

Alexander Nagel / Christopher S. Wood: *Anachronic Renaissance*

In recent years, revisions of Hans Belting's groundbreaking *Bild und Kult* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990), arguably the most influential book published in the fields of medieval and byzantine art history in the last fifty years, led to two divergent paths. On the one hand, countless studies demonstrated that even in the "era of art" since the fifteenth century, the "image" with its claims of "magical" presence survived. On the other hand, medievalists revealed the enormous amount of self-reflexivity in pre-Renaissance art. Both lines of research, however, did not seriously challenge Belting's conceptual dualism. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood try to overcome this dilemma in order to establish a Renaissance concept of art beyond the opposition of "art" versus "cult." Instead of Belting's dualism, where the older model of cultic (or magic) presence is succeeded by the idea of art as self-aware representation (or illusion), Nagel and Wood favor a dialectic aesthetics, in which the tension between the two concepts is reflected (and suspended) by the work of art itself. They limit their investigation largely to relatively well-known objects of high art (painting, architecture, sculpture, and, to some extent, also prints), probably because these promise a much higher degree of self-reflexivity than the current favorites of the new art-historical canon (scientific illustrations, diagrams, reliquaries, votive images, *pittura famanti*, etc.).

According to Nagel and Wood, each work of art is marked by a historical index that links it to the past. This past can be conceived as a linear, though punctuated, sequence of unique events, or as a series of actualizations that negate the succession of time and aim at identity instead of difference. In the first case - the model of mainstream art history, characterized by Nagel and Wood as historicist and materialist - works of art are part of a perspectival, linear concept of history in which each new work locates itself in contrast to previous artifacts. The attitude of artistic production is authorial and refers back to the artist as creator. Nagel and Wood call this attitude "performative." In the second case, each work is part of an invisible continuity of manifestations of an absent original, "substituting" completely previous realizations of this original. It is not difficult to recognize Belting's opposition of "art" versus "cult" behind these concepts. However, the main argument of Nagel and Wood undermines the mutual exclusiveness of the terms along with Belting's teleological narrative. In its complicated self-referentiality, Renaissance art stages and suspends the tension between the two models of art making. (A striking contemporary example of this dialectics, not mentioned by the authors, would be the *Fabiola* installation by Francis Alÿs, with its countless replications of the saint's profile image, juxtaposing the absent original's "substitution" with the "performative" act of the artist as creator and exhibitor of these images.)

Anachronic Renaissance develops its main argument (which harks back to Aby Warburg's and Walter Benjamin's dialectics of the image, and Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of "anachronisme") through a series of case studies - from Jan van Eyck, Botticelli, Carpaccio, and Raphael, to Holy Sepulchres and the Casa Santa of Loreto, neo-cosmatesque pavements, and Bramante - and includes chapters on medals, portrait busts, spolia, and the echo of the Titulus Crucis relic of Santa Croce in contemporary painting and sculpture. Nagel and Wood succeed admirably in ignoring the academic frontier between Northern and Southern Renaissance, although the main focus of their study is the South, a reflection of the more developed art discourse of early modern Italy. The argument of the book, written in an elegant, forceful, sometimes almost breathless style, never gets trapped in the thicket of details. Equally praiseworthy is the inclusion of architecture, painting, printmaking, and sculpture - though painting features as the preferred medium of the self-referential tension between the substitutional and the performative model. Last but not least, the full command over German, Italian, and French literature, all very much up to date, makes this book a rare exception among current U.S. publications in art history.

The questions raised by *Anachronic Renaissance* concern the clarity of its dialectics and the selection of its examples. The "performative" pole provides, quite naturally, no serious problems. This concept includes at its foundation the intention to "register the circumstances of its [here: painting's] own fabrication" (340) and the notion of "style" (historic, regional, personal). "Performance" refers to the "imagination" of the maker, emphasizes materiality or "mediality" (27), and is *grosso modo* self-sufficient. "Substitution" is much more difficult to understand. The authors do not discuss its obvious relationship to Freud's psychoanalytic category, with its paradigm of the fetish. Instead, the notion embraces a wide range of meaning, from "talismanic or magical efficacy" (363) to convention and the "transmission of ancient principles" (146). Substitution reveals "a hidden sameness" (151) of artifacts, and the "smooth unpunctuated flow of content from one artifact to the next" (340). It includes forms, patterns, the "overall style" (151) of older works, similar materials or dimensions; sometimes quite simply the name or label suffices. Substitution transforms an object into a token for the distant and ersatz for the absent at the same time. It is threatened by imitative accuracy that pretends to replicate another work exactly, leading to the rise of the notion of forgery (one of the most fascinating sections of the book; see also Christopher Wood's recent *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Therefore, substitution requires a basic "imprecision" of form (169). Another competing and ultimately opposing concept is the relic (the authors do not discuss contact relics), which quite surprisingly prefigures the paradigm of performative art: it is one of a kind, not replicable, and linked to a fixed moment in historical time (the death of the saint).

In their definitions of substitution, Nagel and Wood sometimes seem to be infected by the "substitutional confusion" (141) that characterizes the concept of anachronic time in general. This includes not only the uncontrollable irruption of the past in the present, or the collapse of time, but also substitution's main paradox, the identity of the different. In these passages, the typical "double thought" (31) of the substitutional model (something is "new" and "old" at the same time) seems to infiltrate the book. At times, arguments include their dialectic opposite, and the contours of "substitution" seem to dissolve in the *sfumato* of a much larger concept, the non-contingent. To be sure, it is a fascinating thesis that classical forms and naturalistic accuracy provided a substitutional balance to the contingency of individual artistic production. However, it remains to be seen whether this idea will succeed in turning understandings of Renaissance classicism and naturalism upside down. If it were true, a contemporary viewer would have been required to conflate the geometrical accuracy of linear perspective in painting, for instance, with the continuous retouching and supplementing of an icon. With this very broad definition, "substitution" runs the risk of ending up as a synonym for the normative or for mere conventions that balance and restrict performative contingency. In many cases, the traditional concept of participation (in its strong, Platonic meaning as *methexis*) would arguably describe the relationship between paradigm (original, norm) and the work of art much better than "substitution."

Some of Nagel and Wood's examples brilliantly corroborate their main argument of a self-reflexive juxtaposition of the substitutional and performative mode in Renaissance art. So for instance Benedetto da Maiano's epitaph of Giotto producing a mosaic icon of Christ in Florence Cathedral; Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Man* (1474/75) in Washington (provided that the insertion of Bartolommeo Bulgarini's [?] fragment of a saint is not a nineteenth-century substitution for a roundel with a female lover); or the transformations of the Titulus Crucis, "discovered" in 1492, in contemporary paintings and sculptures. Other examples are less convincing. Take, for instance, Carpaccio's *Vision of Saint Augustine* (ca. 1502) in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice; in this case, the furnishings of the studiolo seem to allude much more to the myth of Venice than to reflections upon historical substitution. More problematically, non-religious art remains to a large extent excluded from discussion, almost a mirror of Belting's silence about narrative and profane art of the Middle Ages. Religious art, however, has by definition a different relationship to history than secular art. Can we say that in both cases the "debt to the past" is of "basic existential concern" (359) for the artist? How

would one define the substitutionality of, say, Leonardo's *Portrait of a Musician* (ca. 1485) in the Ambrosiana, or of Buontalenti's *Grotta Grande* (1583-93) in the Boboli Gardens? Where is the "sameness" with a past original (or an a-temporal norm) that both works would self-reflectively juxtapose to artistic performance?

One problem of this ambitious book has to do with its claim to reconstruct a forgotten image theory - "towards a lost chronotopology of art making" (34) - mainly through a close reading of the artifact's iconography, and in contrast to the obsession with written sources of "historicist" art history. While religious artifacts function tacitly as a paradigm for all art, Nagel and Wood are unwilling to differentiate among contemporary audiences. But the self-reflective staging of a dialectic tension between presence and representation - presumably the conceptual core of Renaissance art - would have been largely left unnoticed by contemporary viewers of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. "Sameness" with a substituted original is not discussed, not even as a meta-artistic category, by, for instance, Alberti, Ghiberti, Cristoforo Landino, Leonardo, Gaurico, Erasmus, or Dürer. Vasari, the secret *bête noire* of Nagel's and Wood's argument, remains backstage. At one point, he briefly enters the scene as a split personality, who, on the one hand, canonized the single line of performative, or modern art, and, on the other hand, represents "substitution" because of his belief in transhistorical norms. It would have been more revealing to learn from authors of the sixteenth century, especially from partisans of the Counter-Reformation, about the problems of artistic innovation (*imaginatio*, *inventio*). However, the book stops programmatically around 1510 - again, as in Belting's *Bild und Kult*, with Raphael as the mature exponent of the coming age of self-referentiality.

Anachronic Renaissance is a book so rich, challenging, and stimulating that every critique runs the risk of appearing as nitpicking. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that not only differences of audience but also of place remain underexposed in this study. Cities like Venice and Rome, with their specific relationship to historic continuity, are never distinguished from places like Florence or Rimini. Also, Nagel and Wood are not interested in the social motors of the historic dynamics they describe. At times, the rise of the new model of art seems to be triggered alone by the invention of the printing press (multiplication of identical images) and by the faster pace of fashion after 1400 (urging authorities to update altarpieces, for instance, in order to avoid the disturbing effects of anachronism). Still, Belting's practice to interpret art-historical developments as resulting from a legitimacy crisis of the artifact plays out brilliantly in some passages of the book. In chapter 8, for instance, Nagel and Wood discuss the transitions from maintenance to the updating and, eventually, mere conservation of "old-fashioned" altarpieces between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries in Tuscany - in short, from substitution to "relic."

In the end, it remains questionable whether the historic trajectory of Renaissance art mainly lead to a meta-pictorial project. Does "figuring substitution" (71) mark the core of the early modern concept of art? Were viewers mainly requested to grasp the refractions of "substitution" in the authorial attitudes of "performance"? In other words, are Renaissance works of art essentially "self-aware images" (Victor Stoichita) circling around the problem of historicity in art? Nagel and Wood insist, with good reason, on dialectic tension, which might be one reason why they do not discuss Alfred Gell's anthropological model. Agency, however, would allow for a description of the panorama of early modern art as a competitive field, in which the indexicality of the paradigm (the represented person, the deity) is challenged by the index of artistic virtuosity. In both cases, "sympathetic" identity is at stake. But the appropriation, or transformation, of the paradigm by an authorial artist could also be interpreted, following Hans-Georg Gadamer (another important absentee), as an "increase in being," as another form of "substitution," but with dynamic, expansive connotations. In this perspective, one problem, mentioned by the authors, could be mitigated: the fact that "substitution" is at odds with the linearity of Christian salvation history. "Substitution" could then include the appropriation and transformation of a paradigm by artistic "performance"; in doing so, the juxtaposition of the dialectic antagonists would dissolve.

Is anything beyond "substitution" merely "performance"? Arguably, the major blind spot of *Anachronic Renaissance* is the absence of rhetoric as a paradigm for the Renaissance theory of art (strange for such an eloquent book!). As is well known, it was Michael Baxandall, who, in *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) some four decades ago, set the course for the revaluation of the impact of ancient rhetoric in the Renaissance. Countless contemporary sources corroborate the overwhelming importance of the category of *enargeia/evidentia* for the early modern discourse on art. *Evidentia* is about the overcoming of "mediality" through the manipulation of the audience; its goal is enlivenment (of the absent, the fiction, the past). *Evidentia* does not pretend to "substitute" an absent, paradigmatic artifact; its main goal is to put the paradigm as forcefully *ante oculos* as reality itself. Art, qua *evidentia*, is capable of transgressing its performative aspects. This is quite the opposite of art as a recursive system thematizing the mechanism of substitution, and of art as a second-degree reflection upon time, in Nagel and Wood's words, "a hesitation about hesitation" (18). Renaissance art is more than the mis-en-abyme of historical substitution. It is based on a theory of perception that appropriated key notions of the theological discourse, namely the certainty and instantaneity of sight. Without a thorough discussion of both rhetorical background and contemporary psychology (theories of perception and imagination), the "infrastructure of many possible stories" (19) of Renaissance art remains a fragment.

In its intellectual ambitions comparable to recent publications by Klaus Krüger (*Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren: Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich: Fink, 2001) and David Summers (*Vision, Reflection, and Desire in Western Painting*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), *Anachronic Renaissance* seeks to reconceptualize nothing less than the idea of Renaissance art, north and south of the Alps. It is a fascinating, learned, and honest invitation to discussion, a must not only for Renaissance scholars.

Anmerkung der Redaktion:

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