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Review

Anachronic Renaissance by Alexander Nagel and
Christopher Wood

Keith Moxey

Abstract

A review of Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood's book *Anachronic Renaissance*, published in 2010 by Zone Books.

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Review

Anachronic Renaissance by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood

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Anachronic Renaissance registers new thinking about art history's conceptions of both the idea of "art" as well as its notions of "history." Nagel and Wood follow the lead, if not the path, proposed by art historians such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Mieke Bal, among others, who have celebrated the idea of "anachronism" in their writings to suggest that the privileged artifacts we identify with the term "art" possess the capacity to escape the temporal circumstances of their creation in order to create meaning in very different moments and

places — they belong, in other words, as much to the present as to the past.¹ Whereas Didi-Huberman and Bal argue that it is our phenomenological response to images that is responsible for their capacity to move us, Nagel and Wood adopt a historical approach that offers us an anthropology, rather than a philosophy, of the image. While acknowledging the continuing nature of the response provoked by artifacts and works of art, a study of the nature of that response in the present is not part of their project. In a strategy that will be of interest to anyone concerned with the study of "contemporaneity," — the ongoing debate about the nature of the moment which we presently occupy and the way it affects our attitudes to history² — they locate themselves in time by eliding the question of their own position within it.

Their principal accomplishment, a theoretical model that proves an extraordinarily flexible and subtle tool for art historical interpretation, lies in the imaginative elaboration of the concepts "substitutional" and "performative," derived ultimately from Hans Belting's magisterial book, *Likeness and Presence*.³ If Belting frames an account of the history of European art in terms of cult images (whose power lies in their capacity to make present the divine), that are replaced in the course of time by works of "art" (whose fascination derives from their indexical relationship to the exceptional personal gifts of their creators), Nagel and Wood articulate the mechanisms by means of which these transactions are enacted and analyze the development from one model to another.

For Nagel and Wood, the binary opposition of the concepts substitution and performance draws attention to art's capacity to both escape and belong to time. Where the principle of substitution allowed the time of an image to become inconsequential, its value bearing no relation to its temporal location, performance, with its insistence on the importance of authorial agency, only makes sense within a chronological structure. An

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane-Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005; 1st ed. Paris, 1990); "History and the Image. Has the Epistemological Transformation taken Place?" in *The Art Historian: National Traditions and Institutional Practices*, ed. Michael Zimmermann (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2003), pp. 128-143, and Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

² See Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1-19; and *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

advantage of their scheme is that, while adopting Belting's development thesis, namely that one system gives way to the other, they argue that the two approaches to artistic production often overlap and co-exist. This theoretical structure is particularly appropriate to the historical moment, the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, that is the focus of their book. It allows the authors to address both canonical and non-canonical works produced during this period with equal efficacy since their concepts cover both what we might now describe as artifacts as well as works of art. Numerous short chapters illuminate the histories of painting, mosaic, sculpture, architecture, as well as manuscript illuminations, flooring patterns, woodcuts, and fashion.

"What is Substitution?" (chapter 3) — illustrates what they mean by this term: "To perceive an artifact in substitutional terms was to understand it as belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously. The artifact was connected to its unknowable point of origin by an unreconstructible chain of replicas (30)". Using Carpaccio's *St. Augustine in His Study* as their example, a work that represents the saint's mystical experience of the distant death of St. Jerome, they note the presence of elements in the work that could not possibly belong to the time of the event depicted. The artist paints a Renaissance statuette of a nude Venus and a fifteenth-century Venetian sculpture thought to reflect an ancient author's account of Christ's appearance in the saint's study. These images could not have been part of St. Augustine's possessions, yet they are included because of their "substitutional" value, their power to suggest the numinous presence of the divine in a scene of mystical import. Their inclusion, however, also permits Carpaccio to call attention to the status of his work as "performance," to his unique artistic qualities. The work both conflates time, refusing to honor the distance separating its production from that of the artifacts it includes, while marking it with the creative imagination of a particular author.

Some of the most valuable chapters analyze the role of the introduction of Byzantine icons to Western Europe at the end of the middle ages. Often described in terms of the nebulous idea of "influence," Nagel and Wood find a richer and more satisfying way of articulating the fascination held by icons for a late medieval Italian audience. Italian artists regarded the Byzantine style of the icons as a mark of their antiquity even though they were actually roughly contemporaneous. Their alleged age was revered not so much as part of a "revival of antiquity," as for the fact that they were closer to the models on which the substitutional chain of cult images was based. They bore the aura of miraculous images, the images made through divine intervention ("images made without hands"), or those painted by St Luke, held to be the holiest in Christendom. The restoration record of such icons is used to illustrate apparently contradictory motives. On the one hand, icons were restored because their old-fashioned appearance interfered with their substitutional power, their potential to effectively transmit the divine; on the other, they were more frequently left unaltered because modernization might affect, dissipate, or otherwise interfere with their potency. In other words, a tension was perceived between their role as active agents in the transmission of numinous experience and their status as relics. The power ascribed them was thus capable of taking different forms and being handled variously. Nagel and Wood argue that while restoration of icons is to be associated with their substitutional value, their treatment as relics coincides with the rising awareness of the chronological "anchoring" of artistic creation. The increasing importance ascribed the authorial function of the artist promoted a desire to affirm a prestigious historical distance.

Some of the most creative applications of the "substitution/performance" opposition are found in Nagel and Wood's treatment of architecture. The various recreations of the Constantinian monuments at the Holy Sepulchre that occur in Western medieval architecture have long been recognized and usually understood in terms of the concept "iconography," with the citations these buildings represent interpreted as meaning-making devices. Nagel and Wood persuasively argue that far from being mere quotations, these reconstructions are to be understood as re-creations of holy structures that possess all the mystical power attributed the originals. Such edifices participated in the transmission of Christian truth by

re-instantiating the locations associated with Christ's death and resurrection. The power ascribed to reiterated buildings is also illustrated by the history of the Holy House of Loreto. The house in which the Virgin lived in Nazareth, and the place in which she received the Annunciation, was alleged to have flown from the holy land, alighting first in Croatia and then in Loreto on the Adriatic coast of Italy. This legend is not recorded until the fifteenth century, and the cult reached its apogee after Pope Paul II built a basilica over it in 1469 and Julius II had it sheathed in marble by Bramante, Sansovino, and Sangallo between 1507 and 1538. The fifteenth century, the historical moment when the substitutional and the performative models may be said to intersect, saw an outburst of spiritual visibility. Did the intensity of clashing systems of time, one which claimed that cult images overcame and consumed time, and the other that chronology mattered and historical distance was to be recognized if the artistic imagination of the individual artist was to be appreciated, produce a heightened sense of the power of the image/work of art?

The book also addresses a vast array of issues of interest to Renaissance scholars that are frankly too numerous to be mentioned here. For example, the birth of the "copy," the move from a replica that possesses the qualities of a sacred image and thus functions as a substitute in a process of transmission, to a replica that duplicates the qualities of what is recognized as belonging to a different moment in time, and is thus considered a forgery of another's hand. In a system of substitution the copy operates to demonstrate as well as to enact the power of the original (which may or may not be fictive). The notion of authorship, however, breaks this chain and one image cannot operate in the same way as another. Forgery makes an appearance when the filter placed on artistic creation by the individual personality must be taken into consideration: "What is an art forgery if not a substitution cruelly unmasked as a mere performance? (50)"

The book closes with an account of the triumph of painting as the medium of the age of "art." Raphael's paintings in the Stanza della Segnatura "tear the substitutional web and create instant fictions, vast semicircular lunettes opening out onto alternative worlds at once credible and incredible (351)." Painting is now understood as text and artistic creation becomes an exercise in intertextuality: "Citation secures the presence of the past in the present by an authorial decision, rather than by direct work-to-work transmission (357)." This analysis of the animating principles of late medieval and Renaissance is both persuasive and compelling. In contrasting the substitutional with the performative so dramatically, however, the authors unwittingly play into the hands of a historiographic tradition that has impoverished our model of "art" by reductively emphasizing its dependence on language. The privileged objects of the post-Renaissance age of "art" carry a poetry and a presence that seems rather to exploit the long shadow of the substitutional past in a way that eludes definition in terms of a textual metaphor.

Nagel and Wood offer the reader a series of often brilliant interpretations of the art of the Renaissance based upon a profound understanding of the theological and artistic assumptions that underlie its visual culture. In doing so they enrich our appreciation of well-known monuments and afford future generations of scholars valuable theoretical instruments with which to approach the past.



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