

Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 204 pp., 8 illus.

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extension, for our own. The tendency of current free-market arguments to undermine all forms of public support for the arts in Canada is implicitly delegitimated by her demonstration of a similar ideological campaign at the threshold of the nineteenth century.

Kriz partially accounts for her method in developing the case that leads to this conclusion. Acknowledging a debt to Foucault's analysis of discursive formations, she expresses the reservation that his assumptions and procedures do not allow a role for human agency in history. Interrogation of material conditions of the production, circulation and reception of art is tacitly understood as colliding with discourse conceived as a self-sufficient signifying system. Discourse in its engagement with other dimensions of social reality figures prominently throughout the discussion. Strategic reasons may be divined for not declaring a materialist position, including the likelihood of raising associations around the antinomian opposition of materialism to idealism and its political matrix. Without affixing ideological labels, Kriz prefers to instantiate the pertinence of the layered analysis she favours.

Similarly *sans affichage* is the feminist bearing of her study. Yet that dimension of the book is intrinsic to its argument. Kriz makes a signal contribution in tracing structural connections between elevation of the native landscape genius, defined as male, and gendered construction of the subject (artist or viewer), as well as regulation of the female role of amateur. Treatment of these issues as integral to a major reorientation of art criticism and practice around 1800 marks an advance in scholarship for the period and is valuable for feminist research in its heuristic capability. While women in the formation of an art public in Britain have been studied by Ann Bermingham and Ann Pullan,⁸ feminist art history of the time is under-cultivated in the comparison with that of the Victorian era and the twentieth century. The period of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries was, however, the first in which women emerged as published

critics of art in Britain (and elsewhere), instanced by Barbara Hofland who wrote the text to *River Scenery, by Turner and Girtin* (1827) and Maria Graham, author of the first monograph in English on Poussin (1820). The relation of such presences to female amateurism and to formations of discourse around professional practice is but one of the nearly untouched areas of inquiry that may well be encouraged by the stimulating example of Kay Dian Kriz's book.

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Notes

- 1 Gertrud Bing, "A.M. Warburg," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 28 (1965), 305.
- 2 John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public* (London and New Haven, 1986); David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century England* (London and New Haven, 1993).
- 3 Morris Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy: Art and Industry in the Age of Blake* (Ithaca and London, 1992).
- 4 [Francis Jeffrey], review of Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, *Edinburgh Review*, 18 (May 1811), 1-46.
- 5 Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford, 1989).
- 6 Adele M. Holcomb, "'Indistinctness is my fault': A Letter about Turner from C.R. Leslie to James Lenox," *Burlington Magazine*, 114 (Aug. 1972), 557-58.
- 7 Charles Harrison, "The Effects of Landscape" in *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. (Chicago and London, 1994), 209-10.
- 8 See, for example, Ann Bermingham, "The Aesthetics of Ignorance: The Accomplished Woman in the Culture of Connoisseurship," *Oxford Art Journal*, 16, no. 2 (1993), 3-20; and Ann Pullan, "'Conversations on the Arts': Writing a Space for the Female Viewer in the *Repository of Arts* 1809-15," *Oxford Art Journal*, 15, no. 2 (1992), 15-26.

CATHERINE M. SOUSSLOFF, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 204 pp., 8 illus.

Let me begin as favourable reviews often do: Catherine M. Soussloff has written an important book about which much is going to be said; *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* is a significant work because it undertakes an analysis of one of art history's central notions through one of its foundational genres (p. 3). What Soussloff explores is how our concept of the artist has been constructed through the genre of the artist's biography, especially in its early forms. In undertaking this task,

she also examines why the idea of the artist more readily escaped the kind of critical attention that has been recently devoted to other cardinal art historical concepts. Soussloff's book will be useful because of the topics that it raises and the arguments that it outlines; however, it will be consequential because the arguments that it advances are contentious, and will demand further discussion.

What Soussloff in general intends to accomplish is set out in the first sentences of the text: "This book locates the artist in the discourse of history. By doing so, it seeks a richer and more nuanced understanding of the artist, a cultural figure whose significance cannot be disputed, but whose meaning has rarely

been examined or questioned.” (p. 3) As she suggests at the beginning of this quotation, the theoretical means for her investigation are derived from discourse analysis, especially as practiced by Michel Foucault and Hayden White. To this she adds that in her study “the artist in discourse also means the artist in the discipline of art history. In my approach, a genealogical one, I take the concept of the artist to be central to the practice of an art history that has traditionally been driven by concerns with attribution and the delineation of individual and period styles.” (p. 4) In offering a critique of the concept of the artist in this kind of art history she also hopes to contribute to the widening contemporary inquiry into visual culture; in fact, her specific contribution will be to pursue a new form of historiography for art history. In *The Absolute Artist* she wants to offer an analysis that operates at the level of what Hayden White calls “diataxis;” in other words, she will try to examine “not only the mediation between the individual and texts that represent the individual but also, simultaneously, the [process] of historical mediation itself” (p. 24). But Hayden White’s writings are not the only ones that are going to figure in her study; she wants to attempt “a ‘new historiography’ for art history in order to bring the relevance of history, in all of its discourses, into alignment with a variety of theoretical methods that have been employed since 1968 to interpret texts” (p. 4). At the same time though, Sousloff would like to distinguish herself from those practitioners of the “New Art History” who believe that it would be desirable to abolish the disciplinary categories of art history and art theory; she maintains that it would be preferable if they were expanded and enriched, not eliminated (a sentiment that I endorse wholeheartedly).

So then who, or rather what, is the Absolute Artist? Sousloff borrows the term from Milton Nahm’s book, *The Artist as Creator: An Essay on Human Freedom*, though in Sousloff’s hands it takes on a more equivocal meaning that plays on the multiple senses of “absolute.”¹ The territory that Sousloff intends the term to cover is more readily discerned by following how she employs it, rather than by relying on the sketch that she offers in her introduction, but the core idea is this: our concept of the artist has developed in such a way that it lacks a connection to historically situated persons in definite cultural milieux; thus, the artist has become an unconditioned being who is defined by an unproblematic relation to his works (the artist in the discourse under consideration is always male, she tells us, unless otherwise specified). The relation that the artist has to his works is conceived expressively, and so, as Nahm says, “criticism attempts to find the ground for the products of art which we call works of fine art in the history, continuity, and identity of the self-same original mind which has its own unique and individual history.”² The artist and his intentions become buried in his works, and in due time, according to Sousloff,

both the works and the texts on the artist’s life and art become naturalized expressions of his intentions. With the artist thus interred, the artist–object binary that serves this state of affairs (and which Sousloff imagines is the result of eighteenth-century German philosophy) becomes heavily weighted on the side of the object. And so it comes to pass, for reasons which will become more apparent, that art history develops a panoply of approaches for dealing with the object but leaves the actual artist as producer relatively unexplored.

These are the general concerns and presuppositions that direct Sousloff’s theoretical approach. Let us now turn to the more specific topics and arguments that make up her book.

The first thing that I saw when I opened *The Absolute Artist* was Sousloff’s “Schematic Structure of the Artist’s Biography,” which is displayed as *Figure 1* at the beginning of the “Introduction.” I was immediately struck by its rightness, for I realized that all of the early lives of the artists that I had read could indeed be represented through this schema, that the artist’s biography was a highly structured and predictable historical genre with definite regulative functions. One of the remarkable aspects of the schematic structure of the artist’s biography that Sousloff brings to our attention in the first chapter, “On the Threshold of Historiography: Biography, Artist, Genre,” is the extent to which its categories are instantiated in similar ways for different artists. It is not just that there are similar anecdotes about training and technical expertise; they exist as well for everything from portentous prebirth events to the circumstances of the artist’s death. And it is these anecdotes, together with *ekphrases* of the artist’s works, that provide the narrative force for this kind of biography. Sousloff briefly discusses many of the categories that make up the schema of the artist life; one that was of particular interest to me was her sketch of the importance of naming and the body to artistic identity, which I hope that at some later date she will develop, though without the misguided references to philosophers Saul Kripke and Bernard Williams.³

Sousloff also sets out in this chapter some of the general cultural assumptions that shape the rhetorical structure of the genre of biography and guide our reception of material presented in this form. She maintains that the artists’ lives that come to us from the Renaissance found their models in medieval hagiography and in the classical *Lives* of philosophers, writers and statesmen. As all of these were designed around the idea that their subjects were to be seen as models and exemplars, in taking over this form art historical biography aligned itself with a type of discourse given to heroizing life stories from which “the rough edges have been rubbed smooth,” an approach that persists today.⁴

Sousloff believes, as well, that more modern forms of biography are in some manner connected to the systems for the

classification of life forms that were developed by seventeenth-century European science (her case for this provides a good illustration for what I meant at the beginning of this review when I said that her work will be consequential because the arguments that she advances are contentious, and will demand further discussion). Such a link, if we could establish it, would be of no small import, and even a dead-end would be interesting. Soussloff, though, suggests a connection only on the grounds that the term "biography" emerged shortly after the development of taxonomies that instituted horizontal ordering strategies while maintaining a vertical system of ranking life forms by their proximity to the divine. The assumed relation, I suppose, is that since the recording of human life and the organization of forms of life changed during the same era, with the former following the latter, we might surmise that the transformations in thought that brought about the one are responsible, as well, for the other. But even if we are only to entertain such a connection, there has to be a better reason for doing so than mere temporal contiguity and an equivocal association based on the word "life." Soussloff further compounds the problem by attempting to tie Kant and eighteenth-century aesthetics to this hypothetical relation, though ultimately this fails to be convincing because her reading of Kant cannot be sustained.⁵

In the second chapter, "The Artist in Nature: Renaissance Biography," Soussloff narrows the scope of her conceptual excavation to the founding assumptions of the artist's biography, as it took form in the early Italian Renaissance. The central idea around which she orients her investigation is that in Florence, in the trecento and quattrocento, a vision of Italian art as *autochthonous* came to prominence. The term "autochthonous" is derived from the Greek myth of the Chthonic gods, who arose from their native soil without parentage. Because they came into being as fully developed adults, "they have no *bios*, the Greek term that means life as human lived experience and that forms the prefix of the word biography" (p. 44). Correspondingly, in both the literary and the visual arts an autochthonous art is one that is presented, in this case in biography, as though it were an autonomous, self-generated product of a culture. Soussloff's principal contention in this chapter is that the "quattrocento arguments about the preeminence of the modern Tuscan vernacular in literature and the modern Tuscan *arte naturale* founded on perfect measure (*misura*) both rely on the concept of an autochthonous literature or art" (p. 44).

Following Hans Baron and others, Soussloff argues that early Italian debates on the *questione della lingua* regarding which dialect of the vernacular was superior can be directly connected to Florentine politics and the concerns of civic humanism. In a deft discussion of Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante* and Vasari's *Life* of Giotto, Soussloff sets out how Vasari, though writing over two centuries later, modelled his *Life* on Boccaccio's

Vita (which itself was modelled on Virgil's *Lives*) in order to suggest, as Boccaccio had for poetry, that modern painting could only have come into existence in the cultural and political milieu of Florence. In linking Giotto with Dante, Vasari was able to unite poetry and painting in a common destiny and confirm the artist's newly achieved civic status. But perhaps more importantly, this association was facilitated and sustained by common assumptions about the autochthonous character of early Florentine art. In Boccaccio's case, the argument was made by an appeal to the natural superiority of the Tuscan vernacular and Dante's capacity to set it to "true and just measurement," which was the proper ground of poetic imitation. Vasari circumvented subsequent anti-autochthonous evaluations of Dante's poetry to return to Boccaccio and to secure, following Manetti's pro-autochthonous biography of Brunelleschi, a view of Tuscan painting as an originary art also founded on its own form of true and just measurement, i.e. linear perspective and its power to imitate nature.

The imitation of nature, Soussloff claims, referred in equal part to the imitation of the urban environment. And, she continues, when we consider Brunelleschi's demonstration panels, which have achieved along with their creator a mythic, originary status of their own, it becomes clear that acts of imitation could involve more than literal depiction. The subjects and surroundings of the demonstrations are bound up in a network of civic and cultural references that become united, in Manetti's text for example, with the theoretical discussion of perspective itself.

While I am quite taken by Soussloff's discussion of early Renaissance writings and autochthonous Italian art, and I have no doubt that she has unearthed a subject that will make a difference to art history, I sometimes feel that the task that she has set for herself has not been fulfilled, and that her arguments are not always sufficient to establish her point. Let me briefly consider one example that illustrates both. In the parallel that Soussloff draws between poetry and painting as autochthonous arts, it is clear that Dante's poetry is considered Tuscan because he wrote in the Tuscan dialect and his work is thus a partial confirmation of Florentine greatness. But what occupies the place of the Tuscan dialect in the visual arts? What is it about Giotto's work or Brunelleschi's work that is similarly implicated in the Florentine social world that emerges from the texts that speak of them? The answer is that the visual arts were concerned with "forms that were based on nature, but a nature that was indigenous to Tuscany, especially Florence" (p. 92). The first part of this passage, concerning "forms based on nature," is no news to anyone, for as Soussloff herself points out, this claim has been around since Julius von Schlosser's pioneering work, *Die Kunstliteratur*. The second part, however, is somewhat problematic, though not because it is demonstrably improbable or something of that sort; the problem rather is with the case that

Soussloff makes to support it, which she does through her more extended claim that what early writers meant by “nature” also covers “the buildings of Florence and the surroundings of Florence, including the figures and objects that filled those urban spaces and rural spaces” (p. 61). Soussloff wants to subsume the city under nature because she would like to present the Florentine monuments in Brunelleschi’s demonstration panels as the pictorial equivalents of the Tuscan vernacular in Dante’s poetry. The difficulty is that all she offers in support of this autochthonic parallel are two sentences from a passage in Manetti’s biography of Brunelleschi (in fact, this is also all she offers for the greater parallel between the Tuscan language and the representation of the Florentine environment). But surely we need more than this, given the important position that this thesis occupies in her book. And it would not be unreasonable to expect more than this because, if her claim is as fundamental to early Renaissance discourse as we have been led to believe, there should be evidence of it in some of the other texts that her study analyses. What Soussloff does make clear is that the monuments that were represented in or implied by Brunelleschi’s panels were of great consequence to the Florentines’ and to Brunelleschi’s self-understanding, but this lends weight to her case only if the previous claim has been established.

In her third chapter, “The Artist in Culture: *Kulturwissenschaft* from Burckhardt to Warburg,” Soussloff moves her analysis to another level. Her aim now is to “argue that the deployment of the early texts about the artist has determined key interpretations of the idea of the Renaissance and the methods used to understand the idea of a period concept in the history of culture” (p. 77). Her discussion, as the title of the chapter indicates, is focused primarily on the German tradition of *Kulturwissenschaft* as practiced by Jacob Burckhardt and Aby Warburg. This approach produces, especially in Warburg’s studies, a particularly rich object for Soussloff’s form of discourse analysis since *Kulturwissenschaft* theorists investigated images by situating them within a larger cultural context.

The word “*Wissenschaft*,” Soussloff tells us, “literally means ‘science.’ In a combinatory usage with other terms such as *Kultur*, it therefore connotes the inheritance of the Enlightenment’s belief in science as truth with the idea of scholarship as science. The use of the term in historical studies from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards is part and parcel of the empirical or ‘realist’ method of history writing initiated by Leopold van Ranke.” (p. 78) Following Hayden White, she then adds: “If we accept ... that Ranke’s approach to history founded ‘a large school of historians who are in fundamental agreement on common standards of objectivity,’ then we must also agree that the inheritance of the Enlightenment’s belief in the basic ‘truth’ of science and scientific method underlies the project of history writing for much of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries.”⁶ In general I support this assessment, but it seems to me that two important caveats must be added so as not to misrepresent the approach to historical studies being considered here. The first is that, although *Wissenschaft* does literally mean “science,” it was not employed in its literal sense. The appropriate connotation is closer to “system;” thus, to its practitioners *Kulturwissenschaft* meant the systematic study of culture rather than the science of culture. Secondly, while it must be granted that any inter-subjective conception of truth entails the idea of common standards of objectivity, scientific truth involves much more than this. Furthermore, the historians associated with this approach operated with a theory of truth that was deliberately defined in opposition to the procedures of science.⁷ But that said, Soussloff is right about the significance that Enlightenment ideals had for this tradition, and she is to be thanked for drawing our attention to how they are at work in the shared assumptions that she has found uniting art historians as different as Burckhardt and Warburg. Now that we have the benefit of her book, we can better comprehend how the vision of the Italian Renaissance and its artists that Burckhardt found in Renaissance biographies shaped his studies. Even the ideas that are most readily associated with Burckhardt, such as the notion of what constitutes a Renaissance and the belief in the prominence of individuals, appear in a new cast. Burckhardt’s disposition towards written sources in Italian also takes on quite a new significance, especially when it becomes clear just to what degree he accepted Renaissance art and artists as autochthonous, and to what extent both he and Warburg were unwittingly bound by the naturalized assumptions that constituted the myth of the heroic artist, that had been passed down, unchanged, for over four hundred years.

Despite its title, “The Artist in History: The Viennese School of Art History,” Soussloff’s fourth chapter is not really about the Vienna School. Her concern rather is with one figure, Julius von Schlosser, and the way his work was extended and transformed by his students Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in their book *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*.⁸ Bringing this book back from neglect (after what she describes as its institutional repression) is one of the many things that Soussloff should be thanked for; another is her discussion of von Schlosser, which is a commendable contribution to the growing literature in English on the so-called Vienna School.⁹

Building on the research of Wolfgang Iser (another figure who deserves more attention), von Schlosser maintained that the artist’s anecdote has functioned as an autonomous element that has endured from text to text and determined both sense and form in the representation of the artist. Kris and Kurz developed this claim and argued that the anecdote has acted, in effect, as the primitive structural element out of which the

artist's biography has been built. Furthermore, their analysis, which is based on philological and psychoanalytic methods (recall that Kris studied with Freud), revealed that the anecdote functioned not only on the narrative but also on the symbolic level. They concluded, as Soussloff tells us, that these texts "constructed art, history, and, particularly, the artist. The figure of the artist could be viewed as constructed because it appeared as a historical and symbolic representation in an identifiable literary genre. The concept of the artist was born." (p. 99) When Soussloff says that the concept of the artist was born, she of course does not mean that it was here for the first time that the concept of the artist was employed; in line with the form of discourse analysis practiced by Foucault, what she is maintaining is that with the study by Kris and Kurz "the idea of the artist in culture arises as a concept in historical consciousness for the first time" (p. 98).

As useful as von Schlosser's work is for understanding the historical concept of the artist, at the same time it constitutes an obstacle. According to Soussloff, the significance that von Schlosser assigned to origins in historiography played an important role in giving the history of art its familiar shape: "defining the limitations of its textual and visual fields, and creating period styles, national schools, and points of origin from which the story can unfold or to which it must return" (p. 102). Soussloff's reflections on von Schlosser, his work on Ghiberti, and the question of origins in art history are her most notable contribution to contemporary discussions of the Vienna School. And they also help to clarify why current debates in literary theory about the status of the author have had limited applicability to the concept of the artist, for as her increasingly elaborate argument forcefully suggests, "this is because the interdependence of text, artist, and the assumptions of art history that pertain to the discourse of art history, but not to literature has prevented a means of progressing beyond the arguments made by the classic critiques of the author." (p. 109)

In her fifth chapter, "The Artist in Myth: Early Psychoanalysis and Art History," Soussloff deepens her examination of Kris and Kurz's book by situating it in relation to other early psychoanalytic studies of the artist, in particular Freud's essay on Leonardo and Otto Rank's *Der Künstler*. Of the many points that she wants to bring to our attention about this type of investigation and its relation to art history, let us consider only two, which are connected. The first pertains to how psychoanalysis offered a way of understanding what she calls "the dialectic of the artist hero," i.e. the tension between the realization that the artist's biography is inherently heroizing and the belief that, nevertheless, it provides empirical information about the artist as a cultural figure (which is a tension that is a more specific instance of the greater cultural opposition between the

rational and irrational or instinctive that psychoanalysis explored and aimed at resolving). The second point concerns how psychoanalysis did not fully overcome this tension, for when it "inserted its interpretations into this cultural dialectic, it did so with a reliance on the same narrative structures and linguistic constructions that had been used in history writing" (p. 117). Now, because psychoanalytic studies of the artist could not entirely break free of the traditional assumptions of biography, they implicitly participated in the suppression of other methods of art historical inquiry that could have provided a critique of the myth of the artist. Had Freud and the others been able to separate their studies from these inherited assumptions, perhaps they could have presented a more compelling analysis of the artist, and perhaps their results would have been treated more circumspectly by the more traditional art historians who felt justified in dismissing them because of their perceived shortcomings as empirically based investigations.

In this regard Soussloff cites Meyer Schapiro's classic paper, "Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study," as an example of the treatment that these authors standardly received.¹⁰ And after reviewing his main lines of argument she then makes this forbidding claim: "By criticizing Freud and the use of psychoanalytic biography in understanding the artist, Schapiro and the 'doxa' of the profession in effect forced the discipline into the position of relying on the biographies as empirically evidentiary, as the only social and historical documentation of the artist." (p. 127) This strikes me as the kind of overstatement that, if properly mitigated, would run the risk of dying, as the philosopher Anthony Flew used to say, the death of a thousand qualifications. But Soussloff's penchant for overstatement is not so great that it deserves special attention; what does deserve special attention is her comparative discussion of how art history, unlike psychoanalysis, is marked by a certain reticence about the prominent role that Jewish scholars have played in its history. It has been well-established that Jewish émigrés fleeing the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s significantly changed the intellectual geography of North America and the various European countries in which they sought refuge. Art history provides a particularly noteworthy example of that change, and it takes only a moment's reflection to realize just how many German-speaking Jewish art historians came to occupy important posts in museums and universities in North America, and just how much they contributed to the expansion and sophistication of the study of the history of art. Yet, unlike psychoanalysis, which has developed an extensive literature on the place of Jews in its formation, the discourse of art history reveals almost nothing of their presence and how they came to be where they were. Soussloff is surely right in remarking that "given the impact of other disciplines on the field of art history, precisely in thinking theoretically about visual culture in many of the areas about

which art history has not itself been able to speak, a self-consciousness by art history of its own genealogy, in essence its own politics, seems all the more necessary."¹¹ I am less convinced, though, by Soussloff's efforts to tie this question to the issue of the unanalysed status of the artist and the fate of early psychoanalytic studies in art. But perhaps she will develop this in the book she has planned on the Viennese School of art history and its Jewish practitioners, which is something that I eagerly await.

Soussloff's final chapter, "The Artist in the Text: Rhetorics in the Myth of the Artist," is aimed at deepening her account of the crucial role that the anecdote plays in the genre of the artist's biography and in the construction of the concept of the artist. One of her main objectives is to square the type of mythologically oriented approach that is found in Kris and Kurz with Marxist and feminist criticisms of it. She attempts to do this by "applying historiographical methods directly to the realm of myth in which the artist resides. This is where the discussion of the artist in culture must begin." (p. 140) Without doubt it is important to try and give the artist a more determinate identity in the social world, but this cannot be done independently of an analysis of the myth of the artist: the question of mythological status is not a diversion from or ancillary to the question of social being; rather, it precedes it conceptually and methodologically. According to Soussloff, "the artist is a priori a myth" (p. 140), and one that has gone unexplored because we have not returned to its site of representational origination in early modern biographies to investigate its principles of construction. If this task is avoided, then any use of these *Lives* in an examination of the artist in the social world only perpetuates the myth. This is one of the reasons, she claims, why poststructuralist work on the status of the author has had close to no impact on the concept of the artist in art history (there are, of course, other reasons for this, and she provides some insightful remarks on how the commodification of the artist/artwork relation acts as a force of resistance to analysis).

Soussloff returns to the biography of the artist mainly to reconsider the rhetorical element fundamental to the genre and to the myth: the artist anecdote. Following Joel Fineman, she argues that the anecdote "engenders an impression of the real through its form. The discrete rhetorical operations and function, as well as contextual placement, affect our understanding of the content or subject contained by the form as much as or more than the content or subject matter itself."¹² Anecdotes and the tropes about artists that they embody are small narratives with sufficient independence that they can float from text to text across eras and cultures. They are inflected in new ways by different contexts, but the preformed meanings that they contain act to continue and secure the image of the artist at the heart of the myth.

Soussloff also maintains that issues of power are bound up with the form of the anecdote: "we could understand every anecdote at the metalevel to mean the secret political narrative within the larger historical narrative" (p. 155). While this is an intriguing idea to bring to our reflections on early artists' biographies, in the end her case for it is only a sketch that gets its impetus from the etymological history of the word "anecdote" in its relation to the title of Procopius's book *Anekdotia*. The fact that Soussloff's arguments are often underdeveloped is, I think, my biggest disappointment with her book. The fact that her sentences are often awkward and contorted is the biggest obstacle to enjoying it, e.g. "In radical terms, a logical outcome will be seen as one in which the appropriation of the suppression of 'personality' by the makers themselves, because naturalized into the idea of the artist, effectively causes repressions, deformations, and obsession with the character, 'artist,' further reifying, if not fetishizing, the cultural concept."¹³ Despite this, Soussloff should be praised because she is not someone who hides behind jargon. She is not afraid to state her claims directly, which is something to be thankful for because she has so much to say.

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Notes

- 1 Milton C. Nahm, *The Artist as Creator: An Essay on Human Freedom* (Baltimore, 1956).
- 2 Nahm, *The Artist as Creator*, 327.
- 3 Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, 1980); and Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge, 1973). I say that these references are misguided because Williams and Kripke are pursuing questions that, to speak spatially, are on a different level than Soussloff's and do not connect with her discussion in a meaningful way. In support of her efforts to reintroduce the body of the artist into our historical reflections on the artist's social identity, Soussloff appeals on a number of occasions to Williams' claim that bodily identity is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for personal identity. Williams' assertion, which by the way is highly controversial and cannot be invoked as though it has the force of common consensus, is about the basic logical conditions of identity for persons; how a type of person's identity is constructed socially is a question that he need not and does not address, as his problem is conceptually more fundamental. Williams' is operating at a level that is closer to Leibniz's Law than to Foucault's archaeology: Leibniz's Law states that " 'a' is the same entity as 'b' if and only if 'a' and 'b' have all of their extensional, but not intensional, properties in common;" thus for Williams the question is what are the relevant extensional properties for persons? One of them, he argues, is bodily continuity. Williams' argument in fact cuts against Soussloff's,

for Williams would maintain that it does not matter if, say, I am kidnapped and brainwashed into an entirely alien society and given a new “identity;” I am still the same person because bodily identity is a necessary condition for personal identity, while what I believe and how I comprehend the world is not. The problem is that the word “identity” is being used equivocally, without due attention to the differences between philosophical and more commonplace uses. I would argue, similarly, that Kripke’s work passes Soussoff’s on a different level, but that argument cannot be made in a footnote, even a very long one.

- 4 For a related article, published in this journal, on rhetorical strategies in artists’ biographies, see Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, “La légende de Raphaël. Les «grandes» et les «petites» vies d’une figure exemplaire de l’art, écrites en France au cours du XIXe siècle,” *RACAR (Revue d’art canadienne/Canadian Art Review)*, XXII, 1-2 (1995), 80-86.
- 5 Soussoff states: “Thus, we must be careful to note that the use of the term *biography* emerges during a period of the reclassification of the natural world by science taxonomically, while at the same time life maintained its earlier immutable (teleological) status. This is the status theorized by eighteenth-century Aesthetics for the artist: for example, as Kant wrote: ‘It [genius] cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, but it gives the rule just as nature does.’ ” (p. 38) The quotation from Kant is from *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), 151. The Bernard translation, which first appeared in 1892 and has long been considered inaccurate, has been superseded by Werner S. Pluhar’s, which reads “Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as *nature* that it gives the rule.” See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), 175. The difference in translation is important, as we shall see shortly. There are a couple of points that I think it is important to respond to in Soussoff’s claim. The first is that Kant does not assign to human or any other form of life an immutable teleological status; in fact, the project of the *Critique of Judgment* is exactly the opposite of this. Kant does not see persons and things as developing in relation to final causes that define their natures; on the contrary, for him teleological judgments have a very limited use and only supplement the determinative judgments of science by acting as regulative principles that only orient certain types of inquiry that are not reducible to mechanical explanation – they have no explanatory significance and do not contribute to our factual knowledge of the world. This is made explicit in sections 61 and 67 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Secondly, the passage on genius that Soussoff quotes does not say what she seems to think it does. When Kant claims, according to the Bernard translation that Soussoff uses, that “It [genius] cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, but it gives the rule just as nature does,” he is not saying that genius, like nature (which Soussoff thinks he characterizes teleologically), gives teleological rules or laws to art. What genius does do is produce aesthetic ideas, i.e. ideas that are so complex that they cannot be captured or exhausted by the concepts of determinative thought. This makes art very much different from science, for the products of science can not only be captured by the concepts of determinative thought, they can also be replicated by following rule-governed procedures, while the products of art are ones “for which no determinate rule can be given;” see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Pluhar, 175. The artist, though, does give the rule to art through the work itself, but this is hardly equivalent to a rule-governed account of how to create more art. To conclude this point we have to switch translations. In Pluhar’s version Kant says that “Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as *nature* that it gives the rule” (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 175). So, it does not give the rule “just as nature does” but “rather as *nature*,” in other words, because artists create aesthetic ideas, and because artists are part of the natural world, the closest that nature comes to giving rules to art is through the rules realized in art itself. What does all this have to do with the development of seventeenth-century taxonomy, teleological world views, and biography? Nothing. Kant’s conceptions of nature, the artist, and art are not what Soussoff suggests they are (Soussoff has recurring Kant, and philosophy, troubles throughout her book).
- 6 Soussoff, *The Absolute Artist*, 78. The quoted passage is from Theodore M. von Laue, *Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years* (Princeton, 1950), 138.
- 7 We should recognize that the philosophers of history and the historians who use the term “*Wissenschaft*” in this context form quite a heterogeneous group that ranges from Hegel to Dilthey and includes figures such as Heinrich Rickert who was completely unsympathetic to both. At the same time there was the debate between the proponents of *Kulturwissenschaft* and the proponents of *Geisteswissenschaft* (and those, such as Dilthey and Cassirer, who looked for space in the middle). Even so, they were all in agreement that truth in the study of cultural phenomena could not be modelled on a scientific conception of truth; hence, the big debate in art history at the turn of the century on the question of historical truth.
- 8 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, 1979).
- 9 So far the lion’s share of attention has gone to Riegl. See especially: Margaret Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl’s Theory of Art* (University Park, Penn., 1992); and Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton, 1992).
- 10 Meyer Schapiro, “Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study,” in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers* (New York, 1994).
- 11 Soussoff, *The Absolute Artist*, 137. This connection has not been completely ignored. In fact, it has even been partially charted by large-scale exhibitions, e.g. *Exiles and Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists From Hitler*, which was curated by Stephanie Barron and originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition travelled to Le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal (June 9–September 7, 1997) and continued to the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin.

- 12 Soussoff, *The Absolute Artist*, 147. See Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veenser (New York, 1989), 49–76.
- 13 Soussoff, *The Absolute Artist*, 16. However, she should not be singled out. *The Guardian Weekly*, vol. 156, no. 25 (the week

ending 22 June 1997), 24, reported the results of this year's Bad Writing Contest. Unfortunately, North American cultural theorists were over-represented in the list of finalists: Frederic Jameson won for *Signatures Of The Visible*.

KEVIN D. MURPHY, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, xiv + 200 pp., 53 black-and-white illus., \$45 (U.S.).

The church of the Madeleine at Vézelay, in Burgundy, has long held pride of place among monuments of the French Romanesque. In Steven Vickers's course at the University of Toronto in the 1970s on Romanesque sculpture, we memorized many of the nave capitals and the odd, angular figures of the sculpted tympanum in the narthex, never questioning the church's authenticity or canonical status. "Why these particular capitals?" and "Why not the tympanum over the main door?" are questions this undergraduate never thought to ask. If I had, Vickers's gruff answer might have been, "Because, Mr. Thomas, the church was so heavily restored in the nineteenth century by Viollet-le-Duc."

It is, precisely, to de-familiarize La Madeleine, so seemingly natural, so seamlessly medieval, that Kevin Murphy has written this book, based on a PhD dissertation at Northwestern University. Murphy rends the opaque veil of transparency that Viollet-le-Duc and his collaborators hung over the church on its picturesque village-hilltop. He shows that Vézelay the icon of medievalism is a conjurer's trick, a product of the modern architect's skill applied at vast expense under down-and-dirty material conditions of local and regional life overlaid by policy and goals of the national government under the July Monarchy (1830–48). Murphy's compact, well written, and well edited book joins a growing literature on the construction of public memory, especially national memory, most of all in France.

After the revolution of July 1830 that put him on the disputed French throne in place of the Bourbon king Charles X, Louis-Philippe worked to liberalize and modernize the national administration so as to impart a stability missing since the fall of the *ancien régime* while moving France toward a new bourgeois industrial and commercial order. From 1840 on, his policy of *juste milieu* was outstandingly successful. After fifty years of turmoil, with republics, empires, restorations, kings, imposters and pretenders appearing (and re-appearing) with dizzying frequency, the question of historic legitimacy – who could justly claim to rule France? – was understandably vital. At such a time history had its political uses. With the Gothic fashion strong in Britain and surging over European literature, art and architecture, and with France's credible claim to be the cradle of the

Gothic, medievalism naturally recommended itself as a vehicle with which to advance these arguments. The one to realize this fully was Romantic historian François Guizot, Louis-Philippe's minister of the interior. He viewed old buildings as concentrated distillations of historic memory, able to deliver political and pedagogical messages with subtlety and force. A building properly treated, Guizot realized, could be a "historic monument." This idea, departing from the vandalism of the Revolutionary era, led, in the 1830s and 1840s, to the creation and elaboration of a national bureaucracy of historic restoration, including a Commission of Historic Monuments, established in 1837. Into the structure created by these ideas stepped Prosper Mérimée, who became inspector general of historic monuments, and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, just then starting out as a restoration architect. Fortuitously available as raw material for a national historic monument was the decrepit church of La Madeleine at Vézelay, an impoverished village in the extreme southern part of the Yonne department. The church had been in ruinous state since the seventeenth century and particularly neglected since the Revolution. Local authorities had done what they could to arrest the rot, for they were proud of the church, but had eventually to call on Paris for help. It was Mérimée, chiefly, who saw the building's potential to serve a national politics of memory. A backward area that could benefit from sharp infusions of Parisian cash and where the Catholic clergy were particularly weak, divided and unpopular made an ideal stage for an architectural drama of the historic continuity of the French state, now under the wise tutelage of the "Citizen King." All these background events, currents and characters are explored and elucidated in chapters one to three.

The heart of the book is Murphy's chapter four, idiosyncratically occupying more than a third of the text, "Viollet-le-Duc and the Reinvention of Vézelay." Here is traced the physical and metaphorical reconstruction of La Madeleine. The young architect took a particularly sweeping and aggressive approach to restoring it, among other steps dismantling several nave vaults that had been rebuilt in pointed Gothic form in the thirteenth century and replacing them with round, more typically Romanesque vaults, opening a ring of circular oculus-windows in the choir elevation to introduce more light, and entirely reconstructing the tower of the south transept for picturesque exterior effect. The final result was far more light, pale, consistent, abstract and diagrammatic than the church he had