The Art History Canon and the Art History Survey Course:

Subverting the Western Narrative

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Art History enrollments at the college level are declining as students flock to STEM majors and perceive Art History as dated and of little use in today's modern, scientific world (CAA, 2018). Yet Art History classes can teach valuable skills, such as the complex and detailed practice of visual analysis, which can be applied to many disciplines including medicine, police work, journalism, news investigation and advertising as well as the arts. The observational skills learned in the art history classroom teach students how to make connections between visual material and multifaceted forms of meaning; connecting ideas and images across time and space to gain a global view of humanity (Chiem & Colburn, 2015). The creation of the "art object" is a global endeavor and the ability to link concepts regarding their creation, function, and reception, as well as how they influence and mirror modern thought processes, is a meaningful venture. When taught in a such a context, the objects art history studies can engage critical thinking and generate new meaningful connections and bodies of knowledge. However, the pedagogical structure and content of the introductory art history survey course does not always offer students the creative leeway to make these connections. Instructors at the college level often retreat to the methods and content that have been a part of the discipline since its inception in the late 19th century; the professor as expert authority on the western canon of objects and the grand narrative of progressive development that accompanies them (Yavelburg, 2014). As university students are becoming more ethnically and socially diverse, the objects

covered in the survey continue to speak to a white, European audience that is no longer the only audience listening (Primm, 2018). While art history remains useful, its canon of objects has become problematic, and reinforces the othering of the non- western world.

This essay will first examine how the modern canon and art history's pedagogical practices came to be by exploring the history of the discipline, and the theories, methods, and texts that developed alongside academic art history. It will then take a brief look at how modern educational philosophy based on the conceptual ideas of Deleuze and Guattari can provide a new framework for examining how the teaching of art history can be globalized and taught in a more meaningful way.

Art History's History

Art History is often said to have begun with Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and his *Lives of the Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, although several Greek and Roman philosophers such as Pliny the Elder wrote briefly about contemporary art practices in classical Rome. Published in 1550, Vasari's *Lives* observed who was producing "good art" and looked for answers to why art seemed to degenerate after the fall of Rome (Elkins, 2002). Vasari thought art started with God, because as the creator of nature as well as man he was the inspiration for all works. It was the artists of the Renaissance that re-discovered Roman perfection and Vasari divided this time period into three progressive phases with a beginning, peak, and a decline. This idea of a progressive evolution towards

perfection followed by decline is one that would stick with art history for a very long time. Vasari was also the first to introduce the cult of personality as, unlike most artists of the classical period, Renaissance artists were known individuals and thought to be imbued with a special touch of genius that allowed them to create such masterpieces (Elkins, 2002).

The fascination with Italian art and its inspiration from the classical period remained a focal point for some time in the attempt to define what good art was and how it was created. These ties to the classic were elaborated upon by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) in the 18th century. Separating the classical world into periodic classifications, his *History of Ancient Art* (1764) was a comprehensive guide to art of the ancient world (Minor, 2000). Winckelmann formulated a historic process that changed stylistically from generation to generation, depending upon the particulars of that culture, yet still progressed and declined on a bell curve like Vasari's Rome. It was the apex of each culture's artistic production that characterized that culture's ethos or soul (Winckelmann, 1969). In the case of ancient Greece, its peak production exemplified nobility, simplicity, and quiet grandeur. This Greek ethos was based on qualities such as harmony and proportion, which were measurable in Greek works of art. (Minor, 2000). Winckelmann defined a developmental and contextual method of looking at art objects that remains an essential element in art history and helped to define the nature of the classical as it appears in art across time (Minor, 2000). His ideas about classicism in art were amongst those that established the foundations of the discipline and the art historical canon of objects deemed worthy of study and analysis.

Art History as an academic discipline was also heavily influenced by German philosophers

of the 18th and 19th centuries in particular Immanuel Kant (1704-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel (1770-1831), who both wrote aesthetic philosophy. Kant believed that the aesthetic experience occupied a separate domain, distinct and elevated above normal experience. Beauty and creative genius were not a personal preference but were representative of a higher truth or constant that was valid for all people (Kraynak, 2007). Drawing on the work of Kant, Hegel postulated that the divine spiritual essence of a higher power could be observed in specific works of art. The arts thus proceeded from an absolute Idea and allowed divinity to be perceived by the senses (Hegel, 2009). Therefore, certain works of art could contain a more direct connection with the essential Idea though the aesthetic experience they engendered, while others did not. Hegel set the Western ideal form against the non-Western one stating that the Chinese, Indians and the Egyptians "could not master true beauty because their mythological ideas, the content and thought of their works of art, were still indeterminate or determined badly, and so did not consist of the content which is absolute in itself" (Hegel, 2009, 83). Hegel, like Vasari, believed art progressed in accordance to specific laws and that it was towards this ultimate perfection or embodiment of the Idea, that art marched towards across time (Elkins, 2002).

While Hegel looked for the mind of God as the Idea present in great works of art, later art historians such as Heinrich Wolfflin (1864-1925) expanded this essentialist notion to include art as the expression of man. By the late 19th century art history felt the need to make itself more scientific and ascribed a scientific positivism to the 'evolution' of art across time (Hart, 1982). Wolfflin did just that, examining the formal elements of line, color, and space to show how art changed over time, as a result of

the fluctuating attitudes and concerns of the eras in which they were produced. By grouping works together in periods in order to compare processes, stylistic elements, and formal concerns, the "scientific classification of art" experiment began (Hart, 1982, p. 294). Looking at Wolfflin's formal elements, the Renaissance could easily be distinguished from the Baroque, and works that exemplified these differences were pulled out as examples and examined side by side to illustrate these changes. Works and locales that did not follow in this evolutionary process were largely ignored in favor of the development of a genealogical process though which artistic development could be traced (Preziosi, 1998). Published in 1915, Wolfflin's seminal work *The Principles of Art History*, officially established his rules of formal analysis (Hart, 1982). In these works, he presented a new model of comparison to be used in the classroom in which two images from different styles were viewed side by side and their formal elements analyzed emphasizing the variant characteristics of each. This comparative method of formal analysis cemented his position as one of the founding fathers of modern art history pedagogy and is still used in the art history classroom today.

Later art historians began to look at social influences in art. These can be seen in Ernst Gombrich's examination of style and art as indicative of the progressive unfolding of a people or nation (Preziosi, 1998, Gombrich, 2009). Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky developed the theory of iconography which would allow a painting to be read and artist intention to be made visible by using the symbolic value of forms (Minor, 2000). By the time the teaching of art history was introduced into the university system, the following basic assumptions had been established (Elkins, 2002):

1. Art progressed in cycles in the attempt to reach some ultimate, aesthetic or spiritual goal.
2. Classical ideals and classical art were the perfection to which all other works should aspire to.
3. There were those individuals that could elucidate these ideas better than others
4. Art could be approached like a science and analyzed from static and intrinsic formal criteria that would determine its value to society

Art History as an Academic Discipline

It was not until the late 19th century that art history made its way to the halls of the burgeoning Ivey League universities of America. Due to limited availability of photographic reproductions, in order to have objects to study, university museum collections became common. Populated with items donated by alumni who had gathered such items on European tours popular at the time, the works collected were primarily European, classically oriented, and limited the focus on what could be studied in the classroom (Lavin, 1993, Kantor, 1993).

At Harvard, Charles Eliot Norton began his tenure as Professor of the History of Art and Literature in 1874. Norton entered into his position as an amateur, a collector, and soon led the department in an object-based direction. Norton saw art as an expression of the moral life of a nation and teaching fine art exemplified how morality, good taste, and ethics could be infused into society (Kantor,1993). Norton's audience was largely the cultured elite who could draw upon their own experiences abroad. Art was thus tied to prestige, and good art could be scientifically evaluated using a formal analysis of line and color, a la Wolfflin. (Kantor, 1993). The *Fogg Method* of art evaluation,

also developed at Harvard, came to guide the connoisseur and espoused the idea that the aesthetic expressions of a particular people could be tied to the peculiar genius, social, and moral character of the people that created them, creating a western standard from which judgements of cultures and people could be extrapolated (Preziosi, 1992). Other Universities quickly followed suit establishing their own departments of Art History with the professor as expert collector or connoisseur whose knowledge of western classicism allowed them to interpret works of art on a higher level than those without this background (Stankiewicz, 1993).

The Slide Lecture

As Art History departments flourished and grew in the early 20th century so did the technology used to present images in the classroom. These technological innovations had their own influence on how art history was taught. The "sage on the stage" or instructor as expert witness was enhanced with the advent of the lantern slide lecture in 1859 which allowed visual material to be projected onto a screen, in the dark, in larger than life sized scale. (Leighton, 1984). Wolfflin's method of formal analysis, which required the side by side display of two images to compare could finally be dramatically achieved. This reinforced the comparative method and the idea that two periods of artistic production could be analyzed to show an evolution or degradation of style as cycles progressed (Nelson, 2000).

The photographic projection, like the photograph, was regarded as truth; the art historian becoming the voice of science and the projector art history's microscope (Nelson, 2000). This furthered the authority of the instructor by allowing them to appear as a direct witness, of "having been there" and the creation

of the performative frame that enabled (the professor) to mold the audience's vision was born (Nelson, 2000, p. 418). Viewers were led to see what the instructor saw and the lecture became an act of ventriloquism that allowed the picture to speak, suspending independent analysis by the student. Eventually lantern slides were replaced by 35mm slides, then digital PowerPoint images, but the slide lecture and the pedagogy associated with it have changed little since their inception (Nelson, 2000).

Textbooks

Also of great influence on how art history has been taught in the classroom was the development of the Art History textbook. Like the slides and lectures that accompany its use, the text book arranged objects in a particular manner, placing emphasis on some objects while excluding others. Early books on the study of art history, like much else that has influenced the discipline, focused on Italian art and its classical roots. (Schwarzer, 1995). In 1842 Kugler began what is perhaps the first comprehensive survey of art, his *Handbook of Art History*. Kugler kept to Hegel's essentialist journey through time, yet also discussed artistic formalism. His text had a scientific bent and included information on the materials and methods used by the artists and divided the world into four great periods; the developmental stage, classical art, medieval art, and modern art up to 1849 and set the standard for survey textbooks well into the 20th century (Schwarzer, 1995).

The aims and intents of these early texts were adopted by writers in the 20th century in their efforts to provide survey tomes to accompany newly formed art history departments within the American and European university systems. The most popular survey texts; H.W. Janson's

History of Art, Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, Marilyn Stokstad's *Art History*, and E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, all echo the developmental narrative and highbrow aesthetics present both in the early texts and the early institutional curriculum (Schwarzer, 1995). Following Hegel's lead, art from primitive areas such as Africa, China and India were not included because they remained static, non-evolving, and in such places, there could only be unhistorical, undeveloped spirit. Early editions of Janson included a postscript stating that only those objects outside of Europe and America that have influenced western art had been included. India, Asia, Africa, and Pre-Columbian America were excluded "as their indigenous artistic traditions are no longer alive today, and because these styles did not, generally speaking, have a significant influence on the West" (Nelson, 1997, p. 35). While this postscript has been removed from more recent editions, Janson believed that his text should only address the question of how "we" got "here" and art that did not contribute to that understanding was marginalized. The more recent editions and additions of Gardner and Stokstad do include chapters discussing non-western art but they are often integrated oddly and present a "postmodern lack of coherence" (Schwarz, 1995, p.28). In addition, many of these non-western chapters are skipped over by instructors due to time constraints and the desire to cover western art in more detail (Elkins, 2002). The western narrative thus continues as dominant.

The Art History Canon

The use of the term canon to describe the standard body of objects that Art History studies is relatively recent (Locher, 2012). The word canon, derived from the Greek/Latin word *kanna* or "reed", originally meant measuring rod or standard. It was used by the early Church to refer to a "rule or law" decreed by ecclesiastical authority and was later extended to secular books of recognized excellence (etymonline. com). As a metaphor for artistic excellence it was first employed by Pliny the Elder to describe the *Doryphoros*, a work by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos, as it was considered to be a perfectly proportioned image of man. (Locher, 2012). The word was also often referred to as the standards, measurements, and proportions that admirable works of art should adhere to. When used today, a canon is understood to be a group of works or texts, recognized within a particular group as displaying exemplary characteristics that are used as models of their particular time and place (Locher, 2012).

Theoretical Foundations: The Canon and Western Identity

This current canon of objects plots time and space to construct a journey from point A to point B and ignores works outside the narrative that deny this directionality. Specific artists, locations and stylistic movements are selected and emphasized to arrive at a grand narrative that fits in with the western notion of evolution (Nelson, 1997). Aleida Assmann, (2010) defines culture as collective memory that supports a collective identity. This collective memory has little room for storage and is thus built on a small number of normative texts, myths and objects that are re-presented and re-performed as working memory. Canonized objects are constant reminders of the past as it circulates in the present (Assmann, 2010). In this manner, nation states and religious organizations produce narratives of the past, which are taught in their institutions, embraced by their subjects and constantly referenced and recycled symbolically. This establishment of core images (and texts) stabilizes identity and inserts a "normative conscious into a population" helping

to establish both individual and group identity (Locher, 2007).

Donald Preziosi (1996) has discussed how the collected objects of the western canon are fraught with ideological content. These objects are staged in ways oblivious to larger global social and historic contexts and, in actuality, frame the ideology present within the discipline of art history itself. Preziosi states that this simplicity fosters the idea that modern populations should regard art history as un-problematized, "as a natural progression of styles, tastes and attitudes from which one might imaginatively choose as one's own" (Preziosi, 1996, p. 74). The new modern 19th century encyclopedic museum, which Art History text books and educational frameworks developed alongside, was a visual display of both chronological and evolutionary progress towards the ultimate end goal; Hegel's Idea replaced by the nation state in its present incarnation. "Chronology becomes genealogy, which in turn becomes evolution and progress, and everything becomes oriented and arrowed with respect to its pertinence, its contribution to the fabrication of the present- of the new modern place" (Preziosi, 1996, p. 76). Art was coded, registered, classified, and displayed according to rational thought in accordance with Enlightenment ideology, so embedded in modern Europe and its new sociopolitical order to now feel natural (Preziosi, 1996). Object narratives were carefully constructed to tell specific tales, with what was left out or not remembered essentially erasing events and objects from history. Art History, the institution, became a tool in the evaluation of cultural production, a simulacrum or metaphor of the modern subject and its agency, a model of creativity and the artistic and aesthetic genius, and contributed to the fabrication of the modern European citizen (Preziosi, 2007). By creating the canon as its Lacanian ideal mirror

reflection, modern Europe objectified the rest of the world into the "other", thus creating a category of objects excluded from the European narrative and constructed the present out of our "other-past" (Preziosi, 1996). These objects became the "universal standard" against which the non-European could be compared, measured and ranked according to the evolution of these object's modern European-ness. The institutions of Art History thus functioned as mirror stage factories for modern subjects offering unity, identity and a narrative that placed them squarely within the ideology of modern Europe (Preziosi, 1996).

While the Western canon has grown to incorporate art created by women and artists of color, it still centers on Western ideals and the Enlightenment values of the modern European nation state. However, the recent rise of globalism, both economically and socially, calls those objects and cultures that have been left out into focus, and the current canon is failing to meet the collective memory and identity needs of the global community from which students of art history are now culled.

Subverting the Western Narrative

Out of these ideas art historical pedagogy was derived (Lavin, 1993). As pedagogical practices at the university level were, and are, seldom discussed, such methods were not explicitly taught, but learned through observation and repetition. Despite advances in pedagogical theory, few art historians take courses in education, and many of these early models remain in place in today's art history classroom (Yavelburg, 2014). Such teaching practices and canonized objects have become codified into what Deleuze and Guattari (2015) refer to as state institutionalized, striated spaces, where ideas are slow to change and center around well organized and formalized practices.

Institutions cling to structure to maintain power; nationalism has seen a resurgence in recent times, and within art history, faculty are loathe to give up their hallowed disciplinary divisions and to look at art historical objects in a completely different way (Hales, 1995). These divisions are often deeply political as well as personal and are frequently contested territory. Early attempts to change the canon expanded the institutionalized western narrative of art history but did not alter its structure. The introduction of feminist art can be seen as an example of this. Feminists have contested the omission of women from the canon since the 1960's, challenging meanings in art imposed by the male gaze. The addition of feminist art as a category however does not change the bordered space of the canon, it merely expands it, playing into the binary opposition of the male/female hierarchy without altering the map. Karen-Edis Barzman (1994), in regard to the feminist quest for inclusion in the canon states; "What is needed is distance from conventional patterns of thought and discourse to plot the naturalizing of practices that have been culturally constituted, institutionally authorized, and, therefore, open to challenge" (p.327). What is needed is a paradigm shift in how material objects are perceived and how knowledge about them is produced, a shift that will force the pedagogical focus of the discipline in new directions

Deleuze and Guattari: Nomadic Education

The concept of nomadic education, derived from the philosophical ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, may be of use when attempting to re-frame the art history survey, its western canon and narrative. The term nomad, often discussed in their work, suggests a fluid, evolving concept that breaks away from fixed directionality (Deleuze & Guattari, 2015). Nomadic space is smooth and flows without restrictions to

provide an "emancipatory potential" to those who occupy it, in contrast to the striated, state regulated institutional space bound by rules, laws and tradition (Semetsky, 2008). Nomadic education is not static or defined by rigid boundaries but constantly in the process of *present-becoming*. Nomadic education allows directional changes, or new lines of flight, that create dynamic connections, new knowledge and new meanings (Semetsky, 2008). Privileging geography over time, nomadic space spreads like a rhizome, a plant that sprawls without point of origin or pattern of growth. The rhizome is the denial of hierarchy and taxonomy, as well as the history and order of the dominant class (Gregoriou, 2008; Deleuze & Guattari, 2015). Within such state striated/space, the sedentary population rigidly adheres to ideological constraints, systems and canons. The sedentary state is bound by systems, orientation, and orderliness while the smooth is creative, inventive, and fluid. The two concepts exist in adjacent space and thus have borders, or linear elements imposed onto the landscape.These borders and boundaries imply territory within. However, state/striated space and smooth nomadic spaces are not binary oppositions but exist as continual oscillations on a spectrum of geography (Livesey, 2013). Incorporating nomadic ideas of becoming problematizes otherness and directs students into new territory, towards a truth that consists of questions and problems and not finite answers. (Bogue, 2008). As a theoretical concept, nomadic education rejects the type of hierarchical knowledge system we have seen art history develop out of. "Learning is a matter of opening thought to the virtual domain of problems…. not a matter of solving specific questions and securing a permanent body of knowledge" (Bogue, 2008, p.10). In education, nomadic thinking rejects authority as all-knowing and flows out of the classroom into the social world connecting objects and ideas

generating discovery, the creation of questions and new types of knowledge (Semetsky, 2008).

Nomadic education also changes the role and relationship between teacher and student. The expert authority of the collector connoisseur (now replaced by the University professor) is a one directional, institutional model in which legitimized information flows in one direction (Cole, 2008). This is similar to Paolo Freire's *Banking Model of Education* (2000) in which information flows from teacher to pupil without interaction. According to Freire, such actions actively starve the critical consciousness of the student causing them to see the world as fixed and immovable, much like Deleuze and Guattari's striated space of the state, which cannot be opposed but must be subverted (Cole, 2014). *In Difference and Repetition*, (1974) Deleuze assigns a limited role to that of the teacher by stating "we do not learn by hearing do as I say, but by those who invite their students to participate in inquiry alongside of them" (p. 23). Within such a conceptual framework, art historical knowledge could evolve in multiple directions, creating new connections, new ideas, and encourage the entrance of new cultural material into the discipline.

New Approaches

One approach to applying nomadic education to art history is breaking the canon free of its chronological, linear perspective and thus the western narrative. Although linear time is the most common way to trace history, conceiving the past as unfolding across time is not the only way to visualize the past. In many African societies history is traced through kinship, and in others, maps of places are kept to allude to specific events, without reference to when they occurred (Elkins, 2007).

Textbooks rarely refer to any cross influencing between cultures, similar ways of seeing, or the material conditions and inventions of artists, preferring to use periodization to narrate and organize this march through time and space. An alternate approach to deterritorialize art from the western narrative is to think of art as a global expression of certain needs, wants and desires expressed in material form. This focus restructures the survey to advance as a series of nonlinear, non-time-based themes around which art is created across cultures. Themes that have been used in experimental survey courses include art and the body, self and other, places and spaces, muralism, photography, violence and protest, gender and identity, class, hierarchy, origins, and spirituality (Warner, 2014). Alongside these thematic presentations, students are encouraged to integrate their own experience into the body of objects the course encompasses, bringing in ideas outside of academia to make art history relevant at a personal or local level (Dardashti, 2013). Although such themes can occur and cluster like nomadic plateaus or nodes on the rhizome, such plateaus must remain fluid and include multiple entrance and exit points in both their structure and content so as not to become their own, new and revised striations. While themes may appear to be formed from smooth nomadic connections, they run the danger of being absorbed and codified into new institutionalized, striated space. Alternative approaches may be more effective in moving art history in a true nomadic direction.

Kristen Chiem (2016) proposes a different approach when she suggests rerouting students in the survey course around the nature of art historical inquiry and connections between objects instead of towards a particular subject area or time period. Advanced level art history courses have always encouraged critical

thinking and presenting and developing these skills at the introductory level is perhaps a way to make art history more engaging, relevant, and personal (Bender, 2017). Such an approach makes the pedagogical process more interactive and interdisciplinary (Gaspar-Hulvat, 2017). Big picture questions focus on what art historians do, what are the major concerns of the field today, and how does agency, aesthetics and materiality figure into art historical concerns. Chiem's survey course focuses on what art is, the process of how it is made, the materials that are used, art's place in religion or politics, the changing meaning of art in varied contexts, and the examination of cultural ownership. The chronology of the narrative is abandoned in favor of a focus on methodology and evaluation of thought processes and new connections. Interdisciplinary topics such as literature and anthropology are included that encourage nomadic, rhizomic thinking across structured lines. Onsite visits to places like the Getty Roman Villa or a Hindu Temple are combined with poetry readings and writing. Unfamiliar pre-historic art is connected to known ceramic works to highlight the role that writing, memory and history play in the canonization of art. Connections to works, motivations, and materials from other cultures can lead students down multiple and variable paths of inquiry. Chiem flips her classroom so reading is completed outside of class, which allows class time to be used for more nomadic based collaborative inquiry, and active learning sessions, where new directions and multiple lines of flight can be considered. Other potential means to encourage deterritorialization of the survey course center around postcolonial hybridity (Dardashti, 2016), tying larger global ideas into local practices (Murayama, 2016) and presenting art history as natural history (Onians, 1996).

Conclusion

Compounding progress is the fact that many human beings still desire a narrative to make sense of who and where they are now (Elkins, 2002) - but who's narrative is now the question and there are multiple answers depending on who is asked. Nomads, plateaus, rhizomes and multiple lines of flight all provide an interesting framework within which the objects art history studies can be placed. However, the achievement of such goals involves more than changing the text book and expanding the borders art history has erected to include the new global world we all now inhabit. Art history's pedagogical methods need to be altered as well. The art in the dark method of delivery produces an educational space in which too much authority is granted to the instructor as expert, and while guidance is necessary, there are ways to conceptualize the modern classroom to speak to the new global identity of the modern university student. Cross disciplinary thinking, the reconceptualization of time and space, creative inquiry and broad thinking will allow art history to grow, become more relevant and engaging to the contemporary student, and allow new ideas to subvert the western narrative of the canon.

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