

A Trans-Atlantic Migration

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Yve-Alain Bois, *An Oblique Autobiography*.
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WITH THE PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM in the 1950s and then the rise of minimalism, Pop Art and the other innovative developments of the 1960s, it became obvious that the center of the contemporary art world had shifted from Paris to New York. American art had triumphed. As many commentators observed, this was a new, entirely unexpected development. Pablo Picasso continued to paint, and there were still a number of ambitious artists working in France—Simon Hantaï and Pierre Soulages, to name two. But it was simply no longer the case that the center of the art world was in Paris, as had been true in the early twentieth century.

The question then became how to theorize this novel American-centric art. The academic discussion of contemporary art was a new development, and so it wasn't obvious what models were suitable. The most famous American critic, Clement Greenberg, provided an immensely suggestive account of Abstract Expressionism, but his taste in more recent work was unreliable. And certainly his laconic commentaries did not provide a real model for academic art history. The two most influential academic theorists, Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, after beginning their careers as followers of Greenberg, soon rebelled against him and moved in their own directions. While Fried focused much of his attention on historical issues, Krauss engaged in highly original academic study of both modernism and contemporary art. In this process, the importation of French theorizing played an essential role. Soon enough, references to the writings of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault became almost mandatory in American art

writing, at least in discussions of twentieth-century art. And the journal *October*, co-founded by Krauss, where Bois is a longtime editor, became highly influential. In short, although art made in France was no longer especially important, French theory dominated our art world.

In this process of trans-Atlantic migration, Yve-Alain Bois played an essential role. “The French art world was completely oblivious to what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic — American art was almost entirely absent from the walls of galleries and museums.” Frustrated by the weak, conservative French art history establishment, and by the Parisian museums’ failure to collect the best American or French modernism, Bois found in this country a hospitable home for his activity as a scholar and curator, beginning with an invitation from Fried to teach at Johns Hopkins. “Going back to France . . . I wanted to know why Paris, the birthplace of so many of this century’s important works of art, had no museum that could compare with either MoMA or the Guggenheim.” This collection of his reviews and personal reminiscences tells his personal story, but it doesn’t explain why France didn’t have a great museum of modern art. We learn about his research on Piet Mondrian, Lygia Clark, and Ellsworth Kelly. And we get memoirs of Robert Klein, Jean Clay, Derrida and (of course) Krauss. As Bois observes, he himself had no formal training in art history. But thanks to his grounding in French theorizing, he became a formidable, justly influential scholar in America.

The format of *An Oblique Autobiography* doesn’t really encourage the development of a sustained historical analysis. Bois doesn’t offer a developed explanation of why, for example, the French museums were so belated in collecting Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso or Piet Mondrian. Nor does it tell why the concerns of the Parisian post-structuralists, who enchanted so many Americans, did not also transform French art history writing. Long ago, I confess, I tried to read the French-journal *Macula*, which Bois founded in 1980. And I studied, in English, the survey histories of modernism by Clay as well as Klein’s collected essays. But, I must admit, it was only when I reviewed Krauss’s *Passages in Modern Sculpture* and, then, rather belatedly, discussed Foucault’s famous account of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1973) in my “Painting and Its Spectators,” that I became aware of the importance of this French tradition of theory.¹ When I did understand this, what always seemed difficult was employing the French theorists as sources for discussion of art writing, when neither Barthes nor Derrida or Foucault had a very central concern with, or indeed much knowledge of, visual art.

¹ See *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36:4 (1978), pp. 510-12, and 45:1 (1986), pp. 5-17.

Bois notes briefly several ideas that deserve further discussion. Abstract art, he says, is “*living in a different historical time* from the art that traditional art history has chosen as its domain of choice — i.e., that of the Renaissance up to the break created by Cubism.” Here he takes issue with Greenberg. But unfortunately, he doesn’t develop this claim. And, taking issue with the scholars who claim that art history originates in the eighteenth-century with Johann Joachim Winckelmann or in the sixteenth century with Giorgio Vasari, he claims that the first art historian proper was . . . Alois Riegl, in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps here he links the birth of both modernism and art history to larger cultural changes, as chronicled by Foucault.

Bois and his colleagues at *October* changed, for a few decades, the way that art historians dealing with modernism in America worked. And they had a real effect on the practice of art criticism. But in the past few years, the concerns of our art world have changed again, in dramatic and unexpected ways. In the same way, as Roger Fry was scarcely relevant in 1950, it would be difficult today to argue for *Art Since 1900*, in which Bois plays a major role, as a relevant class textbook today. After long ignoring African-American artists, not to mention Asian, African, and Australian artists, American art historians are starting to pay serious attention to them. And American museums are displaying a great deal of contemporary from outside the United States and Western Europe. Our art world now looks at works from everywhere, in ways that make the concerns of *October* appear parochial. The revisionist critique of Greenberg by Bois certainly changed the way we understood Surrealism and late modernist French art American painting and sculpture. But in the end the contemporary art world has moved. This beautiful book reads as the story of how the author became history. ㊦