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# Ann Falkner, *Without Our Past?* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977. 242 pp., 69 illus., $15.00 (cloth), $5.00 (paper)

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[was] that consciousness be projected outward." And Cornell's "ambition [was] to make out of [his] banal materials a model of the Unconscious and its processes."

Unfortunately, Krauss's analysis is scarcely convincing. One cannot examine either the processes or the content of the unconscious mind without the use of powerful theoretical tools which Krauss does not take up. Furthermore, when she implicitly assumes that the Unconscious is primarily a storehouse for memory or states that the significance of rhythmic regularity in Nevelson and elsewhere is its ability to create the sensation of real time, she makes two fundamental errors. One is to forget that the Unconscious is indeed unconscious, and the other is to indulge in crude speculation.

Krauss's speculations are both factual and theoretical; she offers no documentation of the three artists' supposedly conscious intentions, and thus deprives the reader of any distinction between them and her own reconstructions. This is irritating enough, but she is also ignoring a substantial literature on the unconscious rôle of rhythm in art.

More substantial hypotheses than that of Krauss go back as far as 1915 when Freud argued that beauty in art was basically "sexual" at root.[2] In the 1930s, Ella Sharpe improved on Freud's analysis by detaching the idea of beauty from the aesthetic and by also relating rhythm, as a subset of the beautiful, to earlier prototypes, especially the experience of goodness by the suckling infant.[3] The classic development of this train of thought was by the follower of Melanie Klein, Hanna Segal, who clarified the argument that the aesthetic has both a "beautiful" and an "ugly" component and that the creation and the enjoyment of a work of art are unconscious processes analogous to important unconscious processes of the developing infant.[4]

It is this concern with process that Krauss promises but does not deliver. Some of the missing argument can be found in her book, *Terminal Iron Works* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), without which her essay is scarcely comprehensible. There she has presented a basically Freudian analysis with a certain skill. Even there, however, it is doubtful whether her conception of the works of Smith as both totem in the Freudian sense (Krauss argues that the unpredictable relations between back and front views and the void of the interior in many of the pieces defy dual possession) and also as sublimation of unconscious desires can be consistent.

The concluding essays by Haskell and Tucker are almost models of the low calibre surveys too often turned out by weary curators. The incompetence of Haskell's account is comprehensive: she knows too little of the critical literature, and hence misrepresents the limited John Chamberlain as "major";[5] she is given to clichéd, unidimensional descriptions of both works of art and stylistic movements, as in "raw energy and power": she is so confused about what she calls "formal art" that she imagines it to mean the use of simple geometric forms; and she so misconstrues Clement Greenberg that she imagines he is prescribing rather than observing the movement towards autonomy of the various art forms in the century or so since Manet. For Haskell, the fundamental ambivalence of art reduces it to a mere perceptual puzzle, as can best be seen in her account of Larry Bell's glass boxes.

Haskell and Tucker share an important error that is almost an occupational hazard of curators of contemporary art: they too often validate an artist's accomplishment on the basis of its congruence with his stated intentions. They quote a large number of artists on their intentions, but at no point seriously question them.

Whereas Haskell and Tucker find certain tendencies in recent sculpture towards increased literalness, in earthworks, for example, or towards "ephemeral . . . sculptural situations" in Oldenburg and certain more "conceptual" artists, further analysis might suggest more complex interpretations. The earth artists might suggest a revival, although not necessarily a successful one, of the eighteenth-century idea of the picturesque.[6] The tendency to the ephemeral might suggest newness for its own sake, a phenomenal newness without authentic artistic newness. One can only regret that the two weakest essays in the Whitney Museum's book are by its own creators.

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[2] In a footnote added in 1915 to his *Three Essays in Sexuality* (1905).

[3] "Certain Aspects of Sublimation and Delusion," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XI (1930), 12–23; "Similar and Divergent Determinants Underlying the Sublimation of Pure Art and Pure Science," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, VI (1935), 186–202.

[4] "A Psycho-Analytic Approach to Aesthetics," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XXXIII (1952), 196–207.

[5] The majority opinion is represented by W. Darby Bannard's critique in "Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, David Smith," *Artforum*, VI (April, 1968), 22–32.

[6] Sidney Tillim, "Earthworks and the New Picturesque," *Artforum*, VII:4 (Dec. 1968), 42–45.

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Not long ago, proponents of architectural conservation pleaded their case solely on the grounds that to remain a cultured society we must retain our architectural heritage. They may have been right, but this "soft" argument gained them little respect in the hard-nosed world of business. Now, however, as resources become more precious and the conserver society draws nearer, preservation becomes doubly important: we simply cannot afford the wanton demolition of serviceable old buildings. Proponents of conservation have consequently gained a new mantle of respectability, and their arguments are heeded ever more carefully than before.

Ann Falkner has attempted to encourage the conservation movement towards maturity by writing *Without Our Past?*, a book which she aptly subtitles "A handbook for the preservation of Canada's architectural heritage." Falkner has intended that the book not only "heighten awareness" in the values of conservation, but that it also "provide some

guidance" to persons and community groups who may want to become directly involved in preservation activities (p. ix). Those well meaning and potentially powerful lay groups have had little published material which they might study, aside from the many booklets issued by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, many of which are not fully relevant to the Canadian situation.

Our government evidently acknowledges the need for this handbook, for the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs commissioned Falkner to write it, and associated with the University of Toronto Press to publish it. The production of a cheap paperback edition in addition to the hardcover version makes it fall within the reach of every budget.

Falkner responded to the challenge by providing much heretofore unavailable information. Her previous work with the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building and her present post with the Association for Preservation Technology have provided her with good background. She tells about existing heritage legislation and government programmes, instructs her readers how to survey and evaluate buildings, offers hints on how to acquire properties, suggests how to develop a preservation philosphy in deciding what to do with those acquisitions, gives guidelines on costing rehabilitation work, and tries to explain how to cope with the jargon of city planners. She describes numerous preservation projects across the country and cites many good books on preservation. An appendix provides the names and addresses of historical societies and government departments. All of this is valuable material.

Indeed, the book is nearly the useful handbook that it set out to be, and would have become that book had it received help from a collaborator or a strong editor. Unfortunately, it falls short on three critical counts. Firstly, it is badly organized. Material is scattered about, with a chapter's title providing few clues as to its contents. Lamentably there is no index. Secondly, the book is not well written, and the constant use of the first and second persons ("I hope to alert you to your history . . .," p. 18) lacks authority and sounds patronizing. And finally the text lacks a sense of experience or critical analysis. Although we remain fully confident that the author has done her research thoroughly, we are not so convinced that she herself has ever faced a hostile city council or fully comprehends the intricacies of acquiring a threatened property, nor that she is really concerned whether the legislation and programmes that she cites are actually effective. The text is further weakened by a number of bothersome errors in the citing of proper names, such as those of the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Programme (p. 31) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (p. 135).

Falkner frequently reiterates two tired premises of which the preservation movement would do well to rid itself. The first contends that "preservation" and "high-rise development" are diametrically and irreconcilably opposed (*e.g.* p. 147). The real enemy of preservation is, of course, demolition and *re*-development (or parking lots), not development itself. Related to this is the alleged opposition between "preservationists" and "anti-preservationists" (*e.g.* p. 211). These do not comprise two races, nor even two language groups. A preservationist is any person who makes an effort to conserve some object at any point in time or space. Some of Canada's most active high-rise developers have turned to rehabilitating groups of old houses and individual landmarks (projects in Toronto and Vancouver come to mind), and they are being very real preservationists while engaging in those particular schemes.

Conservation has become a respectable activity. Developers do it, the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs does it, and the readers of *Without Our Past?* may do it somewhat better as well.

H.K.

LADISLAV MATEJKA and IRWIN R. TITUNIK, eds. *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1976. 298 + xxi pp., $17.95.

Semiotics remains a puzzling concept. A definition — the science of signs and symbolic relations — is not difficult, but it is, as some definitions surely are, pernicious in its simplicity. If a sign is anything that stands for something else, then "sign" is such a broad category that we are entitled to be suspect of its usefulness. Perhaps when the great Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, formulated the need for *semiologie* in the first decade of our century, the idea that language was just one of many sign systems which constitute an all-pervasive texture in our social environment was something of a revelation. Today, the same idea has become a facile commonplace. A course on "communications" may refer with equal likelihood to the aesthetics of design, first-year English, media analysis, group therapy, or electronic engineering. We say "language" in speaking of Picasso's style, computer codes, or facial gestures. Are we not entitled by now to suspect that concepts like "sign" and "language" are too general to have more than a superficial unity and to doubt whether so coarse a question as "what is a sign?" could contribute to so delicate a research as aesthetics?

The Prague Structuralists, as the authors represented by this volume are sometimes called, did succeed, nevertheless, in building new and important critical vantage points for the analysis of art by taking the problem of sign and signification as an indispensable philosophical lever. With the sign as their methodological focus, they established attitudes towards art and questions about art which still remain challenging and germinal. It is not as easy to say how or why this is so as it would be if the Prague Circle had left us with a clear, consistent theory of art. This they certainly did not do. Their work in phonology and much of their other linguistics may stand on its own, but to appreciate their aesthetics, obviously so incomplete in its development, I think we must ponder its context.

The greater part of these essays stems from the 1930s, a period of fervent intellectual division. In addition to the challenges posed by radical upheaval and experiment within art itself in that and the immediately preceding decades, aesthetic theory felt the impact of philosophic responses to cataclysmic changes in European society. The Prague Structuralists were in a sense the direct descendants of Russian Formalism. In the 1920s, the Formalists had rejected the Romantic psychological theory that art was determined by the spiritual states of its creators and its public in favour of a formal analysis of the material artwork