

Art historians and their textual behaviour

Review of:

Sam Rose: *Interpreting Art*, London: UCL Press, 2022, 136 pages, 38 illustrations, ISBN: 978-1-80008-178-9

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Sam Rose's *Interpreting Art* is a curious little book with potentially disturbing implications. The idea for the book goes like this. If one surveys a large number of art historical works one can study how art historians structure their stories about artworks. The topic of the book are the techniques on which art historians rely in structuring their writing, 'features shared across a great deal of art interpretation' as Rose puts it. (4) Very often, these 'features' are not even acknowledged by authors, but they nevertheless play central roles in writings of art historians. Certainly, in order to describe them one will have to survey an extensive bibliography, and this section of Rose's book is formidable, quite out of proportion with the small size of the book. It should be also mentioned that the presentation is elegant and certainly not unnecessarily burdened by the massive learning required to address a topic like this one: the material has been thoroughly digested and thought through. Nevertheless, it is a disturbing little book under some interpretations (at least) that leaves the reader without clear explanation of its author's intention. To state my opinion, it is an admirable book, but the more I admire it, the less I like the perspective that its author seems to suggest. I do not know whether he intended it so, however, and knowing his other works, I actually doubt it.

The 'features' of art history writing that Rose describes are five: artists, contexts, reception, complexity and depths. Let us start with authors. The belief in the death of the author is as canonical today as the instructions not to read artists' biographies into their works, but nevertheless monographic exhibitions and books are the standard media of art history. (11) This necessarily suggests dilemmas about the credibility of work done in the field. Rose gives an example: in 2018 an essay by Steven Nelson was rejected from being included in an *Aperture* monograph on the work the photographer Deana Lawson, on her insistence. (2-4) It may be argued that the role of an art critic is to present 'a rigorous examination of the artist's work' rather than 'to regurgitate the artist and her editor's views' – but, Rose observes, people who argued so failed to notice that Nelson's interpretation claimed to present a true account of Lawson's own thoughts. It was certainly legitimate for her

to disagree with what he said. The question is therefore not only in how far the views of living artists can be taken to control the meanings attributed to their artworks, but also in how far (or whether at all) one can avoid the artist when interpreting his or her work. The view that meaning should be 'a consciously known and stateable intention' (14) would leave art historians to repeat the words of artists and make it impossible to make claims that fall outside the artist's stated aims. But then, how can one talk about meanings and still avoid to talk about contents of artist's thoughts? Early in the twentieth century connoisseurs and art historical formalists developed the approach that Rose calls the 'Deliberate Artwork approach', in which the artwork is not only assumed to be a result of artistic decisions, 'but the writer constantly reminds their readers that it is the traces of these decisions that they are looking at'. (16) This makes it possible for the interpreter of an artwork to avoid the discussion of the artist's intention, while concentrating on historical reconstructions of how artists and viewers engaged with artworks. (19) The discussion of how the maker made the artwork consequently leads to the discussion of the maker's psychology in the form of the reconstruction of 'artistic personality', 'aesthetic personality' or 'creative personality' —that is, various pseudo-personal constructs used in order to describe that what is accessed by experiencing or interpreting artworks. (20) As Bernard Berenson put it, one turns to documents only afterwards. This artistic personality is commonly taken to be fictional rather than real. In *makerly narration* then descriptions of artworks take the form of the imagined story of their making. (21) In other words: mindreading artists is unlikely to be convincing, but mindreading combined with makerly narration produces 'mindreading narration'. (24) It is in this way of writing that a historian would write that an artist 'wants hyperbole, not pathos' or 'understands the body' in a particular way. (28) During late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century academic art history fully embraced this form of writing and it has remained a standard mode in art history ever since.

The second 'feature' of art history writing is the attention to *contexts*. Rose observes that by the 1930s art writers regularly referred to the 'context', while the subsequent rise of social art history made the demand to place art 'in context' the orthodoxy of the discipline. (34) He cites Thomas Crow for the view that 'that every single article published in the *Art Bulletin* ... ultimately was an example of social history of art whether it acknowledged it or not' —but in Rose's view these articles are much more examples of the contextualizing approach to history writing 'as an increasingly standardized mode for how academic art history deals with its images'. (41) In more recent decades it has been pointed out that instead of being safe and stable anchors of interpretations of artworks, contexts are themselves products of interpretation. (35) Contextualization remains a safe approach as long as the discussion is limited to how artworks might once have been for makers and users. The question is then whether the context had significant impact on how the artwork was experienced. In any case, contextualization of an artwork always relies on plausibility and partial evidence rather than proof—and thus also on our own general theories (that can be intuitive and unarticulated) of how contexts come to affect how people engaged with artworks. Ultimately it comes to 'our own view of *what it is or was* to make and to experience a work of art'. (41)

The study of the *reception* history of an artwork is typically introduced in order to support art-historical reconstructions of how the artwork was seen and used at the time it was made. (53) Rose differentiates between three overlapping modes or reception: (a) recorded reception as origin, (b) visual practices as origin and (c) depth reception as origin. (54) The grand master of the first kind of procedure was Erwin Panofsky, with his search for particular textual records that provide the understanding of the artwork (such as his attribution of Pseudo-Dionysius's light metaphysics to Abbot Suger). Panofsky's approach has been often criticized as elitist, intellectualizing, and shaky. (55-59) Michael Baxandall replaced the written evidence of past reception with the evidence of past visual practices, the 'period eye' or the 'cognitive style' of the people of era. This approach appears less elitist, but it provides no space for differences between groups (such as class or gender) among the idealized audience of the era. (59) 'Depth reception' assumes that the art historian should read as much as there is on the artist and the artwork, while, at the same time, no single source is to be trusted as definite. (63) Rather, the artwork must be understood in relation to how it was seen and written about at its time, but sources are to be creatively read together in order to show what or how the work originally was.

The demand to emphasize complexity in interpretations of one's favoured artworks has, Rose observes, increasingly come to govern art historical interpretation for the past hundred and fifty years. (71) For instance, when one viewer finds a painting beautiful, and another finds it ugly, one can accept that it is beautiful *and* ugly in different ways, then emphasize ambiguity between beauty and ugliness or state that the painting is 'putting in jeopardy traditional notions of an intrinsically and decidably "beautiful" or "ugly" work'. (73) Efforts to find complexity also motivate the 'principle of art-historical charity', as Rose formulates it:

Trust that the maker knew what they were doing, that the artwork is a success, and that you yourself are able to see it. More technically, try to make the artwork as interesting as it can possibly be, then assume this interest is the result of deliberateness and success on the part of the maker and their artwork. (82)

The principle, he observes, is all-important in order to generate complexity in art historical interpretation. Its application relies on another implicit assumption of art historical scholarship, that there could be no 'such a thing as a truly accidental accident in a work of art'. (84) The result is a technique whereby a feature of an artwork is 'picked out and either newly endowed with significance, or given a new and more elaborate significance said to be central to the way the artwork should be made sense of'. (84)

Finally, the interpretative approach that seeks depths 'involves the search for what is and was hidden, implicit or repressed'. (88) The approach relies on a double claim: that it analyses what is truly to be seen in the work of art, even though it may be hidden from the historical record. The strategy starts by observing an absence or a gap, and the interpreter shows that it is central for the work. (88) It is assumed that agents were unaware of these absences that are, nevertheless, the keys to the

artwork. (91) The interpreter then relies on their present-day associations to uncover the seeing and thinking proper to the original historical artwork. (88) This leads to 'resurfacing' of the depth interpretation of things that were hidden to both artists and historical observers. (88)

It is certainly a curious decision for an author of a thoughtful book like this one to leave it without a Conclusion. The book is exceptionally rich in penetrating observations derived from an impressive survey of art historians' practices, but in the end its implications are left undiscussed. Is the book meant to be an art historical variation of Hayden White's *Metahistory*? For on one reading, it does seem to suggest that there are definite procedures according to which art historians produce art historical works, but that the aim of these procedures is not to obtain or present art historical knowledge. Rather, it is to obtain the results of such procedures, which is texts about art history, the way it is sometimes said that IQ tests measure the ability to perform on IQ tests. Rose's underlying assumption does not seem to be that art historical procedures are applied in order to achieve certain aims (such as historical knowledge about or the understanding of artworks). Rather, they are applied because that is what art historians do, and all that these procedures yield are the results of their blind application. The idea that art history could be realist and show us 'the reality of artworks and their pasts' or that the 'features' that Rose describes could have been invented for that purpose is merely mentioned, in order to be dropped. Rose does not say more than that because 'in showing how art history could be understood as realist, we will also see all the problems that ideal meets in practice'. (5) These problems are never described later in the book — the way we are also never told why one would want to rely on the 'features' that Rose describes. For if the assumption is that art historians' aim is not knowledge about artworks or their past but that they merely behave as art historians should behave and therefore generate art historical texts, it is reasonable to ask why one would want to write such texts at all. Here is one explanation: the Spirit of the Time or the Community or Culture causes some individuals to write art historical texts and we call these individuals art historians. Such individuals are mere unconscious scribes in the power of a superior force that makes them produce texts structured according to Rose's five 'features'. Here is another explanation: young high school graduates enrol in art history departments because they want to learn about art and its history. During their education they are explained (or at least brought to understand) that there is no such a thing as art or its history. Rather, all that there is are texts that are said to be about art history and students are taught the skill of making such texts. Inevitably, those students who have integrity drop out, but some stay on. Among the latter, those who are most successful in acquiring the skill of producing art historical texts then become academics and as art historians they teach new young students that there is no art or its history, but only the skill to write art historical texts. Probably there are some more non-realist explanations of why art historians write the texts they do the way they do. But I confess that this is enough for me, and I am not sure I want to know more about it.

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