

# Review: Revisioning Visual Worlds

Inaugural lecture by Professor Estelle A Maré  
Department of History of Art and Fine Arts  
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including notes, a bibliography and illustrations.

Reviewer: Leoni Schmidt<sup>1</sup>

In 1984, Estelle Maré published *Complexity, Ambiguity and Totality in Greek Sacred Architecture; with Reference to the Temple Precinct at Delphi and the Acropolis of Athens*<sup>2</sup>, co-authored with Arthur Rapanos. I clearly remember the growing excitement with which I read that article all those years ago. Thinking back about it, I now know why I was so impressed with that piece of work: it was because it enabled me to think about architecture and about the teaching of architectural history and theory in new and surprising ways. No longer was the Parthenon merely a façade to me; it came alive as a key to the mystery of the Greek universe and as a point of arrival after a ritual interplay of concealment and disclosure. Even today – fifteen years later and in a very different research and teaching environment – I still use that work to surprise students with the complementarity between a structural approach to architecture and a procedural sensibility.

Thus, I recently read Estelle's inaugural lecture with a sense of recognition and appreciation. Once again, she brings a rich and heterogeneous knowledge of the arts and a phenomenologist's "lived experience" of particular works of art and architecture to her task. She speaks as an "...historian who is qualified in both science, namely Architecture and Town Planning, and in the humanities, namely in Literature and

Art History."<sup>3</sup> As in the case of her 1984 article, she enables the reader to access new ways of experiencing the works on which she focuses. In this regard, it seems particularly apt when she quotes Walter Benjamin. She writes: "As long ago as 1933 Walter Benjamin ...criticised the 'bleak condition in which [the] discipline [of Art History] found itself at the end of the nineteenth century'. He pointed out the lack of insight into the meaning of art because the analysis of form was conceived by art historians as their main task. Benjamin pleaded, in the case of architecture, that the 'effect [of buildings] on the imaginative being of the viewer' be realised, since that is more important than their 'being seen' ...a statement which is applicable to all visual works of art."<sup>4</sup> Estelle does not close down meaning through an exclusive analysis of form; she rather opens up a field of interactions within which works chosen for discussion may be situated. Time and again, the reader is presented with multiple points of entry to the work. She draws a map of signification which serves as orientation and never as direction. Concerning Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, for example, we are offered perspectives ranging from that of Erwin Panofsky to that of Svetlana Alpers to that of Jan Baptist Bedaux and these subtly suggest different arguments with the same work as their focus.<sup>5</sup>

Estelle accepts various perspectives and, indeed, celebrates multiplicity. She writes: "...the examples from my 'museum' are completely distinct because of imaginative variations... a variety of world versions

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<sup>2</sup> *De Arte*, 30, April 1984, pp. 10-51.

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<sup>3</sup> *Revisioning visual worlds*, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

will be explicated. I think of this enterprise in terms of difference: art represents world views but the acceptance of their difference is the ground of their interest.”<sup>6</sup> And: “Out of the phenomenologically given world, which is suffused with interpretation, remnants of memory, expectation and associations, works of art as symbols are created. For me, works of art represent a plurality of ‘worlds’ within ‘world-versions’.”<sup>7</sup> This acceptance of plurality goes hand in hand with a respect for the works discussed. Estelle says: “...one stands in awe of great works of art...”<sup>8</sup> She states her task as looking at “...the chosen works as illusory worlds in which suggestion transcends description and illustration, but in which there is a revelation of beauty in the sense in which the universe is whole and complex.”<sup>9</sup> Quoting George Steiner (from his *Errata: an examined life*<sup>10</sup>), she adds: “I will refer to those works which, notwithstanding repeated attempts at interpretation, convince us that, ‘all understanding falls short... that around which a space is perennially fruitful. It questions us. It demands that we try again.”<sup>11</sup>

Estelle discusses works of art and architecture under two rubrics. The first focuses on “...world views and the way in which selected works of art from various cultures correspond to the scientific theory that the universe is symmetrical... During the last quarter of a century those involved with fundamental physics have announced the profound discovery that as we study Nature at ever deeper levels, Nature exhibits ever larger symmetries.”<sup>12</sup> Works focused on in this section include the east façade of the Parthenon; Leonardo’s *Concatenation*; the rose window of the apocalypse in Chartres Cathedral; *Shiva Nataraja* by an

anonymous sculptor from the Chola Dynasty in Tamil Nadu; Andrey Rublyov’s *Old Testament Trinity*; and Hildegard von Bingen’s *Angelic Hierarchy*.

The explication of such works enable the reader to appreciate symmetry as an organising principle and as a correlative for psychological wholeness. Estelle finds a state of transcendent equilibrium in these works. She also presents them as object lessons “...to us in this period of postmodern exhaustion of tradition and the present banalizing of subjective expression... [and they]... present the possibility of unalienated and re-personalized work.”<sup>13</sup> She refers to writings by Anthony Zee, Ananda Coomaraswamy and John Polkinghorne – authors who argue strongly for a transcendent dimension to physics and art. Also of importance to her is Fredrick Turner, and especially *The culture of hope: a new birth of the classical spirit* (1995)<sup>14</sup>.

A recent publication which comes to mind is the structuralist *Metapatterns; Across Space, Time and Mind* by Tyler Volk, in which the author writes: “...a metapattern is a pattern so wide-flung that it appears throughout the spectrum of reality: in clouds, rivers, and planets; in cells, organisms, and ecosystems; in art, architecture and politics... metapatterns are attractors – functional universals for forms in space, processes in time, and concepts in mind.”<sup>15</sup>

Again, it is when Estelle concentrates on a work of architecture that I learn most from her. Within the section mentioned above, she also discusses Bernini’s Piazza San Pietro at the Vatican in Rome. She introduces David Napier’s research to the reader and a fascinating dialogue with that author follows, which leads to an explication of the “...Piazza as an image of the uterus, the womb of the world, inverted in the direction of the altar of God... [an idea which]... originated in Bernini’s mind when in 1609 a Roman

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Op.cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> 1997, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p.22.

<sup>11</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Op.cit., p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Op.cit., p.17.

<sup>14</sup> New York: The Free Press.

<sup>15</sup> 1995, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 8 & 9.

sanctuary to Cybele (the mythological Mother Earth from whose womb emerges all life) was discovered at the very entrance to St. Peter's Basilica."<sup>16</sup>

The second rubric under which Estelle discusses works focuses on "...African works of art which suggest a play of concealment and disclosure", a play which also underpins much of the ritual process through which the Parthenon is approached from Athens, as explicated in the 1984 article. In this section, Estelle refers to the Hegelian notion that the "...spirit only occupies itself with objects as long as there is something secret ...in them."<sup>17</sup> She links this notion to: "The first book ever to explore the subject of the role of art in the cultural and social construction of secret knowledge in Africa, edited by Mary Nooter [and] entitled *Secrecy: African art that conceals and reveals* (1992). This book refers to a proverb of the Akan people of Ghana which holds that 'Power is not only how it is expressed but how it is concealed'. For these peoples, as well as other cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, secret knowledge is a vital dimension of power and aesthetic experience. As the vehicle for conferring status and demarcating gender and class differences, art is vested with the combined force of mystery and authority. Objects of art proclaim the ownership of secrets, while protecting their contents from the uninitiated."<sup>18</sup>

For this section, Estelle chose a Chokwe stool with female caryatid and two intaglio etchings by John Clarke for her "museum without walls". This choice is in a sense a "gift" to me, as there are not many African works shown or discussed in New Zealand; and also because there is another work by Clarke on my own wall in a house in Dunedin, a work which speaks to me of many African stories. About the Chokwe stool, we read with reference to Nooter "...that the object changes into a subject in a mythical relationship with its viewer or user... A relationship to objects can,

therefore, not be mechanical; instead, African people foster a poetic intimacy with objects."<sup>19</sup>

Concerning Clarke's works, Estelle concludes with the following: "Understanding Clarke's works is like entering certain archaeological ruins. What vanished people have left behind, that is the artefacts of their being-in-the-world, the viewer reclaims and reconstructs in his or her imagination as a part of the process of personal world-making. In participating in Clarke's representation of strife, the viewer may find that the symbolic interpretations... are wide open. The first of many that springs to mind is political. The strife of opposites, not of vanished peoples but of all those who, here and now, lay claim to the earth... the strife in which things become uniquely themselves. By extension... [his work] metaphorically suggest the mirror-play of the peoples of this land."

Estelle speaks as an art historian in both sections of works discussed and gives freely of her knowledge and experience. I thank her for this generosity of spirit and I say that it has been a pleasure to read the publication of her inaugural lecture, a "rite of passage" which should be celebrated with her. It is, however, with regard to the theoretical "enframing" of her presentation that I take a questioning stance. This does not entail criticism in its negative and destructive aspect. My questioning is rather offered in a spirit of collegiality and as an invitation to further engagement in fruitful discussion.

Honi Fern Haber writes: "There is no view from nowhere. We can never leave all our prejudices behind and operate from a wholly disinterested standpoint, but our prejudices become dangerous only when they are dogmatic, kept hidden from view and not open to discussion. This being the case, I would like at the outset to make clear, albeit in a preliminary way, the... commitments which inform [my responses]."<sup>20</sup> Estelle obviously subscribes to the necessity to

<sup>16</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, p.22.

<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.27.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Honi Fern Haber, 1994, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, New York & London: Routledge, p.1.

make clear one's position, as she introduces her discussion of works by positing her own choices with regard to the field(s) of Art History and Theory (pages 1-13); and as she concludes her discussion of works by reiterating these choices (pages 30-33).

As a colleague who respects Estelle's position, while not sharing it, I question it. But, to do so transparently, I also need to make my own position clear at the outset of this invitation to further engagement in discussion. Thus, in brief, an outline with regard to my own commitments: I speak from a poststructuralist position and ask that this not be confused with a postmodernist stance which has (amongst many other things) been connected to a relativistic enterprise linked to the diffusing and amoral cultural conditions of late capitalism.<sup>21</sup> Speaking from a poststructuralist position – as I understand it – I stand four-square within *language*. This means that I accept all human endeavour as being *immanent* and having *value* within signifying systems. It also means that I respect *differences* of human experience in all areas and that I try to articulate the effects of such experiences as I can perceive them within my *own sphere* of activities. In response to a structuralist position, I *question* universalising and homogenising modes for the hidden marginalisations and privilegings which they do not expose to view. Questioning is a *moral responsibility* for my position and it is always more sensitive to the *particular*, the small and the concrete rather than to the general, the large and the abstract. Lastly, I can add that my interpretation of a poststructuralist position takes into account *change*, *conflict*, *incompleteness*, *mobility* and the *precarious* nature of all securities. I agree with Michel Foucault that knowledge is a *practice* and often a counter-memory – we never arrive.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Neil Leach, 1997, *Rethinking Architecture; A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London & New York: Routledge, p.207.

<sup>22</sup> See Joseph Childers & Gary Hentzi (Eds.), 1995, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, New

In terms of the above, I pose four "questions" to Estelle in my focus on her inaugural lecture. These questions relate to 1) the status of "theory"; 2) a "radical centrist position"; 3) "the general and the particular"; and 4) the positing of a "transcendent view of art". Within the scope of this review, I can merely hope to invite discussion about these "questions" by offering some counter-ideas, while waiting for other opportunities in which Estelle and I may be able to work through them together.

1) Estelle says: "My search is not for a theory of art. I share George Steiner's... distrust of theories."<sup>23</sup> Read within context (pages 2-4), this statement seems to deny an awareness that Estelle obviously has about the inevitability of occupying a philosophical position. Speaking from a position necessarily entails theory/theories. Michael Carter writes: "In addition to acquiring language, without which we would be 'theory-less', we also acquire those elementary building blocks without which the world would be inchoate and disparate. At this level, thought or theory, is made up of a whole continent of ideas, assumptions and givens about what our world consists of and how it functions. As [Antonio] Gramsci emphasises, this 'world' is all about us, in our stories... in our myths and our fears... Whatever the initial reaction to the word 'theory' might be – horror or delight – it is clear that by the time this reaction takes place that a person is already committed to the use and making of theory."<sup>24</sup> In a very different context, Russell Ferguson contends: "The role of any theory is to explain... as [Gilles] Deleuze puts it: 'A theory is exactly like a box of tools... It must be useful... It is strange that it was Proust, an author thought to be a pure intellectual, who said it so clearly: treat my book as a pair of glasses directed to the outside; if they don't suit you, find another pair."<sup>25</sup> In yet another context,

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York: Columbia University Press, pp.57-58.

<sup>23</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> 1990, *Framing Art; Introducing Theory and the Visual Image*, Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, pp.32.

<sup>25</sup> "A Box of Tools: Theory and Practice", In

Keith Moxey proposes "...to use theory to understand history and history to understand theory... The historical enterprise takes on fresh significance and new meaning once the [theoretical] nature of its claims to knowledge have been recognized..."<sup>26</sup>

The "question" I put to Estelle is whether she would reconsider "theory" as not being a prescriptive device, but rather an enabling practice which can articulate positions and clarify assumptions? She seems to answer where she quotes Matthew Kieran: "Our imaginative engagement does not merely reveal a work's correct core structure. Rather, the very nature of the work's core structure may itself depend upon the assumptions and imaginative understanding we bring to bear upon it."<sup>27</sup>

2) Estelle aligns herself with a "radical centrist position". Read in context, this implies that she is pleading for "...the validity of natural and classical beauty...for a humanist and centrist vision of art..."<sup>28</sup> It is not quite clear to me who the "expanding group of academics who are moving away from leftist and rightist ideologies towards a radical centrist position", and to whom Estelle refers in her introduction, could be. One such could possibly be Hilton Kramer, who writes: "The postmodern assault on tradition – moral tradition as well as the traditions of Western art and thought – is inevitably an assault on the European past..."<sup>29</sup> Not with respect to postmodern strategies, but rather in relation to poststructuralist interventions, Moxey argues, however, that an "...awareness of how historical

narratives are invested with the values of the present serves to historicize the activity of the historian."<sup>30</sup>

My "question" posed to Estelle here is whether she can align Kieran's "imaginative engagement" with the authoritarianism of a humanist position; and whether she can marry the exclusionary notion of a centrist affiliation with the hermeneutic enterprise as being "vision and revision... cumulative, argumentative, self-correcting... [and] tentative", according to Steiner.<sup>31</sup> Her answer seems ambivalent where she concurs with David Levin's "...attempt to retrieve the heart of humanism, even as we acknowledge its inhumanity, its injustice, its irrationality, its violence, its reign of terror. Notwithstanding all its past failings, humanism still represents the potential of humanity questioning itself and its cultural achievements."<sup>32</sup> As a radical critique of habit, poststructuralism would argue that there are possibilities other than the recouping of a framework described in such terms.<sup>33</sup>

3) Although Estelle engages with specific works of art, she foregrounds the general characteristics which she recognises in them as a category. This structuralist assumption is clear where she undertakes to focus on works grouped under two rubrics. This grouping is useful as it enables the reader to understand aspects which the works have in common. However, when Estelle erases the boundaries between cultural contexts, the privileging of the general at the expense of the particular

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Russell Ferguson, William Olander & Marcia Tucker (Eds.), 1993, *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art & Cambridge Mass.: MIT, pp. 5 & 7.

<sup>26</sup> 1994, *The Practice of Theory; Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics and Art History*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., p.1.

<sup>29</sup> 1997, "The postmodern assault", *The New Criterion*, May 1997, p. 11.

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<sup>30</sup> 1994, *The Practice of Theory; Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics and Art History*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, p. 4 with reference to George Steiner, 1997, *Errata; an examined life*, p.20.

<sup>32</sup> Op.cit., p. 31 with reference to David Levin, 1988, *The opening of vision; nihilism and the postmodern situation*, New York: Routledge, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> See Joseph Childers & Gary Hentzi (Eds.), 1995, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 236-238.

becomes problematical. This is especially evident where discussion of a Hindu *Shiva Nataraja* is “seamlessly” inserted between a focus on a Catholic rose window and an Orthodox painting. Another example presents itself where a category of African art contains both traditional Chokwe stool and contemporary etchings by an artist with a European lineage.

In this respect, my “question” is offered to Estelle in the form of a suggestion: Maybe a distinction between an “emic” or insider experience of art and an “etic” or outsider view of art could help when one is speaking about art which does not belong to one’s own cultural tradition? <sup>34</sup> Olu Oguibe writes: “Otherization is unavoidable, and for every One, the Other is the Heart of Darkness. The West is as much the Heart of Darkness to the Rest as the latter is to the West. Invention and contemplation of the Other is a continuous process evident in all cultures and societies. But in contemplating the Other, it is necessary to exhibit... modesty [and regard for the particularity of practices].”<sup>35</sup>

4) Estelle writes: “The radical centre offers a critique of ideology in general Art... transcends the limits of ideology... art has always had its own purpose...”<sup>36</sup>

The wider context in which these statements are situated suggests that she equates the foregrounding of ideology with a leftist, particularly Marxist theoretical position. The “natural classicism” which she espouses with reference to Turner<sup>37</sup> is for her based on “culturally universal forms and genres... not subject to ideologies of power and control... [as the] radical centre is... not

particularly interested in the issues of power and equality, because power is transient, superficial and corrupting.”<sup>38</sup>

Being involved with the immanent relationships of art within a horizontal field of operations, I question the possibility of any art being innocent of ideological concern. Here, I use the term “ideology” as “...the combination of all forms of social consciousness, such as law, philosophy, ethics, art, etc.”, rather than as “...a form of misrepresentation that distorts social reality and seeks symbolically to resolve social contradictions that elude real solutions.”<sup>39</sup> I respect Michel Foucault who would not leave well alone, who questioned habits of thought and critically examined the ways in which ideologies (or discourses) are produced and perpetuated.<sup>40</sup>

Amidst the “raucous war of approaches” and the “faddish, self-conscious proliferating examinations of method and the consequent disarray [in the subject]” which Estelle talks about with reference to S.Heller and S.Howard<sup>41</sup>, many current art historians and theorists engage with contemporary practices without the distorted interpretations which O.K. Werckmeister identifies in his “Radical Art History”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, while respecting the valuable work which Estelle is engaged in and of which her published inaugural lecture is a much appreciated result, I invite her to further discussion on the issues raised through my encounter with her research. Maybe the following quote from Mikhail Bakhtin will lure her into further conversation: “There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is

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<sup>34</sup> These terms are widely used in Anthropology and by critical writers like Thomas McEvelley in Russell Ferguson, William Olander & Marcia Tucker, (Eds.), 1993, *Discourses; Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art & Cambridge Mass.: MIT, p. 325.

<sup>35</sup> 1993, “In the ‘Heart of Darkness’”, *Third Text*, 23, p.8.

<sup>36</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, pp.7 & 8.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., p.7.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See Joseph Childers & Gary Hentzi, p.149.

<sup>40</sup> Op.cit., p. 84-85.

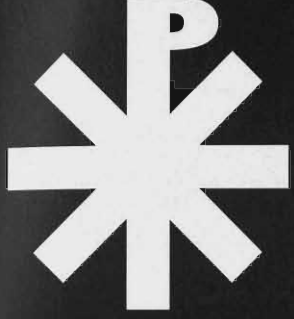
<sup>41</sup> *Revisioning Visual Worlds*, p. 2: S. Heller, 1997, “What are they doing to Art History?”, *ARTnews*, 96 (1), pp. 102-105; and S. Howard, 1996, “Iconology, intention, images, and myths of meaning”, *Notes in the History of Art*, 15 (3, Spring), pp. 1-13.

<sup>42</sup> In *Art Journal*, 42 (4, Winter), 284-291.

those born in the dialogue of past centuries can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Pam Morris, (Ed.), 1994. *The Bakhtin Reader; Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. New York , Melbourne & Auckland: Edward Arnold, front cover.

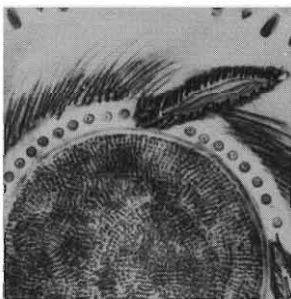


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