



Art History after Modernism

By Hans Belting

The University of Chicago Press, 2003

US\$19 soft cover, 200 pages

Translated by Caroline Saltzswedel, Mitch Cohen
& Kenneth Northcott

Book review by Adam Welch, artist, writer.

The contemporary art history model differs from the classical model in that it can no longer be seen as an unbroken continuation. Despite the obvious connection to its historical origins, art history today is cognisant of the distance that lies between it and its past. Witness to this condition is the charged attitude that contemporary practitioners display toward those classical paradigms. Books have been written that address the attenuation of the concept of art history. Hans Belting, the Mary Jane Crowe Professor of Art History at Northwestern University, in his newest book *Art History after Modernism* (2003) is but one addressing this posthistorical era.

Belting composes a convincing narrative of the beginnings of art history, from Giorgio Vasari (1550) to more contemporary practitioners such as Heinrich Wölfflin “who contributed most to the promotion of art history as an independent field of research, in his *Principles of Art History* (1932).” Belting contends that the essence of art history is ‘style’, yet he neglects to consider media arts and contemporary post-art as having a style connected with the tradition of art. Belting sees the disparity between the works of today and those of the modernist tradition as an issue of a greater connection to history and style. He goes on to presume that works of the posthistorical era privilege a particular content over style, and thereby are expunged from its modernist discourse.

At the end of the day, Belting sees a conflict between the old art history and new practice. Newer technology offers a different experience for the viewer less concerned with style and history, privileging a political agenda. Even if Belting is right – that art history is a history of style – then there stands no reason media art cannot and should not reside within that discourse. At the hilt of this argument is an issue that was eloquently articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer: “I am not convinced by the objection that the performance of a musical work of art is interpretation in a different sense from, say, reaching understanding in reading a poem or looking at a painting. All performance is primarily interpretation and seeks, as such, to be correct. In the sense it, too, is ‘understanding’.”

Belting concocts an imaginative diagnosis of art history while illuminating the uncritically accepted identity problem inherent in it. In the concluding chapter, Belting addresses the ‘other’, though he contributes little new insight towards our understanding of it. However, his description of the contemporary art scene as largely fragmented and almost completely alien to cultures that are not Western, not to mention completely dominated and perverted by the Western concept of art, is a particularly astute observation. Belting’s explanation of the other and the complications of its introduction into the Western art world is instructive and serves as an excellent primer for those not versed in contemporary discourse.

Belting purports: “Today we can travel the world at lightning speed and summon distant lands into our homes at the push of a button. But does that mean that we understand the world any better?” Fifty years earlier Heidegger articulated the same concern, “all distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information... yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance.” Belting’s explanation is limited to cultural understanding within the context of arts’ universalism or lack thereof. He attempts to bridge the issue between the “centre and the periphery, so much discussed today, has hardly changed since then despite all our experience of colonialism and postcolonialism.”

Media art inundates the viewer with a plethora of images and a new vocabulary to articulate the artist’s intentions. In Physics, String Theorists discovered we live in a multidimensional universe. This has yet to affect how we negotiate the world, only how theorists contemplate those dimensions within the realm of scientific possibility. The same holds true of art. As artists discover new ways to realise visually abstract ideas, we do not forget the experience tradition has taught us. Rather, we continue to negotiate who we have become within the new experiences of that tradition. Belting documents the need for a new art history – an art posthistory – though he forgoes the pains of establishing that paradigm. His posthistorical history continues in the discourse of art history in the manner in which he learnt, that is, out of the classical model, which seems the most appropriate method – until the next one.