

ISSUES IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES
No, 9, pp. 91-96 (1991)

The End-of-History vs. All-is-History

Response to “Interdisciplinarity and the Canon of Art History,”
by Selma Kraft, *Issues in Integrative Studies*, 7 (1989), 57-72

by
Ronnie Serr

TWO BASIC HISTORIOGRAPHICAL IDEAS (as well as ideals and ideologies) are struggling in Selma Kraft’s “Interdisciplinarity and the Canon of Art History” (*Issues in Integrative Studies*, 7 (1989), 57-72).

On the one hand, Kraft can be interpreted as claiming that interdisciplinarity has been killing the (traditional) discipline of art history since the 1970s. Over the last decade, new methodologies (such as Marxism, gender studies, ethnic studies, etc.) have been introduced to the study of art objects, artists and art institutions by a variety of scholars trained in a gamut of disciplines. The long-established commitment of art historians to the style and form of capital “A” Art (strictly defined as high bourgeois-elite European plastic expression, from the Renaissance to Postimpressionism) has been compromised by the new scholars who have applied a variety of methodologies to a multiplicity of persons, turning by the act of scholarship traditional non-art objects into post-traditional art objects. The discipline that used to be known as art history has lost its distinct boundaries, as both

its methodology (form-oriented and content-oriented) and its subject-matter (the Canon) have been disturbed by outsiders. The discipline of art history has been undergoing an identity crisis, one severe enough to warrant questioning its entire contemporary existence.

On the other hand, Kraft makes a cogent argument in support of the historiographical idea that art history has had a history of its own. This last argument is not brought forth as the pronounced kernel of the article's content, but is rather the most evident *formal* characteristic of its structure. The discipline of art history was born with Vasari as a developmental history of artists, a discourse that established the Italian Renaissance as a focal point of a unique intellectual tradition. Art history enjoyed a paradigm shift (to use a Kuhnian catch-word) in the 17th century as art criticism and aesthetics became a mainstream concern, replacing the discourse of biography. In the late 18th century, the Romantics saw art as a symbol of its period, while in the late 19th century, Impressionism endowed art with the glory, precision and dignity of scientific observations.

Since the dawn of modernity, the mainstay of Art history has been shifted and re-shifted several times by its great practitioners — Winckelmann, Berenson, Wölfflin, Panofsky — but it has always retained its commitment to style as the most crucial aesthetic consideration, and to high European art as its subject matter. This commitment has been recently violated as the new scholarship has abandoned both its reliance on style and aesthetics for other types of observations and interpretations (semiotic, social), and its sole concern with Renaissance-to-Postimpressionism art.

*

Although specific to here and now, the argument “interdisciplinarity has been killing the (traditional) discipline of art history since the 1970s” is a special case of a general historiographical belief about history, one that could be referred to in shorthand as “the end-of-history” thesis. Under the end-of-history paradigm, anything and everything that has a history, arrives one day at its end. Like the life of an animal or a vegetable (though not a mineral), life begins at one point in spacetime and ends in another.

The counter historiographical idea (ideal and ideology) — “art history has had a history of its own” — can be referred to in shorthand as the “all-is-history” thesis. The all-is-history thesis does not take its life metaphor from the single organism, but from the observation of the realm of nature. Everything that exists, exists forever, constantly undergoing changes and transformations. The world does not stop spinning with the death of any individual. Society, like nature, is a system that has always lived and will live for as long

as humanity exists, regardless of anything else. All that happens, including the birth and death of specific selves, is in history, constituting a part of it, just as each living individual constitutes a part of history at large.

*

Kraft's contribution is especially important when contrasted with the unprecedented activity in the interdisciplinary advocacy camp. Julie Thompson Klein's *Interdisciplinarity* (1990) is perhaps the most impressive documentation of this fervor. For Klein ('little' or 'small' in German), interdisciplinarity is not simply a positive attribute for generalism and learnedness, but a social mechanism of utmost importance. If society is bourgeois art (or a well-trenched army), interdisciplinarity is its avant garde movement, defending society against its built-in stagnation by constant innovation and renovation. If society is a corporation, interdisciplinarity is its research and development department. Against the conservatism of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity opens new horizons of understanding, new paths of action, new freedoms of thought and the new liberties of progress.

Kraft's essay, when read through the-end-of-history prism, can be easily interpreted as a eulogy to art history. For Kraft ('strength,' or 'power' in German), the pain is genuine. Narrowly interpreted, the loss of the Canon and its corresponding methodology means the loss of the academic community of art historians. As no single basis is left common to all, the system collapses. From being a hub of a specific culture, art becomes merely material for another culture of shaky foundations and an uncertain future. But interpreted in a wider sense, Kraft's conservatism squarely addresses the fear that a lack of common foundations will prevent the possibility of true learning and teaching. The point is not only to preserve whatever there is. The point is to prevent the chaotic situation whereby a community — Western Culture at large — is left with no common unity.

*

Consider the current crisis in the discipline of art history by way of an analogy to the crisis in Christianity during the 16th century as the Reformation challenged the Roman Catholic methodology of (and singular authority over) scriptural interpretation.

The use of the term *canon* in both the discipline of art history and the Roman Catholic church is not as misleading as it might first seem: based on the Greek *kanon*, 'a reed,' the Latin *canon* means 'a measuring line' or a 'rule' — and by extension — law. The law is the constant basis of a community, the universal adherence to which is a condition of its existence.

Durkheim's insistence on the identity of the sacred and the social, the aesthetic and the moral, is doubtless the best sociological articulation of this equivalence.

From the perspective of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and the Protestant community can and indeed has been claimed to be non-Christian and non-community. The Reformation went back to the biblical origins of scripture, returning to the authenticity of Jesus Christ, by replacing the Church's authority by the individual. Left with no central "command," Catholic supporters argued, chaos will reign. But for the adherents of the Reformation, the coming of Protestantism was a great liberation, a creation of a truer and freer society, an overturning of the clergy's tyranny.

Is the current interdisciplinary explosion in art history the death of art history? To some die-hard art historians, employing the end-of-history thesis, it might well be. To many others, using the all-is-history paradigm, it is an authentic development of the potential of art history, a well-articulated exposition of its promise, a powerful intellectual tool whereby liberty can be struggled for.

*

During the discussion following Selma Kraft's presentation in the 1989 Conference of the Association for Integrative Studies, Ms. Kraft was asked whether she could cite other samples of dead disciplines.

"Alchemy," replied Ms. Kraft, among others.

Alchemy, indeed, offers an insightful analogy to the discussion at hand.

Under the end-of-history rules of historical interpretation, alchemy was a discipline that lived and died. For most traditional modern viewers, alchemy's death has been a blessing to society, since alchemy was based on false premises and featured useless objectives. Modern chemical theory has shown that transmuting base metals into noble metals could only be a legendary wish rather than a real scientific possibility. Alchemists, like witches, magicians and psychics, should be put outside the limits of honest practitioners. Alchemy is a hoax, a wishful thinking, a strange aspiration to a lost cause. As Ben Johnson's *The Alchemist* (1610) shows, the modern age pronounced alchemy a deceit, a practice by which fraudulent people take advantage of the ignorance of others.

But under the all-is-history rules of historical interpretation, alchemy occupies a unique position in Western history in at least two major ways. First, as most scientists will probably admit (if pressed against the wall), alchemy is the progenitor of chemistry. The modern science of chemistry would not have been what it eventually became had it not been for alchemy. Alchemy

is the forerunner of chemistry. Alchemy is chemistry in its infancy. Or, looked at from the vantage point of alchemy, chemistry is alchemy's recent paradigm shift.

There is a second all-is-history consideration of alchemy, one that is highly critical of modernism and scientism's separation of body and mind. As the work of current New Age philosophers testifies (the *Hermetic Journal*, for example), the theory of base to noble metal transmutation was founded on sophisticated philosophies and cosmologies. According to these philosophies, transmutation was possible because processes of purification and exaltation were integral to human and natural existence. As the base soul purifies itself into a noble soul through a series of practices, religious, moral or social, so do material substances, as material substances are not different in essence than souls. Since Descartes, the union of human existence and the world of nature has been annulled, and all their offspring, if acknowledged, declared illegitimate. Yet, once the separation of body and soul is seen as an ideology of modernism, the philosophical bases of alchemy acquire intense weight and legitimacy.

*

There is no middle way between the end-of-history thesis and the belief in all-is-history. In the tension between them, there is much more involved than a dispute between conservatives and liberals, believers in the old ways and the co-religionists of the new, the haves and the have nots, the *ancien regime* and the revolutionary movement, the old guard and the vanguard.

Each person is by necessity subject to the end-of-history perspective, as his or her life begins and terminates at one specific point in spacetime. Each family, clan, nation, (perhaps even humanity, as we know it), comes into being, lives, suffers, and exits the scene of the living. Yet there is a kernel of nature in human understanding which puts each life within the context of the great living, the eternal living, the one within which (or whom) history is. If it were not for this abstraction ability of human minds, neither culture nor society would have been possible. The end-of-history is just as natural and necessary a belief as is the all-is-history creed. The crisis in the discipline of art history, through the interpretation of Selma Kraft, made it possible to see with extreme clarity yet another showdown between these two necessary frames of mind.

Biographical Note: Ronnie Serr received his BFA from Tel Aviv University in Film and Television in 1979, and his BS in Communication from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1982. Conducted research under the guidance of Elihu Katz, Yvette Biró, Umberto Eco and Nick Brown. Presently working on a dissertation about popularity as a modus of collective preference in mass societies at the Department of Film and Television at UCLA.