

# Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders

The basic tenet of semiotics, the theory of sign and sign-use, is anti-realist. Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs. The core of semiotic theory is the definition of the factors involved in this permanent process of sign-making and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help us to grasp that process as it goes on in various arenas of cultural activity. Art is one such arena, and it seems obvious that semiotics has something to contribute to the study of art.<sup>1</sup>

From one point of view, it can be said that the semiotic perspective has long been present in art history: the work of Riegl and Panofsky can be shown to be congenial to the basic tenets of Peirce and Saussure,<sup>2</sup> and key texts of Meyer Schapiro deal directly with issues in visual semiotics.<sup>3</sup> But in the past two decades, semiotics has been engaged with a range of problems very different from those it began with, and the contemporary encounter between semiotics and art history involves new and distinct areas of debate: the polysemy of meaning; the problematics of authorship, context, and reception; the implications of the study of narrative for the study of images; the issue of sexual difference in relation to verbal and visual signs; and the claims to truth of interpretation. In all these areas, semiotics challenges the positivist view of knowledge, and it is this challenge that undoubtedly presents the most difficulties to the traditional practices of art history as a discipline.

Because of the theoretical skepticism of semiotics, the relationship between contemporary semiotics and art history is bound to be a delicate one. The debate between the critical rationalists and the members of the Frankfurt school, earlier on in this century, may have convinced most scholars of the need for a healthy dose of doubt in their claims to truth; nevertheless, much 'applied science'—in other words, scholarship that, like art history, exists as a specialized discipline—seems to be reluctant to give up the hope of reaching positive knowledge. Whereas epistemology and the philosophy of science have developed sophisticated views of knowledge and truth in which there is little if any room for unambiguous 'facts,' causality, and proof, and in which interpreta-

tion has an acknowledged central position, art history seems hard pressed to renounce its positivistic basis, as if it feared to lose its scholarly status altogether in the bargain.<sup>4</sup>

Although art history as a whole cannot but be affected by the skepticism that has radically changed the discipline of history itself in the wake of the 'linguistic turn,' two fields within art history are particularly tenacious in their positivistic pursuit: the authentication of *œuvres*—for example, those of Rembrandt, van Gogh, and Hals, to name just a few recently and hotly debated cases—and social history.<sup>5</sup> As for the former, the number of decisions that have an interpretive rather than a positive basis—mainly issues of style—have surprised the researchers themselves, and it is no wonder, therefore, that their conclusions remain open to debate.<sup>6</sup> In section 2 ('Senders') we will pursue this question further. But, one might object, this interpretive status concerns cases where positive knowledge of the circumstances of the making of an artwork is lacking, not because such knowledge is by definition unattainable. Attempts to approach the images of an age through an examination of the social and historical conditions out of which they emerged, in the endeavor of social history, are not affected by that lack.

The problem, here, lies in the term 'context' itself. Precisely because it has the root 'text' while its prefix distinguishes it from the latter, 'context' seems comfortably out of reach of the pervasive need for interpretation that affects all texts. Yet this is an illusion. As Jonathan Culler has argued,

But the notion of context frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches the discussion, since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act. We know, of course, that things are not so simple: context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events. Yet whenever we use the term *context* we slip back into the simple model it proposes.<sup>7</sup>

Context, in other words, is a text itself, and it thus consists of signs that require interpretation. What we take to be positive knowledge is the product of interpretive choices. The art historian is always present in the construction she or he produces.<sup>8</sup>

In order to endorse the consequences of this insight, Culler proposes to speak not of context but of 'framing': 'Since the phenomena criticism deals with are signs, forms with socially constituted meanings, one might try to think not of context but of the framing of signs: how are signs constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms?'<sup>9</sup>

This proposal does not mean to abandon the examination of 'context' altogether, but to do justice to the interpretive status of the insights thus gained. Not only is this more truthful; it also advances the search for social history itself. For by examining the social factors that frame the signs, it is possible to analyze simultaneously the practices of the past and our own interaction with them, an interaction that is otherwise in danger of passing unnoticed. What art historians are bound to examine, whether they like it or not, is the work as effect and affect, not only as a neatly remote product of an age long gone. The problem of context, central in modern art history, will be examined further from a semiotic perspective in section 1 here, and the particular problem of the reception of images, and of the original viewer, will come up in section 3 ('Receivers'), and again in section 8 ('History and the Status of Meaning').

In this article, we intend to conduct two inquiries simultaneously. On the one hand, we will examine how semiotics challenges some fundamental tenets and practices of art history. Although this is intrinsic to the article as a whole, it will receive greater emphasis in the first three sections. On the other hand and perhaps more important for many, we will demonstrate how semiotics can further the analyses that art historians pursue (this point will be central to sections 6 and 7). The parallel presentation of a critique and a useful set of tools conveys our view that art history is in need of, but also can afford, impulses from other directions. Since semiotics is fundamentally a transdisciplinary theory, it helps to avoid the bias of privileging language that so often accompanies attempts to make disciplines interact. In other words, rather than a linguistic turn, we will propose a semiotic turn for art history. Moreover, as the following sections will demonstrate, semiotics has been developed within many different fields, some of which are more relevant to art history than others. Our selection of topics is based on the expected fruitfulness for art history of particular developments, rather than on an attempt to be comprehensive, which would be futile and unpersuasive. This article does not present a survey of semiotic theory for an audience of art historians. For such an endeavor we refer the reader to Fernande Saint-Martin's recent study.<sup>10</sup> Some of the specialized semioticians (e.g., Greimas, Sebeok) might see an intolerable distortion in our presentation. However, some of the theorists discussed here, like Derrida or Goodman, might not identify themselves as semioticians, nor might some of the art historians whose work we will put forward as examples of semiotic questioning of art and art history. In order to make this presentation more directly and widely useful, we have opted to treat semiotics as a perspective, raising a set of questions around and within the methodological concerns of art history itself.

The first three sections deal centrally with the semiotic critique of

'context' as a term in art-historical discussion. From questions of context we move to the origins and history of semiotics, the ways in which these tools and critical perspectives have grown out of initial theoretical projects. The limits of space force us to consider just two early figures: Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher (section 4), and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (section 5). In section 6 we present a semiotic view of psychoanalysis, demonstrating a variety of ways that psychoanalysis is bound up with semiotics and can be useful for art history, and then going on to discuss the most relevant concept, central in art history, that of the gaze. Psychoanalysis connects semiotics with an awareness of gender differentiation as pervasively relevant, indeed, as a crucial basis for the heterogeneous and polysemous nature of looking. Feminist cultural analysis has been quick to see the relevance of semiotic tools for its own goals. We wish to acknowledge that efficacy and we would have liked to demonstrate the inevitable 'feminist turn' in semiotic theory itself by presenting the intersections between feminism's theorizing of gender, semiotics, and art history. But lack of space combined with the risk of overlap with an earlier survey article on feminism and art history published in this journal forced us, regretfully, to relegate feminism to the margins.<sup>11</sup> Following the presentation of a psychoanalytically oriented semiotics, we go on to show the interpretive and descriptive, but also critical, value of a semiotically based narrative theory or narratology for the study of images—images that frequently have a narrative side that is not necessarily literary in background (section 7, 'Narratology'). Instead of rehearsing the view of history painting as basically illustrative of old stories, a view that privileges language over visual representation, we demonstrate the specifically visual ways of story-telling that semiotics enables one to consider. Section 8 offers a few reflections on the status of meaning in relation to the historical considerations so important for art history.

One further question concerns the relation between the disciplines. Interdisciplinary research poses specific problems of methodology, which have to do with the status of the objects and the applicability of concepts designed to account for objects with a different status. Thus a concept mainly discussed in literary theory—for example, metaphor—is relevant to the analysis of visual art, and refusing to use it amounts to an unwarranted decision to take all images as literal expressions. But such use requires a thinking-through of the status of signs and meaning in visual art—for example, of the delimitation of discrete signs in a medium that is supposed to be given over to density.<sup>12</sup> Rather than borrowing the concept of metaphor from literary theory, then, an art historian will take it out of its unwarranted confinement within that specific discipline and first examine the extent to which metaphor, as a phenomenon of transfer of meaning from one sign onto another,

should be generalized. This is the case here, but not all concepts from literature lend themselves to such generalization. Rhythm and rhyme, for example, although often used apropos visual images, are more medium-specific and their use for images is therefore more obviously metaphorical.

Semiotics offers a theory and a set of analytic tools that are not bound to a particular object domain. Thus it liberates the analyst from the problem that transferring concepts from one discipline into another entails. Recent attempts to connect verbal and visual arts, for example, tend to suffer from unreflected transfers, or they painstakingly translate the concepts of the one discipline into the other, inevitably importing a hierarchy between them. Semiotics, by virtue of its supradisciplinary status, can be brought to bear on objects pertaining to any sign-system. That semiotics has been primarily developed in conjunction with literary texts is perhaps largely a historical accident, whose consequences, while not unimportant, can be bracketed.<sup>13</sup> As a supradisciplinary theory, semiotics lends itself to interdisciplinary analyses, for example, of word and image relations, which seek to avoid both the erection of hierarchies and the eclectic transferring of concepts.<sup>14</sup> But the use of semiotics is not limited to interdisciplinarity. Its multidisciplinary reach—as journals like *Semiotica* demonstrate, it can be used in a variety of disciplines—has made semiotics an appropriate tool for monodisciplinary analysis as well. Considering images as signs, semiotics sheds a particular light on them, focusing on the production of meaning in society, but it is by no means necessary to semiotic analysis to exceed the domain of visual images.

### 1. Context

One area in which the semiotic perspective may be of particular service to art history is in the discussion of 'context'<sup>15</sup>—as in the phrase 'art in context.' Since semiotics, following the structuralist phase of its evolution, has examined the conceptual relations between 'text' and 'context' in detail, in order to ascertain the fundamental dynamics of socially operated signs, it is a field in which analysis of 'context' as an idea may be particularly acute. Many aspects of that discussion have a direct bearing on 'context' as a key term in art-historical discourse and method.<sup>16</sup>

When a particular work of art is placed 'in context,' it is usually the case that a body of material is assembled and juxtaposed with the work in question in the hope that such contextual material will reveal the determinants that make the work of art what it is. Perhaps the first observation on this procedure, from a semiotic point of view, is a cautionary one: that it cannot be taken for granted that the evidence that makes up 'context' is going to be any simpler or more legible than the visual text upon which such evidence is to operate. Our observation



is directed in the first place against any assumption of opposition, or asymmetry, between 'context' and 'text', against the notion that here lies the work of art (the text), and over there is the context, ready to act upon the text to order its uncertainties, to transfer to the text its own certainties and determination. For it cannot be assumed that 'context' has the status of a given or of a simple or natural ground upon which to base interpretation. The idea of 'context,' posited as platform or foundation, invites us to step back from the uncertainties of text. But once this step is taken, it is by no means clear why it may not be taken again; that is, 'context' implies from its first moment a potential regression 'without brakes.'

Semiotics, at a particular moment in its evolution, was obliged to confront this problem head-on, and how it did so has in important ways shaped the history of its own development. We will discuss later the different conceptions of semiosis in Saussure and in the work of post-Saussureans such as Derrida and Lacan. Suffice it to say, for now, that in its 'structuralist' era semiotics frequently operated on the assumption that the meanings of signs were determined by sets of internal oppositions and differences mapped out within a static system. In order to discover the meanings of the words in a particular language, for example, the interpreter turned to the global set of rules (the *langue*) simultaneously governing the language as whole, outside and away from actual utterances (*parole*). The crucial move was to invoke and isolate the synchronic system, putting its diachronic aspects to one side. What was sought, in a word, was structure. The critique launched against this theoretical immobility of sign systems pointed out that a fundamental component of sign systems had been deleted from the structuralist approach, namely the system's aspects of ongoing semiosis, of dynamism. The changeover from theorizing semiosis as the product of static and immobile systems, to thinking of semiosis as unfolding in time is indeed one of the points at which structuralist semiotics gave way to post-structuralism. Derrida, in particular, insisted that the meaning of any particular sign could not be located in a signified fixed by the internal operations of a synchronic system; rather, meaning arose exactly from the movement from one sign or signifier to the next, in a *perpetuum mobile* where there could be found neither a starting point for semiosis, nor a concluding moment in which semiosis terminated and the meanings of signs fully 'arrived.'<sup>17</sup>

From this perspective, 'context' appears to have strong resemblances to the Saussurean signified, at least in those forms of contextual analysis that posit context as the firm ground upon which to anchor commentaries on works of art. Against such a notion, post-structuralist semiotics argues that 'context' is in fact unable to arrest the fundamental mobility of semiosis for the reason that it harbors exactly the same principle of interminability within itself. Culler provides a

readily understood example of such nonterminability in his discussion of evidence in the courtroom.<sup>18</sup> The context in a legal dispute is not a given of the case, but something that lawyers make, and thereby make their case; and the nature of evidence is such that there is always more of it, subject only to the external limits of the lawyers' own stamina, the court's patience, and the client's means. Art historians, too, confront this problem on a daily basis. Suppose that, in attempting to describe the contextual determinants that made a particular work of art the way it is, the art historian proposes a certain number of factors that together constitute its context. Yet it is always conceivable that this number could be added to, that the context can be augmented. Certainly there will be a cut-off point, determined by such factors as the reader's patience, the conventions followed by the community of art-historical interpreters, the constraints of publishing budgets, the cost of paper, etc. But these constraints will operate from an essentially external position with regard to the enumeration of contextual aspects. Each new factor that is added will, it may be hoped, help to bolster the description of context, making it more rounded and complete. But what is also revealed by such supplementation is exactly the uncurtailability of the list, the impossibility of its closure. 'Context' can always be extended; it is subject to the same process of mobility that is at work in the semiosis of the text or artwork that 'context' is supposed to delimit and control.

To avoid misunderstanding, one should remark that while the consideration that contexts may be indefinitely extended makes it impossible to establish 'context' in the form of a totality—a compendium of all the circumstances that constitute a 'given' context—semiotics does not in fact follow what may appear to be a consequence of this, that the concept of determination should somehow be given up. On the contrary, it is only the goal of totalizing contexts that is being questioned here, together with the accompanying tendency toward making a necessarily partial and incomplete formulation of context stand for the totality of contexts, by synecdoche. Certainly the aim of identifying the total context has at times featured prominently in linguistics (among other places). Austin's remark concerning speech act theory is a case in point: 'The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating.'<sup>19</sup> Semiotics' objection to such an enterprise focuses primarily on the idea of mastering a totality that is implicit here, together with the notion that such a totality is 'actual,' that is, that it can be known as a present experience. However, this by no means entails an abandoning of 'context' and 'determination' as working concepts of analysis. Rather, semiotics would argue that two principles must operate here simultaneously: 'No meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.'<sup>20</sup> Though the two principles may not sit easily together or interact in a classical or topologically

familiar fashion, context as determinant is very much to the fore in semiotic analyses, and particularly those that are *poststructuralist*.

As semioticians have tried to work through the complexities of the text/context distinction, they have developed a further caveat, concerning the stroke or bar (/) between the terms 'text' and 'context.' That mark of separation presupposes that one can, in fact, separate the two, that they are truly *independent* terms. Yet there are many situations within art-historical discourse that, if we consider them in detail, may make it difficult to be sure that such independence can easily be assumed. The relation between 'context' and 'text' (or 'artwork') that these terms often take for granted is that history stands prior to artifact; that context generates, produces, gives rise to text, in the same way that a cause gives rise to an effect. But it is sometimes the case that the sequence (from context to text) is actually inferred from its endpoint, leading to the kind of metalepsis that Nietzsche called 'chronological reversal.'<sup>21</sup> 'Suppose one feels a pain. This causes one to look for a cause and spying, perhaps, a pin, one links and reverses the perceptual or phenomenal order, *pain ... pin*, to produce a causal sequence, *pin ... pain*.<sup>22</sup> In this case, the pin as cause is located after the effect it has on us has been produced. Does one find comparable instances of such metalepsis or 'chronological reversal' in art-historical analysis?

The answer may well be yes. Imagine a contemporary account of, say, mid-Victorian painting, one that aims to reconstruct the context for the paintings in terms of social and cultural history. The works themselves depict such social sites as racetracks, pubs, railway stations and train compartments, street scenes where well-to-do ladies pass by workmen digging the road, interiors in which domestic melodramas are played out, the stock exchange, the veterans' hospital, the church, the asylum. It would not be thought unusual for the art historian to work from the paintings out toward the history of these sites and milieu, in order to discover their historical specificity and determination, their detailed archival texture. Just this sort of inquiry is what, perhaps, the word 'context' asks for; such reconstruction would be fitting and, one might say, *indicated* by the nature of the visual materials to hand.

But there are senses in which the procedure is still strange, despite its aura of familiarity. A primary difficulty is that those features of mid-Victorian Britain missing from mid-Victorian painting are rarely featured as part of the context that accounts for the works of art. A social history that set out, unassisted by pictures, to discover the social and historical conditions of mid-Victorian Britain might well attend to quite other milieu, different social sites, and indeed many other kinds of historical objects that do not readily lend themselves to pictorial representation. A harder social analysis might treat the pictures incidentally, in passing, as one sort of evidence among many. If one is going to study social history, why privilege works of art in such a way



that the findings of historiography must be bound to the *mise-en-scène* of painting?

There are a number of observations that might be made at this point: for example, concerning the relations between art history and social history as disciplines both intertwined and impelled by different kinds of momentum, or concerning the role played by synecdoche in the rhetoric of art-historical discourses.<sup>23</sup> The point that concerns us here, though, is that in the example chosen, the pictures have in some sense *predicted* the form of the historian's portrayal, that the work of art history is 'anticipated by the structure of the objects it labors to illuminate.'<sup>24</sup> If that is so, then the 'context' in which the work of art is placed is in fact being generated out of the work itself, by means of a rhetorical operation, a reversal, a metalepsis, that nonetheless purports to regard the work as having been produced by its context and not as producing it. Moreover, in a further rhetorical maneuver, the work of art is now able to act as evidence that the context that is produced for it is the right one; the reversal can be made to produce a 'verification effect' (the contextual account must be true: the paintings prove it).

In cases of this kind, elements of visual text migrate from text to context and back, but recognition of such circulation is prevented by the primary cut of text-stroke-context. The operation of the stroke consists in the creation of what, for semiotics, is a fantasmatic cleavage between text and context, followed by an equally uncanny drawing together of the two sides that had been separated. The stroke dividing 'text' from 'context' is the fundamental move here, which semiotic analysis would criticize as a rhetorical operation.<sup>25</sup> From one point of view, as Derrida has argued, this cut is precisely the operation that establishes the aesthetic as a specific order of discourse. From another point of view, the cut (text/context) is what creates a discourse of art-historical explanation; it is because the blade can so cleanly separate the two edges, of text and context, that one seems to be dealing with an order of explanation at all, with explanation on one side and *explanandum* on the other. To set up this separation of text from context, then, is a fundamental rhetorical move of self-construction in art history.

Semiotic inquiry has a further reservation about procedures of this kind; since it is concerned with the functioning of signs, it is particularly sensitive to the fact that in our example (a contextual account of mid-Victorian painting) the status of the paintings as works of the sign has in fact largely been effaced. This need not happen with all contextualizing accounts—and our example is, of course, only an imaginary case. What the example depends on is the idea of a number of contextual factors converging on the work (or works) of art. The factors proposed may be many; they may belong to all sorts of domains; but they all finally arrive *at* the artwork, conceived as singular and as the terminus of all the various causal lines or chains. The question to be

answered was, 'what factors made the work of art what it is?' And in order to answer such a question, it is appropriate and inevitable that some narrative of convergence will be produced. The question casts itself in just this convergent form:  $n$  number of factors, all leading toward and into their final point of destination, the work of art in question.

What semiotics would query here is the idea, the shape, of convergence. Certainly the model is appropriate if the object of the inquiry is assumed to be singular, complete in itself, autotelic. All the clues point toward the one outcome, as in a work of detection. But the problem that is overlooked here is that insofar as works of art are works of the sign, their structure is not in fact singular, but iterative.<sup>26</sup> Singular events occur at only one point in space and time: the guest at the country house party was murdered in the library; the Magna Carta was written in 1215; the painting was autographed and framed. But signs are by definition repeatable. They enter into a plurality of contexts; works of art are constituted by different viewers in different ways at different times and places. The production of signs entails a fundamental split between the enunciation and the enunciated: not only between the person, the subject of enunciation, and what is enunciated; but between the circumstances of enunciation and what is enunciated, which can never coincide.<sup>27</sup> Once launched into the world, the work of art is subject to all of the vicissitudes of reception; as a work involving the sign, it encounters from the beginning the ineradicable fact of semiotic play. The idea of convergence, of causal chains moving toward the work of art should, in the perspective of semiotics, be supplemented by another shape: that of lines of signification opening out from the work of art, in the permanent diffraction of reception.

It may be that scholars in certain other disciplines are more at ease than art historians with the possibility of a work of art that constitutively changes with different conditions of reception, as different viewers and generations of viewers bring to bear upon the artwork the discourses, visual and verbal, that construct their spectatorship. Admittedly, the openness of such a text or work of art can and has been appropriated and used in the name of a number of ideological exercises: the rehabilitation of the concept of the canon in literary criticism is one (the open text turning out to coincide with the shelf of masterworks, the rest remaining ephemeral and merely *lisible*); the cult of the reader as hedonistic consumer is another (a consumer who never reflects on the preconditions of consumption). But obviously the plurality attributed so selectively to the 'classic' text (whether visual or verbal) is not excessive because it is a masterpiece. Rather the opposite: the openness of the classic is the result of that fundamental lack it shares with all texts, master-works or not. It is the consequence of the fact that the text or artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in

which the reader reads the text or the viewer views the image, and that the work of art cannot fix in advance the outcome of any of its encounters with contextual plurality. The idea of 'context' as that which will, in a legislative sense, determine the contours of the work in question is therefore different from the idea of 'context' that semiotics proposes: what the latter points to is, on the one hand, the unarrestable mobility of the signifier, and on the other, the construction of the work of art within always specific contexts of viewing.

When 'context' is located in a clearly demarcated moment in the past, it becomes possible to overlook 'context' as the contextuality of the present, the current functioning of art-historical discourses. Such an outcome is something that semiotics is particularly concerned to question. It hardly needs remarking that the referent of 'context' is (at least) dual: the context of the production of works of art and the context of their commentary. Semiotics, despite frequent misunderstandings of precisely this point (and especially of semiotic 'play'), is averse neither to the idea of history nor to the idea of historical determination. It argues that meanings are always determined in specific sites in a historical and material world. Even though factors of determination necessarily elude the logic of totality, 'determination' is recognized and indeed insisted upon. Similarly, in recommending that the present context be included within the analysis of 'context,' semiotics does not work to avoid the concept of historicity; rather, its reservations concern forms of historiography that would present themselves in an exclusively aoristic or constative mode, eliding the determinations of historiography as a performative discourse active in the present. The same historiographic scruple that requires us to draw a distinguishing line between 'us' and the historical 'them'—in order to see how they are different from us—should, in the semiotic view, by the same token urge us to see how 'we' are different from 'them' and to use 'context' not as a legislative idea but as a means that helps 'us' to locate ourselves instead of bracketing out our own positionalities from the accounts we make.

## 2. Senders

'Context,' then, turns out to be something very different from a given of art-historical analysis. But no less problematic is the status of the concept of 'artist'—painter, photographer, sculptor, and so forth. (To avoid some of the connotational baggage that comes with the label 'artist,' we use here the more neutral word 'author.')

<sup>28</sup> It might seem at first that the idea of the author of a work of art is, again, a natural term in the order of explanation, and one that is now much more substantial and tangible than 'context.' As the idea of context is probed and tested, various disturbing vistas open up—regressions, *mises-en-abyme*,<sup>29</sup> multiple or folded temporalities—but 'author' seems much more stable. We may not be able in the end to point to a context, since in so many

ways the context-idea involves lability and shifting grounds; but the author of a work of art is surely someone we can indeed point to, a living (or once living), flesh-and-blood personage with a palpable presence in the world, as solid and undeniable as any individual bearing a proper name, as reliably there as you or me.

Yet, as Foucault points out,<sup>30</sup> the relation between an individual and his or her proper name is quite different from the relation that obtains between a proper name and the function of authorship. The name of an individual (as they say in Britain, J. Bloggs)<sup>31</sup> is a designation, not a description; it is arbitrary in the sense that it does not assign any particular characteristics to its bearer. But the name of an author (a painter, a sculptor, a photographer, etc.) oscillates between designation and description: when we speak of Homer, we do not designate a particular individual; we refer to the author of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, of the body of texts performed by the rhapsodes at the Panathenaic Festivals, or we intend a whole range of qualities, 'Homeric' qualities that can be applied to any number of cases (epics, epithets, heroes, types of diction, of poetic rhythm—the list is open-ended). 'J. Bloggs' is in the world, but an 'author' is in the works, in a body of artifacts and in the complex operations performed on them. Like 'context,' 'authorship' is an elaborate work of framing, something we elaborately produce rather than something we simply find.

Some of the processes of this enframing can be seen at work in the strategies of attribution.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the first procedure in attribution is to secure clear evidence of the material traces of the author in the work, metonymic contiguities that move in a series from the author in the world, the flesh-and-blood J. Bloggs, into the artifact in question. The traces may be directly autographic—evidence of a particular hand at work in the artifact's shaping. Or they may be more indirect—perhaps documents pertaining to the work, or the physical traces of a milieu (as when an artifact is assigned to the category 'Athenian, circa 700 B.C.'). At this level, the most 'scientific' stage of attribution, all sorts of technologies may provide assistance: X-rays, spectroscopic analysis, cryptography. What is assumed is that the category of authorship will be decided on the basis of material evidence, and what 'author' names here is the work's physical origin. The techniques employed are essentially the same as those that would be used by a detective<sup>33</sup> to establish whether J. Bloggs is guilty or innocent (whether the artwork is authentic or fake); and to this extent there is nothing as yet peculiar to art-historical discourse about the construction of authorship: the techniques are part of a general science of forensics. But attribution in art history involves further operations that lead away from science and technology into subtler, and more ideologically motivated, considerations concerning quality and stylistic standardization. Before, the 'author' referred to a physical agent in the world, but now it refers to

the putative creative subject. In the drastic changeover from scientific procedures built on measurement and experimental knowledge to the highly subjective and volatile appraisals of quality and stylistic uniformity, one already sees how multifarious are the principles that 'authorship' brings into play. Not only are the principles diverse, which would make 'authorship' an aggregated or multilayered concept, but they are also contradictory—though the essentially unificatory drive of the concept of authorship as a whole will work to mask this, and to conceal the joins between conflicting elements from view.

If a certain measure of arbitrariness is already evident in the principles of quality and of stylistic standardization, a further and quite different range of the arbitrary is found in the procedures for 'setting limits' to what counts within authorship. J. Bloggs, under the forensic principle, is the origin of all the physical traces that point to Bloggs's presence in the world, every one of them, however minute; forensics can consider all possible evidence, even the most unpromising. But 'authorship' is an exclusionary concept. On one side, it works to circumscribe the artistic corpus, and on the other it works to circumscribe the archive. If the author were the physical agent J. Bloggs, we should have to count among Bloggs's authorized works every doodle, every jotted diagram, that Bloggs left in the world. Similarly, in defining the archive for Bloggs, we would have to admit into it the traces of every circumstance that Bloggs encountered in his life. As a concept, 'authorship' turns out after all to entail the same regressions and *mises-en-abyme* involved in 'context.' And as it operates in practice, 'authorship' manages these receding vistas through many variations on the theme of nonadmission.

Excluded from 'authorship' are whole genres, and the decisions regarding such genres are historically variable to a degree. In our own time, graphic art occupies a mysteriously fluctuating zone between authorship (many graphics in magazines bear signatures) and anonymity (many others do not). Photography is similarly divided, with sometimes an expectation of authorship (for example, when photographs appear in museums, where authorship operations are essential), and sometimes not (many photographs in daily newspapers). Among the forces that patrol these borders are those deriving from the economic matrix, since 'authorship' in the modern sense has historically developed *pari passu* with the institution of property. Here the concept becomes a legal and monetary operation, closely bound up with the history of copyright law. And the forces must also include the protocols of writing and the rules governing what is to count as a correct mode of narration. For instance, a catalogue raisonné would be breaking those rules if it wandered into the realm of an author's doodles and napkin sketches, just as a biography of the author would be breaking them if it widened the aperture of relevance to the proportions of a *Tristram*



*Shandy*. That such deviant narratives are rarely encountered is proof of the efficiency of the 'authorship' operation, which is designed to prevent such aberrations. By a rule of correct narration or 'emplotment,' only those aspects of an author's innumerable wanderings through the world that may be harmonized with the corpus of works will count as relevant, and only a certain number of an author's traces will count as elements of the authorized corpus. The exclusionary moves are mutually supportive, and 'correct' narration will set up further conventions, which vary from period to period, from Vasari to the present,<sup>34</sup> concerning exactly how much latitude may be permitted in describing the perimeters.

Authorship, then, is no more a natural ground of explanation than is context. To paraphrase Jonathan Culler, authorship is not given but produced; what counts as authorship is determined by interpretive strategies;<sup>35</sup> and in the disparities among the plural forces that determine authorship are seen lines of fissure that put in question the very unity that the concept seeks, contradictions that the concept must (and does) work hard to overcome. Consider the following:

- (A) property                      (B) physical agency  
'author'                      (C) creative subject  
(D) narration

Interdependent, these are various pressures that take different forms in different sites: in museums and auction houses, for example, (A) and (B) assume more centrality, and are subject to more exacting differentiation, than in departments of art history, where (C) and (D) may be more pressing than questions of monetary value or of forensics. In art history, modes of narration are of capital importance. And according to the view of many writers, from Barthes to Preziosi, the whole purpose of art-historical narration is to merge the authorized corpus and its producer into a single entity, the totalized narrative of the-man-and-his-work, in which the rhetorical figure *author=corpus* governs the narration down to its finest details.

What these writers find unacceptable is that such narratives are saturated with a romantic mythology of the full creative subject. Barthes writes: 'The author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*... We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.'<sup>36</sup> Preziosi writes:

The disciplinary apparatus works to validate a metaphysical recuperation of Being and a unity of intention or Voice. At base, this is a theophanic regime,

manufactured in the same workshops that once crafted paradigms of the world as Artifact of a divine Artificer, all of whose Works reveal ... a set of traces oriented upon a(n immaterial) center. In an equivalent fashion, all the works of the artist canonized in this regime reveal traces of (that is, are signifiers with respect to) a homogeneous Selfhood that are proper(ly) to him.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of 'author' brings together a series of related unities that, though assumed as given, are precisely the products and goals of its discursive operations. First is the unity of the Work. Second is the unity of the Life. Third, out of the myriad of accidents and contingent circumstances, and the plurality of roles and subject positions that an individual occupies, the discourse of authorship constructs a coherent and unitary Subject. Fourth is the doubly reinforced unity that comes from the superimposition of Work upon Life upon Subject in the narrative genre of the life-and-work; for in that genre, everything the Subject experiences or makes will be found to signify his or her subjecthood. The mythology of this Subject is not only theophanic, it is also—as Griselda Pollock and others have shown—sexist: In a male-dominated art history 'Women were not historically significant artists ... because they did not have the innate nugget of genius (the phallus) which is the natural property of men.'<sup>38</sup>

There can be little doubt that the discursive operations of authorship have been appropriated by ideologies with a heavy investment in the kind of Subject described here. In art history, and particularly through the formula of the monograph, the narrative genre of the man-and-his-work has exercised a hold over writing that is perhaps unparalleled in the humanities. To the extent that this has been the case, the author-function has enjoyed a hegemonic influence within the discipline, naturalizing a whole series of ideological constructs (among them, genius, genius as masculine, the subject as unitary, masculinity as unitary, the artwork as expressive, the authentic work as most valuable). But however much one may recognize the forcefulness of the critique of the author/Subject, it may now be just as critical to realize the strategic limitations operating upon it. [...]