

BOOK REVIEW

Paul O’Kane: *‘History in Contemporary Art and Culture’*

by Matthew Bowman



Artworks precede the art critic’s labour, undoubtedly, but whether they precede art criticism *per se* constitutes a trickier matter altogether. Indeed, artworks, we might suspect, possess their own more complex temporality and it remains significantly uncertain how either the art historian or the art critic—always, by definition, belated actors on the scene—must register that temporality, in all its complexity and entanglements, through or against the essential linearity of their own writing. Such a challenge, however, extends beyond the professional confines of the art critic/historian insofar as it encompasses any and all thinking comported towards artworks that disrupt conventional processual frameworks for interpretation. Not only will our cognitive mapping of the artwork typically generate sequence from an all-over impression in a somewhat false manner, thereby altering simultaneous multiplicity into a diachronic one thing after another, but the artwork itself may knowingly resist and falsify that conversion of multiplicity or heterochronicity into ordered sequence. That is a matter becoming especially pertinent when an artwork

endeavours to scramble historicity, or at least the traditionalist modes that ascribes unidirectionality and evolutionism to historicity, in order to both reject outright its legitimation claims or to contend that other models for envisaging history are possible.

Paul O’Kane’s new book brings together various short pieces and more developed essays that tackle those very issues in a refreshing and thoroughly pedagogical manner. Questions concerning historicity have generated an understandably highly complex literature over the years, so it’s genuine achievement that O’Kane manages to approach his topic with a light touch that succeeds in creating space for subsequently exploring that complexity. Part of achievement derives from the artists he discusses, with figures such as Robert Smithson, Tacita Dean, Elizabeth Price, and Johannes Phokela all evincing ways in which history, memory, and temporality can be envisaged in all their richness and thereby allowing us to shift from commonplace understandings to more productive reconfigurations. It’s not solely within art, however, that O’Kane recognizes heterochronicity, for both hip-hop and heavy metal also come under consideration. In thinking his topic through different kinds of examples, sampling ideas from one practice and another, he is able to guide his reader and invite them to reflect upon their own stake in history, and history’s stake within them.

Disregarding traditional academic protocols that equate objectivity with authorial self-denial, O’Kane’s voice is strongly present throughout the book. In reflecting upon his experience and in proffering autobiographical comments, however, there is a question whether this renders O’Kane’s critical writing basically solipsistic. His recurrent engagement with Walter Benjamin forces the question of experience to become all the dicier. Benjamin, after all, contended that modernity evinced our capacity for experience being forcibly shuttled from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, that is, from a deeper and more sustained registration capacity for experience to a form of experience that is necessarily superficial and therefore fragmented and prone to distraction, but substantially better equipped for handling modernity and transvaluing its hyperdistractions. The question concerning experience is undoubtedly massive and complicated—far beyond the scope of this review. And yet, given how the fashion or desire for immersive artworks has become predominant in recent times, and how that might betoken a felt need to reinstall something resembling or mimicking a premodern *Erfahrung*, then it is worth at least loosely suggesting something approaching an

answer to that question, no matter how incomplete that answer might be. It also might be proposed that uncertainties of experience—our having, and capacity for, it—underwrites O’Kane’s approach as well as the historical effective consciousness that permeates throughout the artworks discussed. Something of that experiential fragmentariness is palpable in O’Kane’s approach. Indeed, the shorter essays are a key to the longer ones inasmuch as these testify to those fragmentary qualities in the latter.

It's worth addressing the potential solipsism charge. O’Kane is explicit that many of these essays stem from a pedagogical context. Many of the ideas expressed have been previously voiced in seminars, with such voicing amounting to a testing of those ideas. One’s experience of the artwork is submitted to the measure of another’s experience. As such, O’Kane’s writing is essentially an invitation for “thinking with”: both a thinking with the artwork and a thinking with others who are invited to think with the artwork. If solipsism is constituted by the subject turning inwards, remaking the world according to the limitations of their own closed interiority, then what O’Kane gives here is the opposite of solipsism—it’s an act of opening or exposure of the self (an act which might also entail the discovery or rediscovery of the self). And indeed, it might be proposed that all this—voicing and testing, submitting one’s experience to others, thinking with the artwork, and the exposure of the self—is, at bottom, a definition of art criticism and a way of mapping its inheritance from debates apropos aesthetics and subjectivity occurring in the late eighteenth century.

As a reviewer imagining himself to be a participant in the seminar, my own inclination would be to invite figures such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer onto the stage to proffer their own perspectives. O’Kane’s engagement with Benjamin perhaps forecloses an engagement with Heidegger given the longstanding antipathy of their ideas; nonetheless, both Heidegger and Gadamer were serious thinkers of historicity and its complications, and a rapprochement between Benjamin and Heidegger in light of their philosophies concerning history and temporality is overdue.

By the same token, the field of art history has had, and continues to have, a strong fascination with the temporality and historicity of its objects; so it’s perhaps a little surprising this isn’t registered in O’Kane’s book. That fascination derives fundamentally from

the Hegelian inheritance bequeathed to formative figures such as Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin (Riegl, indeed, was a key reference for Benjamin, while Deleuze was intrigued by Wölfflin), as well as from an alternative branch that roughly goes from Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche to Aby Warburg. The complexities of temporality have been reactivated in recent years by Michael Ann Holly, Margaret Iversen, Stephen Melville, Georges Didi-Huberman, Christopher Wood, Alexander Nagel, and Maria Stavrinaki. Listing those names, to be sure, possibly takes us from the studio populated by art students and their tutors to the art historian's lecture hall. But the passage from one space to the other is well worth traversing, especially as those art historians' conception of their academic field, and of its shapes of time, is adjusting and being reimagined through the artworks they learn from. In any case, O'Kane compellingly demonstrates that art is not just useful but also, perhaps, vital in reconstruing our place in history and ourselves as historical agents.

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