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# On the question of a philosophical art history: philosophy, theory and thought

Kamini Vellodi

## Introduction

*'Art historians who glibly dismiss "theory" are actually dismissing, or rather expressing their dread of, the strange fact that questions can outlive answers'.<sup>1</sup>*

The question of a philosophical art history assumes a particular tone and intensity today, at a time when the once transformative potentials of 'theory' have become instituted into the discipline and shorn of their former radicalism. What might be invited by a philosophical art history today? To ask this question is, I argue, to reflect not only on the ways in which art history has drawn upon philosophy as a distinct disciplinary regime. It is also to consider the ways in which the 'philosophical', as a trait that is not exclusive to philosophy, impacts art history's relation to itself as a practice of thought. In this paper, I explore the philosophical as a question of thought, rather than an essential feature of a discipline.

I begin with a brief overview of the relations between philosophy, theory and art history, delineating what I consider to be the shape of the problem and its present stakes. When did the question of philosophical art history become a question? Has art history always been philosophical or does the philosophical divide some inquiries from other supposedly 'non-philosophical' inquiries? I explore how the question of philosophical art history is not one that emerged with 'theory' in the late twentieth century, even though the 'theory wave' in the 1970s – 1990s was crucial in reshaping its parameters, implications and present-day practices. And I argue that the futures of philosophical art histories demand address of the question of thought, beyond the historiographic and methodological preoccupations through which theory has become disciplined.

The problems that attracted art history to theory in the 1970s persist. Recent problematisations of 'decolonisation' are just one example of a challenge mounted to the implicit assumptions embedded within art history's professionalised and disciplined ways of thinking. It remains as vital as ever to enfold the critique of art history's thought within art history's own practice. In this sense, Svetlana Alpers' remark, made in 1977, that 'it is characteristic of art history that we teach our graduate students the methods, the "how to do it" of the discipline [...] rather than the nature of our thinking', remains prescient.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 2005, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Alpers, 'Is Art History?', *Daedalus*, 106: 3, Summer 1977, 9.

The work of Gilles Deleuze offers a lens through which to hone and address such fundamental questions, not through the arsenal of his concepts (well-known terms such as 'abstract machine', 'becoming' and 'de-territorialisation'), but rather in his very conception of thought, which in fact was explicitly opposed to any application of 'readymade concepts'. Deleuze was somewhat tangential to the 'theory wave' in art history, perhaps because unlike many of his French contemporaries, he never privileged the domains of literature, language or text over philosophy. He did not posit philosophy as a master discipline but as a practice of thought porous to its non-philosophical outside. This enables an address of the philosophical as a trait with trans-disciplinary and extra-disciplinary potentials and an axis beyond the tensions between empiricism and idealism that has shaped so much of art history's images, uses, and even abuses of philosophy and theory.<sup>3</sup>

### Philosophical art history becomes a question

One might say that the question of philosophical art history emerges with Hegel who in the *Aesthetics* (1835) distinguishes between philosophy as concerned with the essence and idea of art, and art history as the empirical study of artworks and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Here we have the seed of the reductive cleavage that persists to this day between philosophy, understood as ahistorical, generalising and abstract, and a history of art, understood as dealing with specificities.<sup>5</sup> For Hegel, insofar as art is a

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Jae Emerling's feedback on the paper and would like to acknowledge his own work on the questions I address, cf. Jae Emerling, *Theory for Art History*, New York and London: Routledge; 2005. Some of this work was presented at the College Art Association 2021 in a panel we co-chaired titled 'After Theory? On the relations between art history and theory today'. I would like to thank the speakers, Whitney Davis, James Elkins, Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi for the inspiring conversations we had on this topic, which have shaped my thinking.

<sup>4</sup> There is no need to be 'embarrassed' by the multifariousness of artistic productions, since 'the guiding thread is the essence of the thing itself, the essence implied by the concept.' Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, Vol 2, 629. Half a century earlier, Johann Winckelmann had laid out the possibility of an 'an edifice of knowledge' that could introduce rigour to what he considered to be subjectivist tales of artist lives: *Kunstgeschichte* would inquire into 'the essence of art'. Johann Winckelmann, *History of the art of antiquity*, 1764, transl. Harry Francis Mallgrave, Los Angeles, California: Getty Research Institute, 2006, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. James Elkins: art history is 'concerned with what is "irreducibly visual or ungeneralizably singular about artworks" whereas aesthetics "abstracts" or "generalizes" these singularities.' James Elkins, *Art history versus Aesthetics*, New York, London: Routledge, 2006, 41. See also Meyer Schapiro's comment that 'art historians are often impatient with theory because there is seldom a readily negotiable bridge between the generalities of theory and the particulars of practice.' Meyer Schapiro, 'Style' in Morris Philipson, *Aesthetics Today*, Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1961, 97. Schapiro's infamous 1968 critique of Martin Heidegger's reading, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art', of Vincent van Gogh's shoes ('The Still Life as a Personal Object. A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh', *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York: George Braziller, 1994), and the subsequent exchange, including Jacques Derrida's brilliant deconstruction ('Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing [Pointure]', *The Truth in Painting*, 1978), has been seen as symptomatic of blindspots

thing of the past and has been transformed into our thought, and the realm of ideas is the territory of the philosophical, art history presents as an inquiry without currency.<sup>6</sup> It is in this sense that one might say that Hegel inaugurates the moment at which a 'philosophical art history', for him a contradiction in terms, becomes a question.

It is no surprise that incipient art history, in seeking to legitimatise its inquiries would attempt to fuse the elements that Hegel had differentiated. The philosophical consideration of 'what art is' would be combined with study of actual instantiations of art.<sup>7</sup> A philosophical account of history could enable art history to affirm that its object was not just an abstract category, but an entity embedded in historical processes of transformation. Historicism was dissociated from metaphysical idealism.<sup>8</sup> The philosophical was recalibrated to meet art history's broad ambitions as a study of real objects and at the same time, the empirical was no longer conceived simply a brute terrain of facts but as the material for rigorous knowledge production.<sup>9</sup> Alois Riegl articulated the 'future task of art history as a scientific discipline' [*Kunstwissenschaft*] in terms of its distancing from aesthetics (the laws of which he felt were inadequate in the face of actual art historical materials) and its re-grounding in developmental history, the laws of which are responsive to

between art historical proclivities towards facts, evidence, and empirical actuality and the philosophical posing of questions at the register of ontology.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Belting's discussion of Hegel's impact on art history in Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* Trans. Christopher Wood, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Three of the first survey texts of art history reveal the formative impact of Hegel's ideas. Franz Kugler distanced himself from Hegel's influence to focus on the compilation of data on cultural and artistic artefacts. (Franz Kugler, *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, Stuttgart, 1842). Carl von Rumohr's *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, Stuttgart, 1842 was guided by the view that 'art is a form completely opposed to concepts and thinking through concepts'. Carl Schnaase's 8 volume *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, Dusseldorf, 1848 applied a Hegelian teleological scheme of history to the development of art. The majority of survey texts on the discipline note the significant impact of Hegel: cf. Udo Kultermann, *History of Art History*, Connecticut: Abaris Books, 1966, 60, and Christopher Wood, *A History of Art History*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019, 215.

<sup>8</sup> In the words of Maurice Mandelbaum, historicism was the belief that an understanding of the nature and value of any phenomena must be gained through consideration of its place and role within a process of historical development; metaphysical idealism was the belief that the ultimate nature of reality can be found in the traits that distinguish man as a spiritual being. Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason: a study in nineteenth-century thought*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Gombrich famously characterised the work of pioneers including Riegl, Erwin Panofsky and Heinrich Wölfflin in terms of a move away from speculation on the nature of art towards a science of culture. Gombrich described his reservations towards Hegel's work in terms of its ease of application, arguing instead for a logic of discovery that could attribute to empirical evidence a formative role in establishing and validating knowledge. Ernst Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, and Ernst Gombrich, 'The Father of Art History: A Reading on the lectures on aesthetics of Hegel', *Tributes. Interpreters of our cultural tradition*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1984, 63.

its material.<sup>10</sup> In the work of figures such as Panofsky, Wölfflin, Worringer, Sedlmayr, Pächt and Dvořák we see how art history's self-identification as a science (*Wissenschaft* – a systematic body of inquiry), was accompanied by theorizing beyond the immediate givens of experience (as 'principles' 'laws' and 'concepts') in the development of methods such as iconology, iconography and style analysis, as well as a broad appeal to theories from disciplines beyond philosophy, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology - all of which expressed specialist, scientific approaches to their subjects. The impact of positivism further galvanized art history's move towards empirical methods and in this context, theory emerges as a systematic and generalised reflection on experience.<sup>11</sup>

### From Philosophy to 'Theory'

The transmogrification of (continental) philosophy into 'theory' over the course of the twentieth century was in part a legacy of such dynamics. A fork emerged between philosophy understood as a self-regulating institution defined against other forms of knowledge and philosophy as an intellectual activity porous to a wide domain of intellectual activities, a decentred undertaking engaged with the 'real world'. The role of seminal thinkers and theories was indubitable: Karl Marx's view that the realisation of philosophy depends on its destruction as an independent philosophy [*philosophie séparée*]; Martin Heidegger's conception of the 'pre-philosophical' in *Being and Time*, or, in the texts after 1930, the 'task of thinking' after the end of philosophy; Jacques Lacan's critique of philosophy as a 'discourse of the master'; the development of critique by the Frankfurt School theorists as a transformative diagnosis of social reality.<sup>12</sup> Influential intellectuals originally

<sup>10</sup> Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, trans. Jacqueline Jung, New York: Zone, 2004, 287-293. See also Jas Elsner, 'Some Empirical evidence to the Big Picture. Some Reflections on Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen*', *Critical Inquiry*, 32: 4, June 2006, 741 – 766 and Richard Woodfield, 'Kunstwissenschaft versus Ästhetik: The Historians' Revolt against Aesthetics' in Francis Halsall and Julia Jansen, *Re-Discovering Aesthetics*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008, 19-33.

<sup>11</sup> Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer rejected idealism and reinstated the primacy of observation of phenomena in the construction of scientific laws. *Kunstwissenschaften* scholars were likely to be familiar with Comte's work, widely available in German translation. Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler, *German Art History and Scientific Thought: Beyond Formalism*, New York and London: Routledge, 2012, 2. Christopher Wood notes that 'To win space in the university, art history had to commit itself to the empirical method of historical study.' Wood, *A History*, 6. Stephen Melville remarks on the shift away from Hegel and its 'speculative past' toward the assumptions and interests of Anglo-American philosophy. Stephen Melville, 'The Temptation of New Perspectives', *October*, 52, Spring 1990, 12. Christine McCorkel gives an excellent review of art history's relation to philosophy and theory in 'Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art History', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Autumn, 1975, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), 35-50

<sup>12</sup> In his essay 'Traditional & Critical Theory' Max Horkheimer argued that whereas scientists conceive of theory in terms of processes of testing and verification of experience with the goal of 'a universal systematic science [...] embracing all possible objects', critical theorists understand theory as a critical and transformative diagnosis of social reality. These two conceptions of theory – the positivist and the critical – remain pertinent for the question

trained in philosophy begin to migrate to other fields: Claude Levi-Strauss's move, for instance, to anthropology.

Even for those who remained committed to philosophy, the human sciences seemed to promise a renewal. In France, the notion of 'non-philosophy' was particularly intriguing in this regard. In his 1960 Collège de France lecture, 'Philosophy and non-philosophy since Hegel', Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced the idea that non-philosophy is philosophy rendered complex and essential. Non-philosophy opens philosophy to lived experience and to the disciplines that seek to explain that experience – anthropology, psychoanalysis, political theory and history.<sup>13</sup> For Jacques Derrida, the domain of the non-philosophical could be co-opted in the critique of the hegemonic logocentric paradigm of Western philosophy. By discovering the element within the non-philosophical that liberated itself from philosophical authority, philosophy could counter its own impetus towards sovereignty over other discourses, and engage its own deconstruction.<sup>14</sup> In a not dissimilar way, Gilles Deleuze - in his 1985 book *Cinema 2*, described philosophy as a practice of concepts that 'must be judged in the light of the other practices with which it interferes'<sup>15</sup>. Philosophy has no function *for* other disciplines. Far from being a master discipline, philosophy 'needs a non-philosophical comprehension' at every moment of its becoming, to open philosophical thought to its 'outside', what he also called 'the nonthought within thought'.<sup>16</sup> These are just a few expressions of what Étienne Balibar in 2011 characterised as the radical expansion of French philosophy from the 1940s onwards through a regeneration 'out of its other'.<sup>17</sup> Philosophy was refracted in and through other fields of thought (linguistics,

of the use and function of theory in art history today. Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional & Critical Theory', trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, *Critical Quest*, New Delhi: Gautum Printers, 1972, 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel' in Hugh Silverman, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, New York and London: Routledge, 1988, 9-84. See also Tony O'Connor, 'Foucault and the transgression of limits', in Hugh Silverman, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, quoted in Peter Brunette and David Wills, 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Arts, Media, Architecture*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London: Athlone, 2005, 268.

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, London: Verso, 218, 59.

<sup>17</sup> Etienne Balibar, cited in Peter Osborne, 'From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)', *Radical Philosophy*, 165, Jan/Feb 2011, 16. Note Peter Osborne: 'If French thinkers have dominated theoretical developments in the Anglophone humanities since the mid-1970s, it is primarily because of the powerfully 'post-philosophical' coding of the philosophical aspects of their work ... whereby everything intellectually productive about the European philosophical tradition is maintained outside the disciplinary setting of philosophy.' Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy after theory: transdisciplinarity and the new' in Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, *Theory After 'Theory'*, New York and London: Routledge, 2011, 21.

anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literature), becoming a fluid horizon that was not seen as self-sufficient.

'Theory' emerged in the afterglow of this dissolution and opening of philosophy onto the non-philosophical. The expanded sense of theory as incorporating the non-philosophical and immanent to praxis characterised the work of many of the pioneering thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s, and recast the philosophical, including its projection beyond the academy.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Althusser's distinction between *Théorie* as 'Marxist philosophy', 'the theory of theoretical practice', and philosophy as ideological and self-sufficient (in line with Marx and Engel's), was an important one.<sup>19</sup> For many, theory 'became a non-philosophical way of doing philosophy', 'philosophy for non-philosophers'.<sup>20</sup> This was at once a recoding of philosophy and of what theory had been within the classical history of philosophy in its association with metaphysics or doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

### Art History's 'Theory Wave'

A pivotal factor in the transformation of philosophy into 'theory' in the post-war years was the migration of French thought - associated with figures such as Roland Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and later Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Francois Lyotard - into the US university system.<sup>22</sup> French thought infiltrated Anglo-American humanities not through philosophy departments but through departments of literature. Within the academy, "theory" - memorably characterised by Derrida as a 'purely North American artifact'<sup>23</sup> -

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Williams notes that the Marxist conception of praxis as 'practice informed by theory' as well as 'theory informed by practice' was intended to unite theory with the strongest sense of practical activity. Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana press, 1988, 317-18. This expanded sense of theory was of course inseparable from political events. In an interview on *A Thousand Plateaus*, Guattari remarks that before May 1968, the disciplines 'had gotten along through a respect for one another's autonomy.' But 1968 challenged academics to move beyond their specialisms, switch 'from one register to another' and 'range across fields', to make thought worthy of its real objects. Félix Guattari, 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia', in Sylvère Lotringer, *Chaosology. Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, Ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet, Jarred Becker, Taylor Adkins, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy after theory', 21. On the persistence of Althusser's distinction, we can note Jameson's distinction between philosophy as 'always haunted by the dream of some fool proof self-sufficient system' and theory as having 'no vested interests in as much as it never lays claim to an absolute system'. Frederic Jameson, 'First Impressions', *London Review of Books*, 28:17, 7th September 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory*, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Rodolphe Gasché outlines this history of theory within the philosophical tradition in Rodolphe Gasché, *The Honour of Thinking. Critique, Theory, Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006

<sup>22</sup> German thought was not generally part of this assimilation - and the reception of figures like Benjamin and Adorno came later. See Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Some statements and truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Positisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms', trans. A. Tomiche, in D. Carroll, *States of Theory*,

became a 'paradiscipline' with multiple points of uptake and applications. This institutionalising process converted 'what the French call "thought" (pensée) into what Americans call "theory"'.<sup>24</sup> By the 1970s 'theory' emerged in the singular, uniting heterogeneous practices of thought and diverse thinkers under a set of tropes and names - 'high theory' 'theory with a capital T' and also, most misleadingly, 'critical theory'.<sup>25</sup>

The reception of (French, 'poststructuralist') theory by art history through literature had a significant impact on the development of Anglo-American art history - the reframing of the visual in terms of textuality, a preoccupation with things as signs, and the conflation (or confusion) of the critical with criticism (an established literary pursuit).<sup>26</sup> This shifted the domain of theory away from the epistemologically-oriented conceptions of the theoretical that had dominated earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-century 'scientific' discourses. Indeed, the persistence of the literary, textual and linguistic in art history's theoretical outlooks, compounded by the seismic impact of structuralism across the humanities, has been such that even today philosophy and theory are associated with the question of language.<sup>27</sup>

New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 71 – 82. Melville remarks on how Derrida was 'cut off by the very term, 'theory,'" from his actual arguments and motives". Review of 'The Theory mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse' and 'French Theory in America', CAA review, April 3, 2002, available at <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/33#.Yu6venbMJ1t>

<sup>24</sup> Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, *French Theory in America*, New York and London: Routledge 2011, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Osborne points out the problems with the use of the term 'critical theory' – the long-established designation for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Frankfurt school - to describe French thought, much of which was in tension with the philosophical notion of critique. 'Critical theory' functioned within the Anglo-American academy of the 1980s as a name for a 'heterogeneous assemblage of French, or French-inspired, theoretical writings' often expressing diametrically opposed intellectual projects. Osborne, 'Philosophy after theory', 20. For Osborne, theory 'after "Theory" in the Anglophone humanities is most definitely 'Philosophy' and he argues for 'the need to develop an anti-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary conception of philosophy as a dual practice of criticism and construction, within which theoretical reflection on non-philosophical materials is paramount.' Osborne, 'Philosophy after theory' 20 - 24.

<sup>26</sup> An important moment was the 1966 Baltimore symposium at John Hopkins University. Participants included Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Derrida's influential paper 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' introduced the notion of the text as a play of arbitrary linguistic codes. The editors of the symposium proceedings identified one of the key features of this new wave of French thought as the displacement of the role that Hegel had previously occupied. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy. The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1972. On the integration of French Theory into US academia see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008 and Warren Breckman, 'Times of Theory: On Writing the History of French Theory', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 71:3, July 2010, 339-361.

<sup>27</sup> Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson framed the question of theory in art history firmly with respect to semiotics, language and text. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art



But the 'linguistic turn' was only one aspect of a more fundamental, holistic unsettling of art history. Theory shook the intellectual foundations of the discipline. Notions that had for long been uncontested - meaning, truth, expertise, fact, objectivity, representation- were exposed as values and called into question.<sup>28</sup> 'Interpretative strategies' drawn from deconstruction, semiotics, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis prompted new concerns with the economic, political, institutional and social conditions of art and issues of subjectivity, ideology and identity – including questions of gender, racial, sexuality and class. The ideological presuppositions and unconscious biases of the discipline's practice were exposed, apparently 'objective' and 'natural' categories were revealed as constructions, and the way the conditions of the present (for instance, the art market) determine interpretation was registered. For many of those associated with the 'New Art History', theory (often varieties of Marxism) was coupled with attention to the social dimensions of art.<sup>29</sup> Theory – a set of nameable theories that included Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, deconstruction and phenomenology - unsettled art history's grounding in art and history - art as a quality recognised in works of art, and history as a domain comprised of historical events and processes of development.<sup>30</sup> Not only were many of the notions grounding traditional historiography – linearity, periodisation, progress, continuity, teleology, causality, agency, authorship, truth – taken to task, but the very category of historicism was called into question, in turn prompting new approaches to historiography.<sup>31</sup>

Many saw the promise of theory, then, in terms of a mobilisation of a discipline that had stagnated as unreflective positivist enquiry and narrow hyper-specialisation; a promise both critical and ethical.<sup>32</sup> 'Critique' here manifested in the

History' *The Art Bulletin*, 1991, 73: 2. More recently, Christopher Wood has described theory as a turning away from 'plain' and 'straightforward' language, a 'bending of language'. Wood, *A History*, 403. See also my review of Wood's book, Kamini Vellodi, 'Two Histories of Art History', *Art History*, 44:2, April 2021, 409-416. The introduction of structuralism to art history in the States is often attributed to Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss and the subsequent role of *October*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Irving Lavin, 'The Crisis of 'Art History'', *The Art Bulletin*, 78: 1, March 1996, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Leonard Rees and Frances Borzello, *The New Art History*, London: Camden Press, 1986, 4, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Washington: Bay Press, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Fredric Jameson, 'How not to historicise theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 34: 3, Spring 2008, 563-582. On the rejection of 'history' see Hayden White, 'The Burden of History', in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1992, 42. See also Deleuze and Guattari: 'History is the almost negative conditions that make possible the experimentation of something that escapes history' *What Is Philosophy?*, 111. This disdain for historicism was exacerbated by a general distancing from Hegel, the *bête noire* of many 'theorists'.

<sup>32</sup> Irving Lavin describes James Ackerman's critique, at a 1958 CAA speech, of art history's myopia and lack of self-awareness and the turn to theory 'in the name of which the art historian ceased aspiring to be a disinterested interpreter of the past and became an active participant in the effort to reform society by challenging its values.' Irving Lavin, 'The Crisis of 'Art History'', *The Art Bulletin*, 78: 1, March 1996, 13. Henri Zerner criticized art history as

post-Kantian sense of looking at and calling into question the conditions, groundwork and limits of a supposedly natural practice of thinking. Whereas in the past, philosophy had arguably been used by art history to support art history's development and consolidate its sense of identity, in the early years of the 'theory wave', art history used theory to contest its identity and even its validity as a self-sufficient or singular enterprise - with the irony of course being that in time, theory, freshly sanitised, would be reintegrated into the discipline's practice.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, from the perspective of a discipline's continuity, sustaining query at extra-territorial interstices and as a critical force that resists disciplinary habits is a challenge.<sup>34</sup> It was inevitable that theory would become sanitised in its integration within the institutional fabric of art history. Historiography was one way in which art history levelled the impact of theory to a form compatible with what it could recognise of itself.<sup>35</sup> The 1980s and 1990s saw a slew of publications in this vein –

an 'uninspired professional routine feeding a busy academic machine'. Henri Zerner, 'The Crisis in the Discipline', *Art Journal*, 42: 4, Winter, 1982, 279. TJ Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', in Eric Fernie, *Art history and its methods. A critical anthology*, Oxford: Phaidon, 2008. In his 1982 *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson remarked that art history had stagnated because it stopped asking the 'basic questions' about its practice and objects. These were now consigned to philosophy, and the gap between philosophy and art history had widened. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, xi.

<sup>33</sup> Some saw the incipience of theory's presence within art history as marking the beginnings of the end of the discipline's sense of identity, cf. Lavin, 'The Crisis'. In a 1988 article, James Elkins argued that the identity of art history depends on its refusal of theory (he is focusing here on Hegelian and post-Hegelian art theory). James Elkins, 'Art History without Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 14: 2, Winter 1988, 355. Some art historians called for a return to positivism against theory: cf. Paul Barolsky, 'For all its current theorizing and theoretical self-consciousness – some would say posturing – the discipline is still grounded in a body of what are called historical facts.' Paul Barolsky, 'Art History and Positivism', *Notes in the History of Art*, 18:1, 1998, 27. See also Keith Moxey on the rejection of post-structuralist theory by 'positivist historians' who preferred to stick to the notion that 'historical interpretation has something to do with truth.' Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Even the new offshoots of theoretically adventurous scholarship at the edges of 'core' disciplinary practices have a way of stabilizing themselves into what W.J.T Mitchell has described as 'sites of convergence' or 'interdisciplines'. For a discussion, see my essay. Kamini Vellodi, 'Diagrammatic Transdisciplinarity. Thought outside discipline', in Guillaume Collett, *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Problem of Transdisciplinarity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Norman Bryson characterised the collection of French writing (including Kristeva, Barthes and Serres) in his 1988 *Calligram* in terms of an 'absence of a sense of threshold, of border police', arguing that innovative thought takes place 'extra-territorially'. Norman Bryson, *Calligram. Essays in New Art History from France*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, xxviii.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Michael Ann Holly: 'theory and historiography (not the same thing of course) have [...] become part of the fabric of art history.' 'Theoretically Speaking . . . : David Carrier, Michael Ann Holly, and Andrei Pop in Dialogue'. CAA reviews, March 2020, available here <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3732#.Yu7HknbMJ1s> In the same exchange, Carrier comments, 'my sense is that right now it's hard to use those theoretical materials

responding to the theory moment by revisiting, albeit often in very erudite and inventive ways, the discipline's intellectual history.<sup>36</sup> Thus by 1988, James Elkins was able to remark that 'the majority of theoretical studies are not critical but historiographical: they "Objectively" chronicle the history of the discipline without advancing new theses.'<sup>37</sup>

### From Theory to Methodology

A key manifestation of this institutional taming of theory was the increasing preoccupation of art history with its methods from the 1980s onwards. Insofar as method had been a feature of art historical scholarship since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a legacy of its scientific (*wissenschaften*) roots, this preoccupation was consistent with a longstanding image of disciplinary practice. It was also a means of supporting interdisciplinary practice, with method being the transferrable and applicable element between disciplines in contrast to the subject-matter that keeps them distinct. It was also no doubt a pedagogic question: as method, theory could be more readily taught to students as the way to 'do' art history, a means of art history's reproduction, part of its toolkit. It is by virtue of such toolkits, aided by handbooks and guides, that complex systems of thought have been packaged into palatable forms, concepts made into interpretive devices that can support disciplinary continuity and heterogeneous theories made exchangeable and usable in a 'pick n' mix' effect.<sup>38</sup>

In turn, theory became less of a critical practice directed at exposing and shifting deep-seated presuppositions, and more of a methodological 'option'. Phenomenology, deconstruction, feminism, semiotic analysis, and so on, all became methods one could apply to almost anything. Art historians were quick to see the

[poststructuralism etc], just because the whole discipline's changed. You have to do two things: explain Erwin Panofsky, Alois Riegl, and Aby Warburg, and relate them to art.' See also Dana Arnold: 'the history of art history has at times appeared to be equal to object-based study and it is arguable that this now forms part of the archive of the discipline' Dana Arnold, 'Art History: Contemporary perspectives on method', *Art History*, 32: 4, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2009, 657–663.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. Podro defines a critical art history as one that goes beyond the 'archaeological' search for historical facts and studies the 'concept of art'; Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991. Keith Moxey, Mark Cheetham and Michael Ann Holly, *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Elkins, 'Art History without Theory', 356 n.5.

<sup>38</sup> Even Panofsky allowed 'critique only a brief moment of passage' before consolidating the methods (iconography, iconology) that were so evidently successful. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 5. The last couple of decades has seen a steady flow of publications on art historical methodology. Cf. Dana Arnold (ed.), *Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; Anne D'Alleva, *How to Write Art History*, London: Laurence King, 2006; Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006; Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, London: Laurence King, 2005.

issues. As early as 1973, James Ackermann described art history's appeal to theory as an improvement of method 'without reaching down to the principles on which it is based'.<sup>39</sup> A year later, TJ Clark questioned why fundamental problems and arguments of art history had turned into methods.<sup>40</sup> In the 1990s George Didi-Huberman characterised the 'malaise' of academic art history in terms of its 'methodological self-sufficiency: its closure', James Elkins voiced dissatisfaction with the way art history students move between interpretative models arbitrarily and Whitney Davis reiterated the point that art historians were too willing to 'apply' methods of psychoanalysis, and reluctant to engage psychoanalytic concepts at their source.<sup>41</sup> More recently, Stephen Melville has critiqued the 'portability of theory or method' that rendered it a static, applicable framework lacking responsiveness to its material, characterising the reduction of theoretical reflection to matters of method as a corollary of institutional impositions on 'research' that stripped theory of its once radical impact.<sup>42</sup>

The reduction of theory to methodology was not only a characteristic of art history's practice. It was a feature of theory's broad transformation accompanying its institutionalisation within the humanities. As theory itself became a field of specialisation, a metadiscipline of sorts with its own vocabulary, syntax and canon, its terms became thematised, signifiers, enabling compatibility with professional exigencies and the academic market.<sup>43</sup> The philosopher Francois Châtelet spoke in 1972 of the 'imperialism of methodology' that was ruining the furthering of knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> James Ackermann, 'Towards a new social theory of art', *New Literary History* 4, 1973, 320.

<sup>40</sup> Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', 249.

<sup>41</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning The Ends of a Certain History of Art*, Penn State Press, 2005, 8. James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts. Art History as Writing*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997. Whitney Davis, *Replications. Archaeology, Art History and Psychoanalysis*. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1996, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Melville and Margaret Iversen, *Writing Art History. Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, *Vision and Textuality*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995: theory became a way 'to ground and unify the field of inquiry in a way that speeds the process of professionalisation'; 'a generalized theoretical rigour can thus threaten to mesh extremely well with the structure of bureaucratic institutional self-reproduction', 6. Jeffrey Di Leo describes the impact of the multinational corporate publishing industry and the 'neoliberal abyss of the theory market'. Jeffrey Di Leo, 'Can Theory Save the Planet? Critical Climate Change and the Limits of Theory', *Symploke*, 21: 1, 2013, 27-36. Barbara Christina argued that theory's commodification was a key factor in academic hiring and promotion, contributing to the exclusion of people of colour, who theorized 'in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic' and 'linguistic jargon' – forms such as narrative, riddles and proverbs. Beyond her caricature of theory, what remains salient in Christian's argument, particularly in the context of questions of decolonisation, is the effects of any discourse becoming authoritative through institutionalisation. Barbara Christina, 'The Race for Theory', *Cultural Critique*, 6, Spring 1987, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Francois Châtelet, quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, 220.

### Lightness in Theory?

By the mid-1980s, the 'death of theory' was already a familiar catchphrase.<sup>45</sup> Theory had lost its object, and become too heavy with its own self-importance.<sup>46</sup> But many remained committed to theory as a 'systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions.'<sup>47</sup> John Rajchman claimed that the reduction of theory to 'stock formulas', 'readymade concepts' and a 'quotational patchwork' had divested it of its ability to look for 'those real points that allow thought to move and recreate itself', those 'forces of the outside, which don't fit into context, which complicate, deform, transforms institutions and so [...] give theory to impetus to try out new questions.' Against this outcome, Rachjman's view of the 'lightness in theory' was a suspension of meta-theorizing to experiment in the real, a trying out of several questions at once, 'not ordered by a given method'.<sup>48</sup>

With respect to writing on art, many remarked on this sense of the loss of connection to object/material was felt, and some argued for a recalibration of this relation. Yve-Alain Bois remarked that instead of applying theory, 'concepts must be forged from the object of one's inquiry ... and that the main theoretical act is to define this object'.<sup>49</sup> Hubert Damisch characterised the 'theoretical object' as the object which obliges one to do theory, furnishes one with the means of doing it and prompts reflection on what theory is.<sup>50</sup> Stephen Melville's conception of theory as plastic, reshaping or rediscovering itself within its new occasions and in touch with its singular objects was another way of considering the renewal of theory for art history in terms of its immanence to its real objects.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Some of the most vitriolic attacks on theory were launched by Camille Paglia and Alan Sokal. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' polemic. Walter Benn Michael, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 8:4, 1982, 723-742 was a significant catalyst for debate. See Breckman, 'Times of Theory' for an account, 349.

<sup>46</sup> 'French theory had ascended to what appeared to be an impenetrable hegemony. With the birth of theory 'thought no longer had a pure object, nor did it need one' - it had become 'pure provocation'. Romi Mukherjee, 'Review of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, biographie croisée by François Dosse', *International Social Science Journal*, Vol 60, 2009, 197-198.

<sup>47</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> John Rachjman, 'The Lightness of Theory', *Artforum*, 32: 1, September 1993, 165-166.

<sup>49</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993, xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Hubert Damisch, 'A Conversation with Hubert Damisch', *October*, 85, Summer 1998, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Melville argued that theoretical art history must be careful not to lose touch with an object and replace it with a 'discursive representation'. Melville, 'Colour has not Yet Been Named: Objectivity in Deconstruction', in Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction in the Visual Arts. Art, Media, Architecture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 39. See also James Elkins, *Beautiful, dry and distant texts, Art History as Writing*, Pennsylvania: Penn State University, 1997, 7. Elkins coins the term 'metatheoresis' to denote what happens when theory is applied to a practice and transforms into something that can no longer be recognised as theory. It is through experimental writing, he claims, that the philosophical can be made immanent to art history, 9.

### Philosophical and Theoretical Art Histories, 'After Theory'?

What theory became had deleterious effects, obscuring thought through a quotational apparatus. It is perhaps not surprising that much core art history has tried to move beyond its erstwhile stated allegiances to theory – whilst nevertheless retaining the ever-expanding theoretically-informed 'menu of methods', fuelled by the exponential growth of new theories from object-oriented ontology to actor-network theory, neuroaesthetics to decolonial theory. At the same time, theoretically informed approaches at the fringes of the discipline have migrated elsewhere, such as Visual Culture, Visual Studies, and Image Studies. Yet, the targets at which theoretical work in the 70s and 80s were aimed remain as pertinent as ever: the relations between the academy and praxis, the impositions of institutional structures, the fundamental questions of inequality, identity, alterity and representation, the biases of the art historian – that is, of all the presuppositions and assumptions that normally go unchallenged. We should remember that what attracted art history to theory was the way it could act as a catalyst for difficult questions and expose and unsettle its comfort zones – such as its proclivities towards description, formal and contextual analysis. Theory was a lens, a role-model even, but not necessarily a 'means'.

It is arguable that in recent decades, 'rigour' in Anglophone art history has come to be associated with amongst other things, 'close looking', attention to individual works, artists/movements, objects and new historiographies, including histories of reception.<sup>52</sup> Is this a retreat? Art history has, at the same time, undoubtedly expanded the horizon of its inquiries, attending to an ever-widening breadth of subject matter, including questions of race and gender, technology and the environment. Has such expansion been accompanied by a critical interrogation of the way it thinks? Holding a lens to challenging issues alone does not achieve this. Neither does reinventing or expanding methods, since method is – as explored above – often a means of carrying out a way of thinking already committed to. Unless the underpinning modes of thought are directly addressed – questions, for instance, of epistemology, representation, speculation, description, hermeneutics, empiricism – and not just the content (what thought thinks about), we risk perpetuating the same assumptions that we are ostensibly still trying to challenge.

Griselda Pollock expressed this succinctly, in her preface to the 2003 reissue of *Vision and Difference*, where she reflects on changes in art history since the book's original publication in 1988. She notes that 'feminist interventions' had 'momentarily ruffled' the discipline, and were now consigned to art history's history, whilst debates have moved to other questions such as 'internationalism, postcoloniality and post-gender studies of sexuality and queerness'. Such disciplinary amnesia loses sight, she argues, of the way critical-theoretical projects of the 1980s interrogated the discipline's fundamental ideologies. That is,

<sup>52</sup> A scan of two flagship Anglophone journals of Art History – *Art History* and *The Art Bulletin* show the majority of articles published over the past 5 years fall into the following categories: studies of single objects/artists; the use of theory as an interpretive tool, and historiographic approaches. Questions of race and gender are dominant.

'differencing the canon' is not just a question of attacking and expanding the canon – rather, it entailed nothing less than a fracture of the normative structure and image of art history. Indeed, art historians of the 70s – 80s aligned themselves with theory 'in the name precisely of thought'.<sup>53</sup> But today, she argues, the traditional art historical establishment see theory as an 'option' and core art history, even when it addresses challenging issues (and the attention to feminist interventions persists), continues fundamentally 'unruffled'. Echoing Pollock's intuitions, I think a challenge facing art history today is an undoing of the fate that befell theory through its institutionalisation: the conversion, that is, of what the French called thought (*pensée*) into what Americans called 'theory', and the reversal of everything that was lost in this slippage – experimentation (both of thought and of writing), trans-disciplinary trespasses, the rigorous orientation of thought around *problems*.

It goes without saying that the pastiche that theory became was not in any way representative of the powerful work of French thinkers that had impelled it. The 'theoretical' in their work was not a generalised, diffused and abstracted notion ('Theory') but a set of effects, an ethos of thought rigorously engaged with a specific object or problematic field – whether that be writing, signs, sexual difference, the unconscious, images, or thought itself. The work of theorizing (with a small 't') manifested as acts of thought (rather than the singular monolith 'Theory' which abstracts from these acts). The terms through which they came to be known as critical, reflective, interpretative, creative, deconstructive, hermeneutic, speculative, became signifiers detached from the real work carried out by these acts.

Perhaps the questions of theory and even philosophy are simply too burdened by their histories and associations to be invested as vectors for radical and experimental art writing today. Turning instead to the question of thought itself we ask ourselves: what is a thoughtful art history? How does art history think and under what conditions? How do these conditions impact the nature of its thought?

### **Deleuze, and Thoughtful Art History**

I would like to explore the work of Gilles Deleuze as a lens onto these questions. This is not to propose Deleuze as a theoretical framework or model – which would only be to perpetuate the `problems raised above. Indeed, Deleuze himself was clear that philosophy 'cannot claim the least superiority' to other disciplines; and, contra-Hegel, that 'no one needs philosophy to reflect on anything'.<sup>54</sup> He was explicitly disdainful of any application of 'readymade concepts'.<sup>55</sup> Neither is it to single

<sup>53</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*, London: Routledge, 2003, xviii-xix.

<sup>54</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 6. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xvi.

<sup>55</sup> 'nothing positive is done ... in the domains of either criticism or history, when we are content to brandish readymade old concepts like skeletons intended to intimate any creation' Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 83. In the realm of theory, 'any precarious and pragmatic framework is better than tracing concepts.' *A Thousand Plateaus*, 27. This criticism of application was made by other French 'theorists': note for instance Baudrillard's famous lecture in 1987 at the Whitney Museum in which he criticized the liberal use of his concept of the simulacrum, a concept that by nature is mobile, difficult to grasp and impossible to apply. Cusset, *French theory*, 231.

Deleuze out as a privileged reference point. Indeed, Deleuze's work on philosophy, art, theory, and practice was very much part of a milieu of French thought.<sup>56</sup> What I wish to do is reignite the question of how theory can (and did) function as a catalyst for the 'big questions' pertaining to thinking.

Throughout his work, Deleuze's preoccupation were the problems facing thought (whether, philosophical, or anthropology, literature, cinema, and painting) and the 'images' of thought that block an address of these problems and retain thinking within the presuppositions, habits, groundworks and assumptions it already possesses.<sup>57</sup> Even though – unlike many of his contemporaries – Deleuze maintained throughout his work a commitment to the distinction and singularity of philosophy, he nevertheless projected philosophy in terms of its relations to the non-philosophical, and approached theory beyond the traditional divide between theory and practice: '[T]heory too is something which is made, no less than its object.... philosophical theory is itself a practice, just as much as its object. It is no more abstract than its object.'<sup>58</sup> So in his early *Difference and Repetition* (1968) he remarks that, 'The search for new means of philosophical expression ... must be pursued today in relation to the renewal of certain other arts, such as the theatre or the cinema'<sup>59</sup> – philosophy must engage with its non-philosophical outside (which includes not only the arts, but fields from evolutionary science to mythology). Thirty years later, his view hadn't changed: in *What is Philosophy* (1991) Deleuze and Guattari state that philosophy includes non-philosophy in its genesis and 'is addressed essentially to non-philosophers as well.' All disciplines meet in the 'un' or 'non-thought', a complex of connections, resonances, interferences, intensities and integrations where the borders of disciplines become indiscernible'.<sup>60</sup> The experience of this unthought 'difference', difference not submitted to structures of identity or contradiction, prompts us to think as we have not done before; the encounter with alterity makes us think anew. Whilst interrogations of difference are well integrated into art historical study after 'poststructuralism', the ontological (philosophical) question of difference has morphed into anthropological or

<sup>56</sup> It is important to distinguish between Deleuze's more classically philosophical work, which in its studies of then unfashionable philosophers such as David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche departed from the trends of the time such as Marxism and phenomenology and the dominance of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger - and his later, co-authored work with Guattari.

<sup>57</sup> By 'image' Deleuze refers 'to a whole organization which effectively trains thought to operate according to the norms of an established order or power, and moreover, installs in it an apparatus of power, sets it up as an apparatus of power itself'. Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 23. In his 1991 preface to the English version of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze states that philosophy needs a new image of thought, 'or, rather a liberation of thought from those images which imprison it', xvii. For an analysis, see Kamini Vellodi, 'Thought Beyond Research. A Deleuzian Critique of Artistic Research', in Paulo De Assis, & Paolo Giudici, *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research*, (Orpheus Institute Series). Leuven University Press, 2019, 215-233

<sup>58</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 268. See also Deleuze's remarks on the relations between theory and practice as 'fragmentary, partial and mobile, in 'Intellectuals and Power', *Desert Islands*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xxi.

<sup>60</sup> *What Is Philosophy?* 41, 59, 218.



sociological questions of cultural, gender, sexual or racial difference.<sup>61</sup> Retaining the question of difference as an ontological question enables us to interrogate fundamental categories of inquiry such as thought and experience.

In their 1995 *Vision and Textuality*, Melville and Readings describe Deleuze and Guattari as exemplars for theoretical art history, for registering 'a new sense of our radical intimacy with [the object], an intimacy that permits intensity but forbids reflection.'<sup>62</sup> It is interesting that they focus not on the usual panoply of fashionable Deleuzian concepts, but on the question of experience - a question at the heart of Deleuze's philosophy, and one that has always been at the heart of art historical investigation. Rather than outline Deleuze's philosophy of experience, I would like to instead turn to an example of how his own chance encounter with the painter Gérard Fromanger catalysed the construction of new ideas.

On visiting Fromanger's studio for the first time, Deleuze asked him a number of 'stupid questions', such as, 'Why do you put red there?'. He returned for a second visit and asked the artist how he managed to put things on a canvas that was initially white.

Fromanger: 'you see it as blank, but in fact it's black.'

Deleuze: 'Ah fantastic! It's black, black with what?'

Fromanger: 'It's black with everything every painter has painted before me'

Deleuze: 'So it's not about blackening the canvas but about whitening it.'<sup>63</sup>

This seems to have been a key moment for Deleuze, for his conception of the creative act as an 'diagrammatic' operation of destruction followed by construction. Following his 1973 essay on Fromanger, he developed the concept of the diagram (a notion that had emerged in earlier texts, but was now developed in relation to the creative act) in his 1981 *Francis Bacon. Logique de La Sensation*: 'The painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it', and the diagram is the operative set of marks that disrupts this white canvas and introduces new 'possibilities of fact'.<sup>64</sup> He would return to and develop the notion in several later texts.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999 and Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, London, New York: Routledge, 1988

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, *Vision and Textuality*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995, 23.

<sup>63</sup> 'Entretien avec Gérard Fromanger' (22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1984), IMEC Archives.

<sup>64</sup> Fromanger 'cold and heat', in Gilles Deleuze, *Photogenic Painting - Gerard Fromanger*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel Smith, London: Continuum, 2003. 61-2, 71-2. See Dosse, 440-441. For accounts of the diagram in Deleuze and Guattari's work see Kamini Vellodi, 'Diagram. Deleuze's augmentation of a topical notion', *Word & Image*, 34: 4, 2018, 299-309 and 'Diagrammatic Thought: Two Forms of Constructivism in C.S. Peirce and Gilles Deleuze', *Parrhesia*, 19, 2014, 79-95, and '

Here we see how an encounter led to the construction of a concept ('the diagram'), and its subsequent variations; we see the immanence of the philosophical construction of concepts to real, non-philosophical, experiential conditions. Art is not just something to be thought about, but the singular, real condition for thought's genesis. Deleuze doesn't begin with the groundwork and knowledge erected by accumulated wealth of scholarship (he is no expert on Fromanger, or on modern painting, or even on art) – but with the encounter with the paintings in their alterity and the 'dumb questions' of a novice.

Deleuze names the register of experiences that defy recognition 'superior empiricism'. Whereas 'ordinary empiricism' grounds thought on given, quotidian experience, superior empiricism begins with limit-experiences that disturb habits of perception and sedimented images of thinking and initiate new thought. Art can act as such a catalyst – as Fromanger's works did for Deleuze. In their later work Deleuze and Guattari coin the term 'constructivism' to emphasise the constructed nature of the operation. Their statement that 'you will know nothing through concepts unless you have first created them – that is, constructed them in an intuition specific to them' echoing Henri Bergson's remark that 'an empiricism worthy of the name.... would measure out for the object a concept appropriate to only that object, a concept of which one could barely say that it was still a concept because it would apply only to that thing.'<sup>65</sup> Constructivism replaces the use of 'petrified', ready-made concepts with a creation of concepts, or reawakening of dormant concepts. I am reminded here of T J Clark's expression of 'the actual work that Riegl or Panofsky did, *against the grain* of the concepts they used.'<sup>66</sup> Or Damisch's statement that 'displacing concepts' was core to his work.<sup>67</sup> There must be something transient and fragile about the concept, and a retention of its plasticity through constant testing and reshaping, a willingness to put it to the test and if necessary deform it, to prevent generalisation or sedimentation into deadening 'toolkits'.

Constructivism is not, however, a new method. A thinker does not proceed methodically, Deleuze would say, but more like a dog chasing a bone, in leaps and starts; a 'groping experimentation' in the real.<sup>68</sup> With its origins in rationalist philosophy, method wards off 'alien forces' and 'error'; it is an abstraction that 'is valid for all times and places', severing the act of thinking from its singular experiential conditions.<sup>69</sup> Rather than method, what interests Deleuze is problems. 'Groping' around in Fromanger's studio, he encounters problems raised by paintings that he is seeing for the first time: the problem of colour, of how to begin painting, and so on. Whereas method is a tool that supports thought to travel to a destination, perhaps towards a solution or resolution (which is why handbooks of

<sup>65</sup> *What Is Philosophy?* 7. Deleuze, 'Bergson 1859-1942', in *Desert Islands*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Clark, 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation', 251.

<sup>67</sup> Of his concept 'cloud' Damisch wrote that 'Deleuze praised me, kindly, for having finally invented something 'philosophical: the 'elastic concept'. Hubert Damisch in conversation - Stephen Bann, *Oxford Art Journal* 28.2, 2005, 160.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Gregg Lambert, *The Non-Philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari*, London: Bloomsbury 2002, xvi. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 41.

<sup>69</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 166. See also Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 103.

methods are quite representative), problems put thought into disarray, unground it and force it to renew itself. Whereas methodology converts the question into something that *can* be answered, the problem sustains the question as question, affirming a problematic field as an ongoing source for interrogation. Not simply a provisional moment in the acquisition of knowledge the problem exceeds the implicit closure of questions and answers, insisting and recurring to continually impel thought. This repetition is key to the problem's power; the problem determines its own necessity by virtue of the fact it repeats itself.<sup>70</sup> Thus, philosophical theory is 'an elaborately developed question', 'not the resolution to a problem, but the elaboration, *to the very end*, of the necessary implications of a formulated question'.<sup>71</sup>

Several figures have located, and affirmed in their own work, the value of theory and philosophy for art history in terms of problematics: the renovation of 'paradigmatic problems' in new form (Clark), the potential for art history of 'renewed problematics' that affirms questions that survive the articulation of every answer (Didi-Huberman);<sup>72</sup> the notion that it is the 'questions that art history raises – rather than its subject matters – that has global reach (James Elkins).<sup>73</sup> Some of the most compelling and transformative writing on art today – by figures not all of whom would identify as art historians – affirms this problematising perspective, which necessarily produces a trans-disciplinary inquiry. To list just a few examples: John Onians' rethinking of fundamental problems of artmaking and visualisation through advances in neuroscience; the trans-disciplinary refraction of the problem of the image across psychoanalysis, anthropology, science (Hans Belting; Horst Bredekamp; Georges Didi-Huberman); the focusing on problems of writing, or fundamental concepts of analysis with respect to global and world art (James Elkins;

<sup>70</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 107-8; 146, 195. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari contrast the problematic to the theorematism – the theorem belongs to the rational order, but 'the problem is affective and is inseparable from the metamorphoses, generations, and creations within science itself', 362. Deleuze was indebted to Henri Bergson's conceptualization of problems – cf. Chapter 2 in *The Creative Mind*, and the critique of 'false problems' in *Matter and Memory*. Deleuze also refers to Heidegger: 'By a repetition of a fundamental problem we understand the disclosure of the primordial possibilities concealed in it. The development of these possibilities has the effect of transforming the problem and thus preserving it in its import as a problem. To preserve a problem means to free and to safeguard its intrinsic powers, which are the source of its essence and which make it possible as a problem. The repetition of the possibilities of a problem, therefore, is not a simple taking up of that which is 'in vogue' with regard to this problem [...] A good interpretation must, on the contrary, decide how far the understanding of the possible which governs all repetition extends and whether it is equal to that which is repeatable.' Heidegger, quoted in *Difference and Repetition*, 201.

<sup>71</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity. An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 106.

<sup>72</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 2005, 33.

<sup>73</sup> James Elkins, 'Art history as Global Discipline', in *Is Art History Global?*, New York and London: Routledge, 2013, 21-22.

David Summers; Whitney Davis; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann). Such examples, and many more could be given, show that it is not 'theory' or 'method' themselves that are problems; indeed, many of the most brilliant breakthroughs and re-imaginings are indebted to encounters with theory, or inventions of new methods. The issue is the way that theories are co-opted as part of disciplinary apparatus and levelled of their critical and genuinely generative force.

One of the key problems that art history has today tasked itself with is decolonisation. But there is nothing more aligned with art history's disciplinary image than the notion of a 'method of decolonisation' or using decolonisation as a new critical tool or the emerging 'decolonial theory' as an interpretative strategy. The point is not to treat decolonisation as a new 'ism', the rightful successor to Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonialism, and so on. Critical interventions need to do more than attack canons and reintegrate the excluded. Colonization is not only a fact of content (what topics are being taught and studied) but a question concerning the shape of thought itself. And it is fruitful to again remind ourselves that many of the interrogations accompanying the 'theory wave' were directed not only against selected disciplinary presuppositions and values but against art history's normative 'image of thought'. Whilst diversifying the curriculum to include questions of indigenous dispossession, histories of slavery and empire, and so on, is undoubtedly important in the destabilization and reshaping of our epistemological structures, any such expansion, whilst retaining the essential disciplinary structures and habits and presuppositions underlying the discipline's practice - such as method, specialism, canon and knowledge-production - can only offer a partial critique.<sup>74</sup>

Using Deleuze's prompts, we can project genuine critique that does not take place in the name of values already given, but proceeds as an involuntary operation forced by an experience that shocks the groundwork of thought. We can call this critique immanent because the critical act assumes nothing outside of itself, and total because it is directed against the entirety of its real objects. This includes the presuppositions that thought has of itself, all those implicit and tacit habits and assumptions that determines the goals of thought when it tries to think (such as 'making a contribution to the field'). Genuine thought, both critical and creative, does not begin with what it already recognises or knows of itself and its object, but

<sup>74</sup> Kaufmann makes this point: 'While the boundaries of the discipline of art history have been extended to cover previously unsurveyed continents and epochs, broadening the field of study.... Historians of art .... have until quite recently paid little overt attention to the examination of *geographical questions*.' [my italics] *Toward a Geography of Art*, University of Chicago Press, 2004, 9-10. More recently, Charlene Villaseñor Black and Tim Barringer state that 'it is crucial that art historians seek out as the subject of their research works of art that refuse to confirm .... that embody alterity. It is art history's role to reject inherited assumptions [...] with new problematics in mind'. I find their proposal that art history should be 'guided by inquiry', a constantly evolving acquisition of skills reconfigured in response to the research question interesting - even if they are rather prescriptive with respect to what this inquiry excludes. Charlene Villaseñor Black & Tim Barringer, 'Decolonizing Art and Empire', *The Art Bulletin*, 104: 1, 2022, 6-20.

with the element of the outside. Thought *must happen* to thought as an involuntary encounter with alterity.

From the perspective of art history the paradoxical nature of this task has been recognised. If decolonisation means stripping the (Western, Eurocentric, imperialist) frameworks and groundwork of art history, which is to say de-disciplining it, how can art history continue as art history?<sup>75</sup> This is the same conundrum (and for some, opportunity) that faced theoretically informed art history in the 1980s-90s. Rather than allowing decolonisation to become yet another new principle with a name, a new image of art historical thinking complete with its new curricula, canon and methods, should we not instead affirm its problematic nature as the site of ongoing critique? The value of decolonisation as a problem is not simply the new responses it initiates or solutions it brings about, but also the way it recurs to force art history to problematise itself again and again.

### Conclusion

From its early preoccupations with speculative aesthetics and the philosophy of history to its reformulation as part of the discipline's scientific self-identification to its engagement with (French 'poststructuralist') theory, the philosophical and the theoretical have been continual elements of the intensive modulation of art historical practice, integral to the mediation of the discipline's reliance on the empirical and brute facts. The 'theory wave' in the 1970s – 90s shifted theoretical work, broadly speaking, from the interest in general systems of concepts supporting epistemological frameworks to practices of critique. I've explored this with respect to the dynamics within post-war French thought itself – including the expansion of the philosophical to include the non-philosophical, and the relations between philosophy and theory – in order to reassess the stakes of philosophical and theoretical art histories today.

When scholars in the 1970s began to lament the loss of art history's earlier philosophical nature, they were calling for a renewal of a critical impetus and engagement with the 'big questions' that could unsettle the ground of the discipline, produce transformative effects and propel the discipline to think differently. This imperative is as relevant today as it ever was. We find ourselves in a moment where theory has lost the radical edge it possessed. But the problems which theory helped expose persist. Against the reduction of the theoretical to the methodological which levels disruptive effects to a matter of new 'tools', and the historiographic, that levels the work of the theoretical through explanation and contextualisation, rather than enacting it, we need to affirm the function of theory and the philosophical for art historical thinking today as a means of enabling us to ask the 'big questions', continue to critically reflect on our assumptions, engaging with concepts at their source to replay or newly construct them, and take bold leaps from our disciplinary habits and habitats. The invitation of theory and of inventive theoretical art histories is how to pose and renews problems that disturb existing epistemological scaffolds. The work of Gilles Deleuze reminds us that for this generation of French

<sup>75</sup> See the responses from Kariji Jain, James Emilio, Jas Elsner, James Elkins and Kamini Vellodi to the 'Decolonising Art History' questionnaire, *Art History*, 43:1, 2020.

intellectuals, the object and register of problematising inquiry was not in fact 'theory', but 'thought' (*La Pensée*), rigorously engaged with specific objects, fields and problems. In its conceptualisation of philosophy as a porous field engaged with the non-philosophical, its theory of superior empiricism (how encounters with unfamiliar experiential terrains mark the forced beginning of thought), and its conception of constructivism (how concepts manifest in the encounter with alterity and transform with their problematic fields), Deleuze's work has much to offer any discipline to which the questions of experience and conceptual construction matter. But applying, translating and superimposing this Deleuzian voice, or any authorial voice, as a master key to solving problems, is not the way to engage in meaningful theoretical and philosophical inquiry. Instead, a philosophical art history, a thoughtful art history, takes inspiration from fundamental and recurring problems, or constructs its own problems anew. Rather than a new methodology, it poses itself as a problematology.

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