2015

The Geographical Information of Art History: How to Trace the Making of Knowledge and Facts

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Art Traceability

Olivier Marcel, Guest Editor
Editorial Statement

The ARTL@S BULLETIN is a peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary journal devoted to spatial and transnational questions in the history of the arts and literature. The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international, and 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, ARTL@S BULLETIN intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts.

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The Geographical Information of Art History: How to Trace the Making of Knowledge and Facts

"Traces by the thousands... it’s the dream of any researcher,"¹ but the way to go from the archives or the field is seldom straightforward: indeed, “the physical pleasure of salvaging a lost trace is followed by feelings of perplexity and impotence of not knowing what to do with it.”²

The spatial turn in humanities has enticed various disciplines to deconstruct the making of art. Following the circulation of artworks and artists now appears to be a fertile way to uncover the rationales, the constraints and the transgressions that shape the historical geography of art.³ This ‘return to facts’⁴ calls for a closer examination of the methods used to identify, collect, re-assemble and interpret the geographical information produced by artistic activity. To examine the traceability of artistic knowledge and facts is the primary aim of this issue of the ARTL@S Bulletin.

Depending on the spatial and chronological framing of their studies, researchers are led to work on a variety of documentary material that can inform on the circulation of art: such traces can be written, pictorial, photographic, institutional, individual, collective, etc. In each case, the available traces can be partial and only give access to specific types of information: origin, extension, destination, network, economic model, value, hierarchy, etc. It can consequently hinder or bias our understanding and analysis of art.

The genealogy and usages of the notion “trace,” from Carlo Ginzburg to Paul Ricoeur and Bruno Latour, reveals the surprising abundance of conceptual approaches.⁵ Indeed, traces can be thoughtfully disseminated by artists themselves and constitute a voluntary, planned and strategic testimony to future research. Traces can also be looked at as the clues, or the scattered jigsaw pieces of the institutional, legal or economic organization that may have framed artists’ practices and circulations. Traces of art can also be considered as footprints, grounded facts that may indicate the unavoidable gateways or the decentered pathways of artists’ trajectories. In that sense, traces of artistic activity can be reclaimed, reinterpreted, or found the basis of memorial constructions.

In each case, traces are not a given but rather trails of research that lead to the reassessment of the way we understand artistic facts (circulations, events or deeds), and knowledge (that may encompass formal techniques, tacit social know-how and network, but also views on the history and economy of art practices that are all coherent with a set of spatial understandings of success, legitimacy and authenticity).

² Ibid.
³ As seen in recent projects such as ARTL@S [www.artlas.ens.fr], London Galleries [Anne Helmreich and Pamela Fletcher, Nineteenth-Century Art World Wide 12, 1 (2012)] or in the most recent developments in the field of art geography [Tatiana Debeux (2012), Camille Boichot (2012), Olivier Marcel (2014), Christine Bhrubide (2015)] that echo Peter Jackson’s seminal call to “re-materialize social and cultural geography.” See Peter Jackson, Social and Cultural Geography 1 (2000): 9-14.
⁴ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyaux-Prunel, eds., Circulations in the Global History of Art (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).
⁵ Alexandre Serres distinguishes at least four approaches: “trace-mémoire,” “trace-écriture,” “trace-indice,” and “trace-empreinte.” See Alexandre Serres, “Quelle(s) problématique(s) de la trace ?” Séminaire du CEWICOR: Traces et corpus dans les recherches en Sciences de l’Information et de la Communication (Université de Rennes 2, December 13, 2000). http://archivest.uccaf.cnr.fr/sic_08001397/document
Arboleda is a New York based Colombian artist whose work revolves around the materialization of artistic gestures within the broad social realm. His piece, Monday Morning, can be interpreted as a subtle play and conflation of different understandings of the notion of trace. While emphasizing ephemerality, those balloons given to pedestrians in the city’s Central Bus Station during rush hour also provide an allegory of the way traces are passed on, reclaimed and ultimately outpace the artist’s own scheme. This illustration also invites researchers to ponder on how far we should follow each and every balloon — metaphorically speaking — to understand the reach of a single artwork: from the artist’s own trajectory that led him to Nairobi, to the impact of a contemporary art practice within a local art scene and to the performance’s afterlife in the social, critical, and scholarly commentary it produced.

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If art studies, ranging from history, sociology or geography, have now embraced George E. Marcus’ methodological strategies to “Follow the People,” and “Follow the Thing,” what does this pursuit entail? Applying the traceability paradigm to art studies brings forth a series of questions that revolve around the production of facts, doings or behaviors on one hand, and the knowledge or discourses that rely on these actions on the other.

Who produces the traces of art history? Who has the power to inscribe those traces in time and space and how does that ‘situate’ our readings of art history? In that sense, evaluating the traceability of art constantly leads to evaluating actors’ logics, their relations, hierarchies and ultimately their power over our scholarship.

Among the contributors of this issue, Vincent Veschambre provides a reflexive study on the notion of trace, in the perspective of geography, a discipline he conceives as the study of the spatial dimension of the social. He approaches traceability as a method to reach the social actors that have been concealed by history.

Fedora Parkmann’s article tackles the spatialities of magazines. The hypothesis explored by the author is two-fold: on the one hand the iconography of art magazines is part of an internationalist strategy; on the other hand, this source allows measuring the circulations of a group of artists and the reality of their influence.

Laetitia Corbière retraces the role and importance of impresarios in the circulation of concerts at the turn of the 20th century. Looking at memoirs, accounting documents and tour programs, the article shows how impresarios became instrumental in the international promotion of national identities.

How can those traces speak? Does the study of specific traces induce specific observation protocols and analysis? Assuming that different methods make lead to different interpretations, we can hypothesize that a single trace can therefore lead to multiple and contradictory conclusions. How then can different traces be assembled? Putting scattered or disparate traces together exposes us to a “biographical illusion” and the risk of artificially creating meaning. In what conditions can we establish the coherence between traces and trajectories or networks?

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Léa Saint-Raymond has built up a rich study of a unique caricature published in a Parisian magazine during the interwar, in which an artist appears to attack the “Montparnos,” depicting them as failed and scruffy artists. The author shows that artistic distinction is also a social and spatial one and provides a method to understand the territorial dimension of artistic rivalry. Using a wide range of tools, the article retraces and deconstructs the subtext of an artistic quarrel.

What sense can be made out of the distribution of traces? Do cartographic representations give substance to diffusionist notions that have riddled art history such as ‘style,’ ‘influence’ or ‘school’? Are they able to contradict or nuance dominant models of thinking such as center/periphery? Or do they only mirror the situatedness of their recording process? Can we index traces in a comparative and global perspective or should the methods relating to traceability take into account the specificities of local inscriptions?

While tracking looted artworks and war trophies of Napoleonic wars, Nora Gietz draws an original perspective on 1800’s Europe and the subsequent transnationalisation of art history. The author posits that artworks have a spatial life, and that that life is significant of its times, of the events, conceptions and hierarchies that occurred during that time. By doing so, she provides a reflection on the spatial life of art, and the sensitive issues of restoration/restitution legitimacy.

How far can/should the quest for traceability go? How do linguistic, cultural or material boundaries affect the legibility of traces?

Studying tourism and leisure mobilities of American artists in Europe between 1950 and 1960, Elsa Capdevila challenges the interpretation and limits of the available sources of art history. Looking at letters, drawings, exhibition reports, participant lists in salons or art schools, her contribution asks where art history stops, both in terms of sources (how do tourism studies relate to art studies?) and in terms of space (the Parisian center is confronted to the attraction of European margins). The traces lead to an understanding of the symbolical construction of the “international” status. The author then builds on those traces to further understand the socialization of artists in the process of mobility.

The objective of this trans-disciplinary, trans-regional and trans-periodical issue of Artl@S Bulletin is to confront a wide range of sources (catalogues, institutional archives, photographs, interviews, etc.), methods (qualitative, quantitative, comparative, multi-situated, carto-graphic, etc.) and areas of investigation (careers, movements, markets, etc.) in order to highlight the pivotal and problematic role of traceability in the spatial study of art.

In a conclusive article, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Olivier Marcel analyze the readings and meanings of exhibition catalogues, one of the archetypal tools to retrace art. Looking at radically different contexts, they assess how this source can serve for comparing and bringing new light onto exhibitions, and ultimately our own knowledge of art history.

The contributions of this issue converge to a general finding that could be summed up in the following proposition: the further we trace the ideas, practices, values, hierarchies or claims inherent to the art field, the more we are able to decipher the hidden political and social motivations contained in aesthetical claims of the diverse actors of art. However, this research endeavor leads to redefining the scope of information relevant to art, and take a fresh look at the methodologies we use to interpret them.