

Questioning Context in Renaissance Art

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Leonard Barkan, *Michelangelo, A Life on Paper* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2011), 352 pp., 165 color illns, 40 halftones, 3 line illns, ISBN 9780691147666, \$49.50.

Michael Cole, *Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammananti and Danti in Florence* (Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2011), 372 pp., 167 halftone illns, ISBN 9780691147444, \$49.50.

'Context Stinks!' is the playfully provocative title of an essay by Rita Felski in a recent volume of *New Literary History*.¹ She explores the way in which context has become non-negotiable for scholars of literature and history – the type of context to be deployed might be disputed, but not its presence. That has certainly been the case in early modern art history for some time, but two recent books, Leonard Barkan's *Michelangelo, A Life on Paper* and Michael Cole's *Ambitious Form: Giambologna, Ammananti and Danti in Florence*, demonstrate that the parameters of the received notion of context may be under review.

Barkan's interpretation of context is the more literal, as well as the more radically narrow, of the two. His point of departure is that discussions of Michelangelo's drawings frequently ignore the written inscriptions – whether drafts of poems, cryptic musings, or account records – on the same page. While leaving out much of the world beyond the piece of paper he is examining, he constructs a universe within it. Certain problems repeatedly confront Barkan on his quest to uncover the poetic and semantic structure of individual sheets. Most obviously, he often struggles to reconstruct the sequence with which individual elements of the drawings were made, and the absence of this information makes any conclusions about their relationship necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, Barkan resists venturing too far into the realm of the unknowable, and his comments are largely gleaned from close observation of the fortuitous juxtapositions of word and image that were the consequence of Michelangelo's working method.

Barkan's own method eludes easy characterisation, but he ventures his own retrospective analysis in suggesting that he has been guided by Freud's example. Through this lens, Michelangelo's varied notations and sketches come to be understood as the artist's 'waking dreams' or 'the psychopathologies of his everyday life' (p. 290). As Freudian analyses go, however, Barkan demonstrates impressive restraint, analysing the poetry without claiming to know the man. In this he steers clear of what John Shearman called the 'botanical fallacy': by your fruits we shall know you.² Many biographers of Michelangelo have fallen prey to this temptation, but Barkan disavows any claim that he can come to know 'Michelangelo himself' by bracketing the

phrase with quotation marks, further elaborating: "Michelangelo himself", then, turns out to consist of two distinct fields of inquiry, each of them enigmatic and fragmentary in a different way: the inward space of his creative process and the outward space of his multitasking page' (p. 292).

Freudian analysis has been out of fashion in art history for some time, so it is interesting to see the lightness of touch with which Barkan employs it. This emerges in part from the self-consciousness and caution that the last decades of critical theory have engendered. As Barkan writes,

Over the last half century, we have been wisely instructed to loosen the proprietary identifications that bind works of art to the names printed on their title pages or scripted in their lower right hand corners and to be more aware that cultures as a whole, histories of intertextuality, and the operations of language or of vision may be as foundational as the sovereign will of the named creator. Yet more significant—and this is where "the Death of the Author" means "the Intentional Fallacy"—we have learned to construe personal agency as operating in such ambiguous ways that a whole set of suppositions concerning artists' purposes (as intuited from their biographies) and their fulfillment in finished work has needed rethinking.

He continues, 'In the face of these quite legitimate questionings, I have nonetheless found myself dedicated simultaneously to honoring the complex theoretical problematics of Life-and-Work and to finding a way in which the artist himself can be brought back as a legitimate object of study' (p. 288). Barkan's point is that Michelangelo's life was so richly documented in his own time, so thoroughly an object of fascination among his contemporaries, and so self-consciously constructed and projected by Michelangelo himself that the biographical viewpoint seems not only defensible, but also inevitable.

Barkan thus offers an outsider's challenge to art history: why not biography? It is an interesting point, considering the state we are in: monographs on single artists continue to be produced in great number, so to some degree the artist as organising principle still dominates the field even in the face of discomfort about biography as a generator of meaning. In some cases, it seems that scholars' interest in biography has simply shifted to figures other than the artist: to the patron, or even to his subjects.³ With reference to the artist him/herself, there remains a chasm between popular interest in the personal lives of famous artists such as Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci and the general scholarly reluctance to consider matters not directly pertinent to the artists' work. But even among scholars, the pull of biography persists, and the wealth of documentation concerning Michelangelo's life makes him a natural subject.⁴

In one case at least, Barkan might have indulged his urge to biography and psychoanalysis more than he does. Among the most exciting passages of the book concerns Michelangelo's exchange of drawings, letters, and poems

with the young Roman nobleman, Tommaso Cavalieri. If any aspect of Michelangelo's life and work is ripe for Barkan's particular mode of analysis, with his interests in suppression and sublimation, it is certainly this. Considering the richness of the materials available for this analysis, it is surprising that Barkan devotes a mere five pages to the subject, which warrants at least a chapter of its own.⁵

In instances such as the exchange with Cavalieri, Michelangelo employed his capacities both as draftsman and as poet, allowing Barkan to demonstrate the range of his own set of analytical tools. In other parts of the book, Barkan's skills as a literary scholar are less highlighted than one might expect, with only one chapter entirely devoted to poetry. This is probably because Barkan's purpose – here as elsewhere – was partially to transcend conventional, time worn boundaries between the study of literature and art. Yet, in several ways, his points of departure are at odds with art historical method.

Most strikingly, the distinction between Barkan's approach and an art historical one arises in his conception of the page. For Barkan, his focus on 'the page itself' entails a notion of it as an abstract container for words and images. From an art historical point of view, the page is first a physical artefact. As such, apparently mundane matters – the weight of the paper, the size of the sheet, where it has been folded or cut, and the details of its technical construction (evidence of underdrawing, metalpoint, compass points etc.) – can reveal an entire archaeological history. Mauro Mussolin has recently achieved startling results through just such close attention.⁶ Although Barkan could not have known of Mussolin's work, the contrast in their methods is significant as a reflection of distinctive disciplinary approaches.

In another regard, Barkan's construction of the page as a coherent entity contrasts with the substantial insights of scholars such as Johannes Wilde and Michael Hirst, who have dissected Michelangelo's sheets in order to divine which sketches relate to particular projects. Wilde, Hirst, and other scholars tend to treat the conjunction of diverse elements on a single sheet as largely a matter of chance, occasionally yielding information that enables it to be dated, but rarely meriting inquiry with regard to the possible significance of combined elements. In contrast, a key premise for Barkan is that none of the juxtapositions of words and images can be simply accidental, or a function of Michelangelo's miserly use of paper. He writes: 'for a strong-willed, self-driven artist like Michelangelo, practices like these cannot be relegated simply to the realms of accident or necessity. His work demonstrates that there is for him a powerful aesthetic that comes from the regular, necessary, and voluntary experience of composing new expressions in the midst of old ones' (p. 63).

Although Barkan has spent his career traversing disciplinary boundaries, in some regards this is his boldest move yet, entering the sanctum sanctorum of art history. The results of viewing Michelangelo's work from his particular vantage point are certainly illuminating, but rather than showcase the insignificance of specialist training, they

underscore the many ways it shapes the questions we ask and the ways we ask them.

Like Barkan, Cole insists on employing a tight lens for his subjects. In opposition to recent interest in global networks, exchange, and travel, he argues that the city of Florence and the interplay between a small circle of artists is the proper locus of his interpretation. In directing his attention to Medici Florence, he resists the tendency to adopt the Duke's view of the city. As he writes, 'any study of patronage runs the risk of looking at society only from top down, of adopting the voice of the court panegyrist flattering a tyrant' (pp. 11–2). Cole finds an alternative to the dominant historical models that have gazed from the heights of the social pyramid downwards in the work of T.J. Clark. As Cole notes in the conclusion, early modern art historians have been slow to take up the paradigm of social and political engagement Clark established for Modernism. Cole expresses his inflection of Clark's model thus:

How is it that a set of shared ambitions led sculptors to become political actors? What incidental agendas—the erasure of Savonarola or the Strozzi, the colonization of once free cities—followed the path from the production of autonomous gallery sculptures to the installation of site-specific works? How did a patron's political goals enable artists who may well have had quite different aims, and what dividends did "narrowly" artistic goals play for patrons? (p. 285)

In a field still heavily beholden to the legacy of John Pope-Hennessy and his stylistic judgment, these are radically new questions.

Many of the broad generalities and assumptions of periodisation – typically formulated by later historians and not by writers of the period – remain firmly entrenched. Few if any would now write – as Pope-Hennessy did – of decadence or decline. But the sense of moments of apex and decline survive, implicitly, in forms of *attention* – simply in the way a survey text or course might take up sculpture in reference to Michelangelo, and then a century later to discuss Bernini, as if nothing happened in between. These are of course the jumps and gaps that come with the survey, but they also reflect and determine historical patterns that can be extremely difficult to unmoor. Periodisation has a strong impact on the material Cole considers, and why it is ripe for his reading. In the historiography of art, Giambologna, Ammananti, and Danti have been helplessly caught in the unmarked territory between Michelangelo and Bernini. They are condemned to be followers or precursors. Cole seeks to liberate them from this condition, working on several fronts at once.

Cole sets out the terms of his analysis with polemical force in the introduction, which establishes the art-historical traditions against which he is reacting. He directs his attention to sixteenth-century ducal Florence, and sets himself against three major trends in recent scholarship. First, the tendency to see everything that happens in sixteenth-century Florence as following in Michelangelo's wake; secondly, the phenomenon of art historians in thrall

to despots; and thirdly, the way in which the trendiness of the topic of international exchange has overshadowed the crucial importance of local circumstances and relations.

In contrast to these trends, and against the persistence of the monograph, Cole centres his discussion on the rivalry between three prominent sixteenth-century sculptors: 'Ammananti, Danti, and Giambologna all arrived in Florence toward the middle of the 1550s, and their convergence changed the aims of sculpture and the criteria by which it was judged, inaugurating a half century of sculptural production that counts among the most dynamic in the history of the West' (p. 10). In the seven chapters that follow, Cole illuminates all aspects of these sculptors' production, from small-scale bronzes to monumental sculpture to architecture.

While Cole keeps his narrative focused on the three sculptors at the centre of his study, he considers a wide range of their activities, from small portable bronze objects, to monumental fountains, to equestrian statues, tomb monuments, chapels, and palaces. The versatility of these sculptors in approaching such a range of commissions was crucial to their success, and Cole is adept at following them through their varied endeavours. Throughout, he keeps two dominant realities of the sculptors' lives ever present: the intense rivalry between highly talented, driven artists, determined to undermine each other at every turn, and their continuing need to ingratiate themselves to the Duke.

Cole analyses the work of the three sculptors while introducing a series of provocative, broader arguments about the interpretation of early modern sculpture. In Chapter 2, 'Professions', he suggests that subject matter was secondary to many of Giambologna's small bronze works, and that he deliberately made them open to multiple iconographic interpretations, to be adjusted according to circumstance. He proposes that the conservative critic Andrea Gilio da Fabriano's lament that artists paid little attention to subject, and all their attention to the display of their art, may actually have had the opposite of its intended effect, in a sense articulating a goal towards which artists might strive. This point seems particularly persuasive in the case of the portable bronzes, because their physical scale allowed a flexibility of arrangement and context that this additional level of openness to different meanings would have only enhanced. It is also instructive in the sense that so many of our interpretations tend to be based on laboured iconographic readings, while Giambologna describes a two figure group 'which can be taken [to show] the abduction of Helen and perhaps of Prosperina—or as one of the Sabines' (p. 88) and adds that the subject allowed him to demonstrate his artfulness. Alessandro Vittoria went as far as suggesting one of his works could be either a Sebastian or a Marsyas, in other words a saint or a pagan god.⁷

Cole also brings into doubt some of the rhetorical tropes of writing about sculpture. For example, he questions the notion of movement attributed to these sculptures, instead asserting that what is remarkable about them is their stillness. His argument relies on a reading of Pomponio Gauricus's text on sculpture from 1502 and Gotthold

Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* of 1766. He suggests that while we see torsion in sculpture as a sign of movement that has occurred or is to come, it belonged to the category of 'stasis' for Gauricus. This reading cuts so powerfully against received modes of understanding these works that it is difficult to evaluate or even take in. It also raises the question of if and how the reception of works over several centuries should be weighed against the aims of their makers. One might further ask whether stillness is indeed the aim of these works, or whether it is instead a constraint, so that it is the pressure of the medium pushing against itself and its limits that makes these works so compelling. These hesitations notwithstanding, Cole is persuasive and unsettling enough to ensure that no reader will be able to look at a sixteenth-century sculpture the same way again.

In a book about sculpture, it is striking that three chapters out of seven are devoted to topics intersecting with, or directly addressing, architecture. Cole's assertion of the importance of architecture to the sculptor's formation is a welcome corrective to the longstanding tendency to construct artificial boundaries between media that were intertwined in the Renaissance. He identifies a major and largely untreated question: what was the relation between sculpture and architecture in the later sixteenth century? Despite the scholarly fixation on Michelangelo, and the way his work forefronts this issue, it has rarely been addressed. Specifically, Cole describes two types of relationships: between architecture and sculpture in tomb and chapel designs, and between monumental sculpture and urban space in civic monuments.

In Chapter 6, on chapels, Cole conveys in vivid terms the sense of rivalry that drove each new endeavour of Ammannati and Giambologna. He demonstrates how the artists deftly manoeuvred between the constraints of post-Tridentine religion, on the one hand, and of the propaganda requirements of ducal Florence. In a number of instances, Cole's account of the rivalry between Giambologna and Ammanati allows an entirely new reading of urban spaces. For example, he suggests that Giambologna placed his equestrian statue in Piazza Santissima Annunziata in just such a way as to block the best views of Ammanati's Palazzo Grifoni, reorienting the piazza towards the new façade of the church and away from the palace.⁸ Akin to the famous account of Bernini's fountain of the Four Rivers turning away from Borromini's church of Sant'Agnes in Piazza Navona, it enlivens our sense of the personalities and aesthetics on display in the piazza.

Despite the extraordinary importance of sculpture in the Renaissance, the challenge of studying it in reproduction has undermined its status and limited the terms through which it is considered. Over the course of a series of incisive publications, Cole has remade the field of sixteenth-century sculptural studies. He has moved the field beyond the concerns framed by Pope Hennessy (primarily the traditional territory of connoisseurship, related to date, attribution, and quality) to a set of questions rooted in the early modern literature of art: questions of animation, of

alchemy, and of allegory, among others. In this book, he casts his net still wider, encompassing not only sculptural objects per se but also their relationship to the wider urban world.

Felski suggests that among the failures of contextualism is its inability to account for the 'transtemporal movement and affective resonance' of particular texts (for which we might substitute works of art).⁹ This actually leads to an unanswered query with regard to Cole's book. He persuasively demonstrates that the artists at the centre of his book surpassed many of Michelangelo's achievements and yet were not beholden to him. Why, then, do they seem to have less 'transtemporal movement and affective resonance' today? Why do the crowds at the Accademia walk by them? Of course one answer could simply lie in the self-reinforcing cult of fame that surrounds Michelangelo and the fetish of the *David*. But if there is more to it than that, it may be a question worth asking.

Although divergent in subject and method, the two books under review both belong to a revisionist moment in the historiography of Renaissance art. Long in the grip of an unarticulated practice of patronage studies, essentially diluted Marxism in which a focus on social and economic factors had morphed into a politically questionable, flattering attention to patrons, a spate of new books signals a change. Impossible to characterise except by their rejection of old models, recent publications suggest a number of paths away from the pieties of contextualism.¹⁰ The books by Barkan and Cole both also belong to varying degrees to a 'return to the object' that is underway, after years in which art history took up New Historicism's model of making the context into the text.

Perhaps most impressively, neither Barkan nor Cole allows themselves to be held back by the divisions that have grown up in the field but which would have been meaningless at the time. There is reason to hope that their success will embolden art historians in training to be similarly adventurous.

Notes

1. Rita Felski, 'Context Stinks!', *New Literary History*, vol. 42, 2011, pp. 573–91.
2. John Shearman referred to the botanical fallacy in his lectures on Michelangelo at Harvard University in the 1990s.
3. For example: Sheryl Reiss, *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. Kenneth Gouwens and Sheryl Reiss (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2005); and the recent biography of Bernini's lover by Sarah McPhee, *Bernini's Beloved: A Portrait of Costanza Piccolomini* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2012).
4. Michael Hirst and William Wallace have recently presented two distinct responses to the challenge of biography: Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame, 1475-1534* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2012) and Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and his Times* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010).
5. Barkan explored similar themes in *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (Stanford University Press: Palo Alto, 1991).
6. Mauro Mussolin, 'In Controluce: Alcune osservazioni sull'uso della carta nei disegni architettonici di Michelangelo di Casa Buonarroti', in Golo Maurer and Alessandro Nova (eds), *Michelangelo e il linguaggio dei disegni di architettura* (in press).
7. Cited by Cole, p. 89.
8. Cole, p. 255.
9. Felski, 'Context Stinks!' (2011), p. 574.
10. Recent books that suggest alternative ways of pursuing context include: Stephen Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella D'Este* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2006); Kathleen Christian, *Empire without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2010); Christopher Heuer, *The City Rehearsed: Object, Architecture, and Print in the Worlds of Hans Vredeman de Vries* (Routledge: London, 2009); Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2008); Maria H. Loh, *Titian Remade: Repetition and the Transformation of Early Modern Italian Art* (Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, 2007); Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011); Lisa Pon, *Raphael, Dürer, and Marcantonio Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance Print* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004); Jonathan Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting: Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006); and Christopher Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2008).

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