

Review

Art theory - an historical introduction (2nd ed.)

by Robert Williams

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‘Art History’, now seen as problematic, white, male, a product of Empire, has been displaced by ‘theory’, a nebulous cloud of philosophies drifting across the landscapes of art’s making. Yet under this alibi, there is much continuity with capital A and H Art History here. The usual timelines drive forward before hitting the wall of late modernity, trapping us in the familiarity of a slow car crash: Beginning in antiquity and the Middle Ages, we travel from ancient Greece into the early modern period, then to the Renaissance; Humanism is covered and the importance of the Western academy, bringing us, inevitably, into the Enlightenment era. We then get the crisis of the academy and the modernisms emerging out of the two twentieth-century world wars, before the fragmentations of postmodernism. This is the epic story of art, right up until its narrative glue dissolves under the corrosive influence of ‘theory’ itself.

The conceptual trick attempted by the author is a remapping of the term ‘theory’ back onto philosophies of art as disparate as Burke and Kant’s sublime and the teaching of rhetoric from antiquity. This objective isn’t unique - many courses in critical theory attempt the same thing.

Q1 30 The majority nations are largely represented via Western arts practitioners who are shown to ‘bring them in’ to the West via European modernism. In one sense this is true and Williams upfronts his Eurocentrism. He doesn’t use

the term ‘Third World’, but tellingly employs ‘non-Western’. This kind of Western-centrism has been heavily critiqued. Feminist and post-feminist fissures have further shifted the territory, yet there are five entries for Jackson Pollock and none for Griselda. 35

This minority theme plays out in a different direction. As soon as we get into late modernism, what were essentially shouts from the time become amplified, then reified, in academic discourses. ‘The Situationists’ are invoked like some backbone of postmodern culture. At extreme points, the history of theory risks becoming rather ahistorical. Books like this are a great resource for teaching, yet I see the same examples and references churned up in undergraduate dissertations over again, something which will be repeated across the Western world. 40

Neither the sociology of art nor documentary traditions are foregrounded as the text shadows the usual academy-generated narratives; regardless, this book is potentially useful to IVSA affiliates in several ways. First and most obviously, we have an overview of art history and ‘theory’, but what usefully emerges across the text is how different works produce very specific forms of visual knowledge, inevitably linked to advances and limitations in technology, methods and ways of thinking. 50 Q2 55

Yet we still need the kind of art ‘theory’ history which Bruno Latour might write, refusing to periodise, viewing the curated and uncurated on a level playing field, in a horizontal, rather than a symphonic - ascending and crashing - narrative form. 60 65

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