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Buchloh's History

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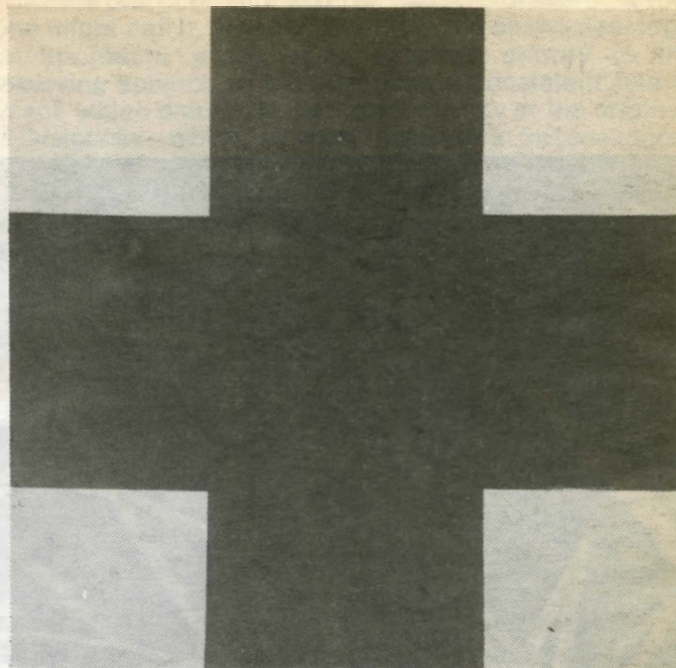
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BUCHLOH'S HISTORY

BY
ANDY
PATTON



Kasimir Malevich; Black Cross; 1915.



Kasimir Malevich; Self-Portrait; 1933.

Benjamin Buchloh's essay "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" has become central to many of the discussions and polemics concerned with the new European painting, its market surge, and current representational painting in general. In re-reading it recently, I was troubled by the manner in which it represents history. What follows are simply some notes in which I have tried to draw out the implications of that history and to point out a few contradictions in the text itself. I have used the version contained in the excellent *Modernism and Modernity*, which is a compilation of papers given at the 1981 Vancouver Conference on Modernism; a longer version was published in October 16. I have tried to lift Buchloh's representation of history out of the text as a whole, to examine it more or less autonomously. Thus these notes are, to some extent, disengaged from the specifics of the historical argument which his essay makes. But I do not think that how history—and especially art history—is represented can ever be abstract for working artists. Any monolithic representation of history will efface the actual practices and the actual commitments of many artists: it is one of the moments in which artists experience the critic as a power set over us, legislating history rather than recognizing it as complex, discontinuous, conflictual, disorganizing...

History as Teleology

A specific view of history forms the ground for Buchloh's judgements of a range of works and practices from both the period following the first World War and from our own. It is a view woven into the vocabulary of the essay. Thus we read and enter a history of "obsolete modes" and "obsolescence" (p. 107), "retrograde contemporary art" (p. 81), "materially, perceptually, and cognitively primitivist forms of signification" (p. 108) . . .

This vocabulary is already a history which can be distinguished in its salient aspects. The notion of "obsolescence" in art, for instance, can only mean that art develops technically, since it is only within the technical sphere that we can refer explicitly to modes of production which have entirely replaced earlier modes. Secondly, "a retrograde contemporary art"—an apparent contradiction in terms—constructs or displays a history which is linear, continuous, progressive. But further, it means that the end toward which history is moving must be clear, for only then can a retrograde work be distinguished against the certain direction of the larger progressive history. It would also entail an artwork which is unambiguous in its meaning and in its historical alignment, even at the moment of its first appearing, even to those who are also enmeshed in that same moment. The work cannot be subject to any process of on-going interpretation and re-interpretation, any conflict of voices which could radically reassess its political trajectory or de-stabilize its already understood meaning. Nothing can be unforeseen.

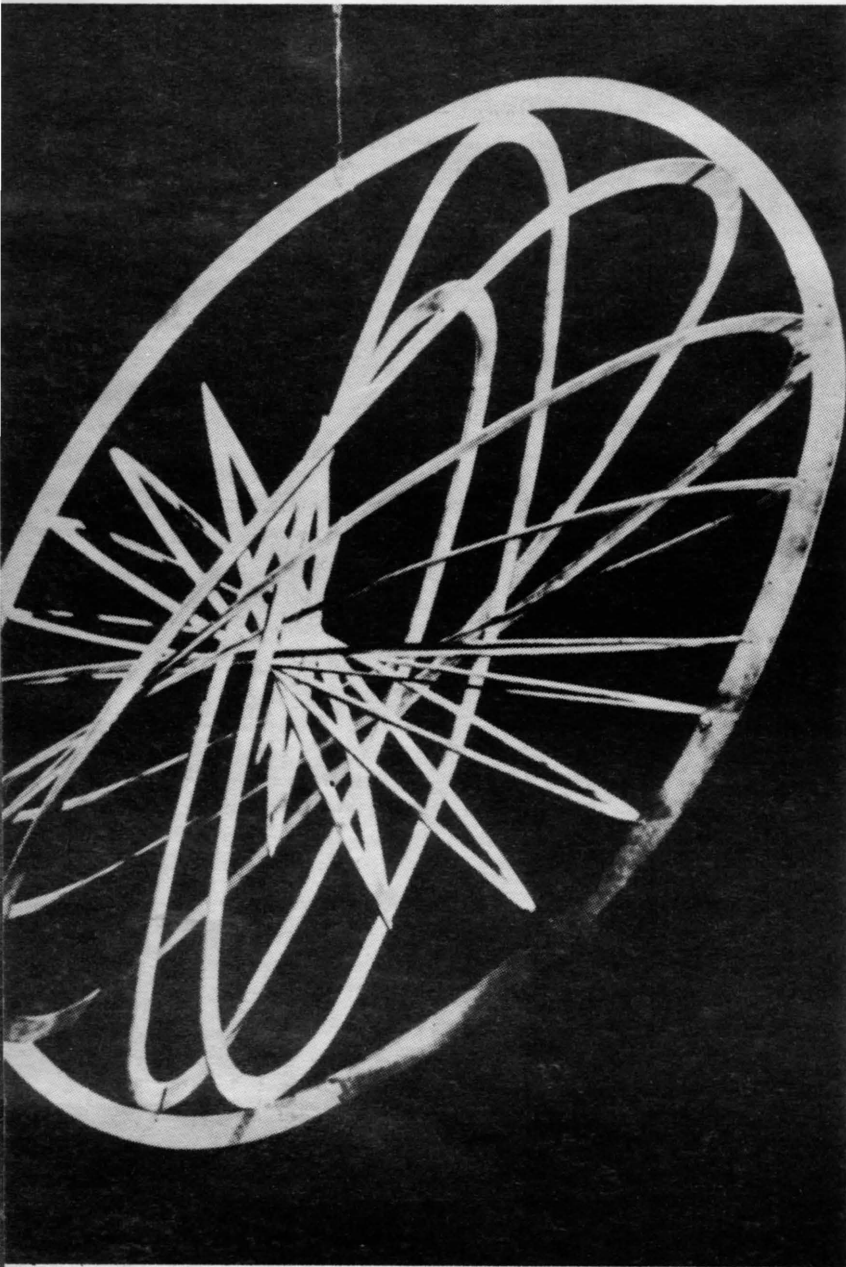
Buchloh's history is a one-way street in a technical domain. More radical or advanced practices, whether in painting (such as Malevich's *Black Square*) or outside it (such as the Readymade), render representational practices in painting obsolete by 1915. But any unilinear history which attempts to maintain itself as a simple continuity will run up against situations it cannot encapsulate, which seem to be anomalies threatening it from "outside". One such problem for Buchloh's history is that the obsolete practices did not disappear, were not replaced by the new modes. What can it mean to say that an obsolete mode continued?

Buchloh is in trouble here simply because his representation of history is univocal, technical, continuous, unilinear . . . Thus it cannot accommodate itself to what actually occurred which was that the *Black Square* and the Readymade did not replace the already existing modes and representational practices. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they added new practices to an already multilinear, discontinuous, conflictual situation and increased the level of tension. A history of "obsolescence" seems more of a wish-fulfillment than a useful history—a wish that certain modes of production and representational means which may be unfortunately durable could be surpassed even when the social structures which maintained them still endure.

This attempt to solve within the representation of history what remained unresolved in practice structures the text and its strategies from the first rhetorical question:

How is it that we are nearly forced to believe that the return to traditional modes of representation in painting around 1915, two years after the Readymade and the *Black Square*, was a shift of great historical or aesthetic import?

The question itself is written over a contradictory relationship of the author to history. If Buchloh is to remain allied to a history which can simply declare the obsolescence of certain modes, then obviously there is no need to concern either the reader or himself with the unimportant, beyond revealing that its asserted "importance" is false. But if the majority of the essay concerns itself with representation in painting as being, or leading to, authoritarianism, and with the relevance of that analysis for current practices, then in the most apparent way, the unimportant is being revealed as something necessary to address, and to address with the full rhetorical force with which the essay is written. If this "shift" is necessary to address and to analyze at length, then much of the rhetorical strategy, the vocabulary, and the manner in which history is represented will have to be discarded. The strategy of the essay is a contradictory rhetoric which proclaims the false importance of representation in painting, while all the same dealing with its continuing centrality within art at



Alexander Rodchenko; *Hanging Construction*; 1920.

times when the relation of the avant-garde to the society outside its perimeter can no longer be taken for granted.

The essay concludes with a paragraph where the voice of the author and the voice of history seem to coincide. The text finishes, history is closed off and the author speaks for history itself:

The aesthetic attraction of these eclectic painting practices originates in a nostalgia for that moment in the past when the painting modes to which they refer had historical authenticity. But the spectre of historical derivative-ness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production. This is not so much because they actually derive from particular precedents, but because their attempt to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness.

The author knows, clearly and definitively where the artists and architects subject to his attack will be placed. There can be no—or will be no—discussion or dissent as to their historical secondariness. And no possible future re-evaluation. Further, they are situated “immediately”—by some law of history rather than by the author’s assessment of their work. Such a history then must function autonomously, cut away from human agency—which is exactly contrary to the view of the subject that the essay initially constructs. Earlier in the text this passage occurs:

It is endemic to the syndrome of authoritarianism that it appeal to and affirm the “eternal” or ancient systems of order (the law of the tribe, the authority of history, the paternal principal of the master, etc.)

But it is exactly that authority of history to which, or with which, the voice of the text speaks at that point. If a text whose basic thrust is against the imposition of authoritarian structures of representation can fall prey to using those same structures itself, the whole attack against representation in painting both post-1915 and current must be more carefully weighed.

The Subject

Every history is tied to a specific construction of the subject, and a history as absolute, linear, and continuous as that in Buchloh’s essay will be mirrored by as absolute a subject.

A series of rhetorical questions establishes that subject as one equivalent to the omniscient narrator of the classical novel: fully conscious, moving history forward decisively:

But would it not be more appropriate to conceive of these radical shifts of the periods between the wars, with such decisive selections of production procedures, iconographic references, and perceptual conventions as calculated? Should we not assume that every artist making these decisions would be aware of their ramifications and consequences, of the sides they would be taking in the process of aesthetic identification and ideological representations?

As with every rhetorical question, the reader can only answer yes, affirming what the author has argued. The subject we must assent to is one who already knows, in a history which is already seen, what the ramifications and consequences of his or her procedures, references, and perceptual conventions will be. It is important to emphasize that “ramifications and consequences” create a future. But the subject can only be held responsible to the degree that Buchloh demands if the work’s future effects are known before the work—as a series of decisions—is made. In other words, we are not only responsible for our acts, but for their future effects. And those future effects are already clear to us before we choose to act. Lastly, the text is asserting that acts, decisions (and therefore consciousness) are the engines which drive history. That view of history, and of the subject, is exactly what Foucault and Braudel have criticized. They attempt to construct a different, discontinuous way of representing history and its subject. Foucault writes in *The Order*

of Things:

If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a consistent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity—which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.

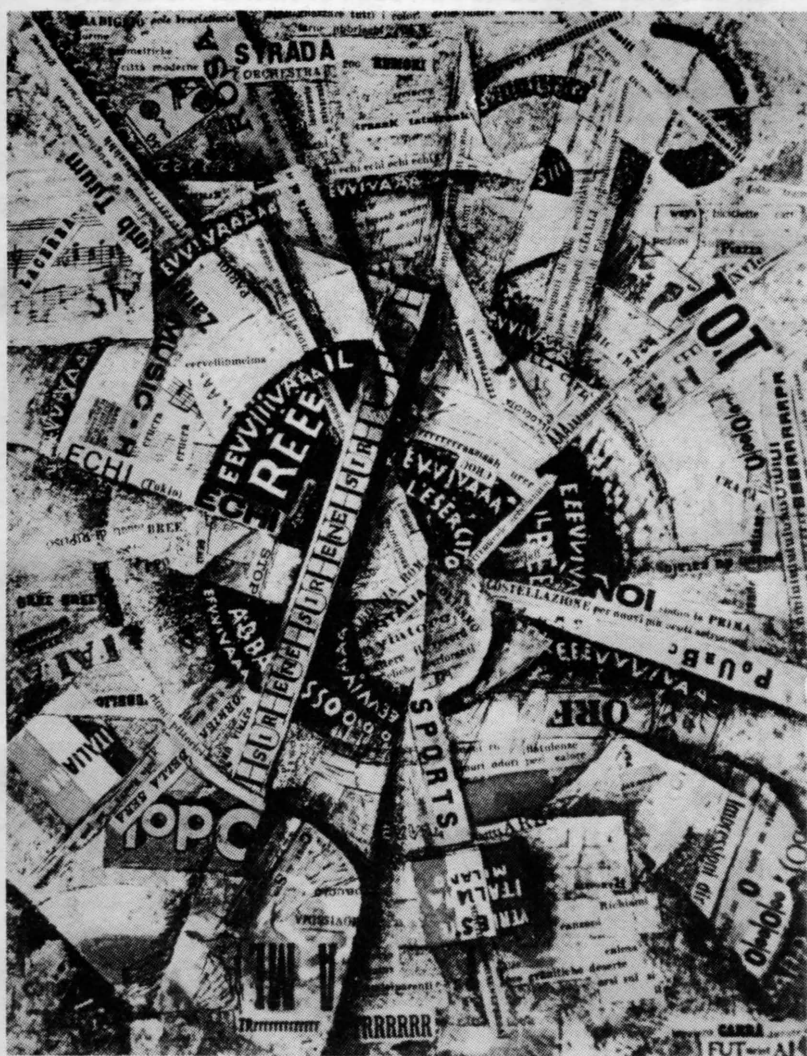
The subject displayed in Buchloh’s rhetorical questions is one who has priority, who is able to choose—to calculate—from among “the production procedures, iconographic references, and perceptual conventions . . . aware of their ramifications and consequences.” The subject has a full consciousness, and thus a control, over its choices among these methods and conventions as though it was “above” or “outside” them. A better writing of the subject in a situation of choosing among the many codes, methods, conventions etc. might be one which represented the subject as “inside” the conventions about which (s)he is trying to exercise some choice. Perhaps it would be to write a subject who *is* those codes, conventions, and methods; for whom those conventions, methods, codes are the means of perception. However, there should be caution here. This subject—the one who *is* a nodal point of various methods, codes, conventions—can become as absolute as Buchloh’s. Only this subject would deny *any* ability to choose, or any discontinuity in the subject or among the various methods and codes.

If we are to talk in a language of consciousness and responsibility, then it seems to me that Buchloh’s text goes too far in its construction of the subject as fully conscious and calculating amid its displayed choices and their future effects. Critical texts are all too prone to becoming devices for the projection of the illusion of full consciousness. Like anyone else, the critic is the product of a certain social and intra-psychic division of labour—which here makes a fetish of consciousness and projects it onto the artwork as the sole value and the sole purpose or experience of human life. If one wants neither to deny the subject as having any choice, nor any responsibility for choice—and at the same time wishes to avoid the illusion of full consciousness which directs Buchloh’s text—perhaps we should represent the subject as “inside” the multitude of conventions, methods, and codes which are never simply exterior to the subject but are in fact her or his means of perceiving both the world and the self. And we should write as well the discontinuities among the many codes which keep any one code, any one socialization, from an absolute hegemony within the subject, and which keep the subject and its acts from any completed unity or control.

Similarly, we could think of the subject at the point of choosing among the many conventions and methods available as already only partly responsible. And as the “ramifications and consequences” of their choices extends into the future, these would grow increasingly unforeseeable. Thus the subject is in fact an increasingly discontinuous series of effects, which are *never*, even at the moment of choosing, identical with the subject or the subject’s consciousness, and grow increasingly discontinuous and uncontrollable with distance and time.

As its construction of the subject shows, Buchloh’s history is determined by consciousness. The aesthetic pleasure (“supplied as false consciousness, or vice versa”) of reading and engaging yourself with Buchloh’s text may principally be that of feeling allied with a vast and unifying view, which is an experience of a lucidity without contradiction, an illusory control of or in history which allows everything to be seen in its place.

Fortunately, the text finds itself in contradiction with itself about the subject and its degree of consciousness. On page 105, we read: “None of the manifold features of this eclecticism should be seen as random; they confirm one another in an intricate network of historical meaning, which may, however be read differently from the intentions of the author or the interests of their audience and the art historians who constitute their historical reception.” (My emphasis). If this is true, then every work is opened to interpretation; it finds itself in a conflictual plurality of voices. The artist then cannot be said to have control of the work or its effects. Even the class interests of the work’s author will not be able to control all readings



Carlo Carra; *Patriotic Celebration*; 1914.

or uses of the work. Other voices, such as Buchloh's here, will take up the work for their own, other, purposes. So it cannot simply be claimed, as the text initially does, that "every artist making these decisions would be aware of the ramifications and consequences of the sides they would be taking in the process of aesthetic identifications and ideological representations." The artist would have to be conscious of uses of the work—interpretations—which had not yet been made, historical perspectives not yet suggested, sequences of future works which would then reconstrue, resituate their own work. History itself would have to be already-written, already-seen, rather than a process and a product of conflict.

Representation

Like most criticism, Buchloh's essay seems unaware of its own practices. After declaring that representation in painting is "obsolete" and "retrograde", authoritarian in its very form, the text proceeds as though its language and rhetorical structures, its representation of history, were neutral or transparent.

The essay is as much a traditional representational form, and means of production, as the naturalist painting; it is the "fiction" variant of the classical novel. Just as the narrative in such a novel is moved forward by the omniscient narrator from whom nothing in the world of the text is hidden, the argument in the essay is advanced by a voice which speaks with certainty about, or from within, a history whose end is clearly visible, and with which the voice is identical. History as it is presented in the text is brought to a focus in the position of the author's central and unifying view. That historical view—we habitually refer to it as "historical perspective"—is the temporal equivalent of the Renaissance perspective which was the core of visual and spatial ordering systems that the text says had "defined pictorial production since the Renaissance and had in turn been systematically broken down since the middle of the nineteenth century". Those allied temporal orders have neither been broken down nor questioned in Buchloh's text. Just as the narrator of the classical novel is never implicated in the world which the text establishes, the author here is not implicated within the text's system of representation or means of production, speaking instead from "above" or "outside" or from "nowhere", a god to the text as much as any traditional narrator.

The modernist collage is used in the essay as a privileged example from which earlier practices can be questioned. Perhaps here I can use it to question the text, to test specific criticisms by asking of the critical text what it asks of an artwork.

Quite unlike the modernist collage, in which various fragments and materials of experience are laid bare, revealed as fissures, voids, unresolvable contradictions, irreconcilable particularities, pure heterogeneity, the historicist image pursues the opposite aim: that of synthesis, of the illusory creation of a unity and a totality which *conceals* its historical determination and conditioned particularity. This mode of a unified pictorial representation, homogeneous in mode, material, and style, is treacherous, supplying as it does aesthetic pleasure as false consciousness, or vice versa.

If this passage is correct, then the essay itself must be classified as historicist since it attempts to construct a unified representation (of history), and is "homogeneous in modes, material, and style". And while the text is not without its contradictions, these are not presented or placed in visibility as in the modernist collage, but are submerged in the unity of the voice. One of the strengths of Buchloh's text is that it attempts to show the historical determination of certain painting practices both after 1915 and currently. But how could one argue that his text attempts to show its own "historical determination and conditioned particularity"? What does it mean for a text to condemn other works for concealing their historical determination while concealing its own?

Perhaps no text has a sufficient command of itself and of history that it can reveal its own historical determination. The text in this case—Buchloh's essay—can only maintain the image of a consciousness which sees itself and its multiple determinations when it maintains history as simple, linear, continuous, progressive, univocal, and only

when it speaks from "nowhere", in a language which is treated as though it were somehow neutral. If we ask of a text what it demands of an artwork, in that reading it becomes difficult to maintain that the text has the required self-consciousness, or the necessary command of history, to succeed as its own test case.

The collage is also a means by which the representation of history as linear and continuous and univocal can be challenged. If I can go outside Buchloh's text for a moment to quote from an anthology on the subject of collage, it is fairly clear that collage is destructive of the very history which the essay maintains.

Its heterogeneity, even if it is reduced by every operation of composition, imposes itself on the reading as stimulation to produce a signification which could be neither univocal nor stable. Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation.

If we are to agree with Buchloh's text and use the collage as a privileged example for our practices, then the history which the text maintains will have to be discarded in favour of one which is discontinuous, multiple, conflictual—a "wide" rather than a "narrow" history. If we agree with the history his text maintains, then we cannot refer to the collage as a privileged example from which other works can be criticized for concealing their historical determination and conditioned particularity, nor for a "unified pictorial representation", nor for being "homogeneous in mode, material, and style." Or else the question, the actual practices of the situation in which we are all involved, is more complex than Buchloh's text allows.

There is one last aspect of the text's representational practices which I would like to address. The avant-garde (within art history) is roughly equivalent to a vanguard revolutionary party. It seems to me that Buchloh's essay is based throughout on the assumption that a vanguard party can represent history itself. The question of representation is therefore also a question of political representation. The whole question of the vanguard party representing history is too complex to do it justice here, yet it is a fundamental question. I will simply state that I do not believe that the vanguard can (or does) represent history, and therefore I do not have any simple faith in the notion of an avant-garde practice. I cannot see how a small vanguard party can in practice fail to be destructive of a radical and democratic self-representation, or of the allied notion of history as a complex conflictual plurality of voices and constituencies. One of the most fundamental questions which could be asked concerning Buchloh's text, then, is: "Can a vanguard party represent history?" For those who have doubts that it can, the question might then be asked whether the notions of a vanguard party, or of an avant-garde in art, are not at least potentially a representing of history which can become authoritarian, rather than a signal of an emancipatory history. I won't pretend to know the answer.

For behind the idea of social evolution was an unconscious attachment to the development of a *single* form. Social development was unconsciously based on the experience of one type of Western Society, and its imperialist contacts with more "primitive" societies. The real social and cultural variation of human history was thus reduced to a single model: unilinear and predictable. Even Marxists took over this limited model, and its rigidity has been widely experienced in some twentieth-century communist practice. A more adequate understanding of both natural and cultural evolution would have made so mechanical and unilinear a model untenable, for it would have emphasised both variation and creativity and thus a more genuinely open and (in the full sense) revolutionary future.

Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* ■



Alexander Rodchenko; *Romance (Circa Scene)*; 1935.