded by their framing – a situation paradoxically rendering any museological legibility itself moot.

As an epistemological technology, a method of fabricating knowledge, interpretation is essentially ethical and political in that its manifestations, palpably impinging upon the perceptions of individuals, invariably has potentially unpredictable consequences for individual and social behaviour. Moreover, the very palpability of the artifice of its own stagecraft renders museological effects potentially construable otherwise than as (presumably) intended. In this respect, museological practice shares the core conundrum of all artistry or artifice as such. In rendering the visible legible, art historicism, for example, itself renders its own legibilities moot and problematic, bringing to light the (often covert) agency of those who would claim a given interpretation as true or faithful to its alleged intentions. In effect, interpretation's own artistry renders its productions moot: a situation with fundamental political, philosophical, and even theological consequences.

While some commentators – recently, Ranciere, for example - have claimed that the supposedly mute palpability of artworks renders them not only 'democratically' available to audiences but also available as models (simulacra) of empowerment, not only is its supposed opposite equally probable, but the antithesis itself is palpably problematic. As indeed is the customary distinction between a staged artefact and its written or verbal inflections. This paper examines aspects of these conundrums through case-studies of recent museum practices where exhibitions have been overtly staged as not only critical of conventional modes of exhibitionary stagecraft but as affording 'agency' to audiences, and thereby opportunities to 'own' or possess meaning. In fact, the critical edge of such (invariably ephemeral) critique is quickly blunted by the very paradox of having-been-staged, rendering artistic deconstructive interventions as mere art-celebrity entertainment or media spectacle, and hence perfectly complicit with what they purport to critique. The paper contextualizes recent critical museological practices by drawing attention to the nature and functions of interpretation as a practice *always ambivalently sanctioned and proscribed*, linking it to long-standing political and cultural conflicts and impasses regarding the proper social roles of artistic (re)presentation - a dilemma as old as Plato's conflicted attempts to banish the mimetic arts from his ideal city, and as recent as unresolvable and violent religious conflicts over the proper uses and interpretations of artistry.

“Can Pictures Think?” - James Elkins

In the last hundred years there have been a wide range of theories about how pictures (paintings, drawings, film, photography, and video) embody, possess, contain, or suggest meaning. It would not be inaccurate to say that every major art historian, philosopher, or critic who has articulated a theory of interpretation has in effect contributed to this question. Normally these theories are treated as separate endeavours, so that accounts of the meaning of images are found, separately, in phenomenology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, and other fields.

My proposal here is that all such theories participate in a general interest in distinguishing linguistic meaning from what sometimes ends up being called pictorial meaning. This is a speculative lecture: it's an attempt to suggest that all interpretations may be understood as versions of a hope, or desire, about pictures. At one limit there are claims (endemic in modernism) about pictures' non-linguistic nature. At another limit there are claims (common in anthropology) that pictures not only have language, but are living, acting agents in the world.

In between is the gray area that continues to snare theorists. And in the grey area, the most interesting region, one often inhabited by academic writers, is where there is a hope that pictures somehow produce thought - that they somehow think.

I will discuss a number of versions of this kind of claim, by writers as different as Hubert Damisch, Tom Mitchell, and Louis Marin, and I will claim that the notion that pictures embody thought is the crucial confusion that enables current conceptualization of the image. It is a confusion because it elides several mutually incompatible or otherwise unacceptable claims, such as the claim that a picture has volition and agency. But it is crucial for current writing because enables many claims about the way that meaning resides in pictures, without requiring that those claims are individually argued. We work, in effect, in an intentionally ill-defined zone that permits our desires about pictures to live alongside our desires about our writing.