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Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer

Kanwit, John Paul M.

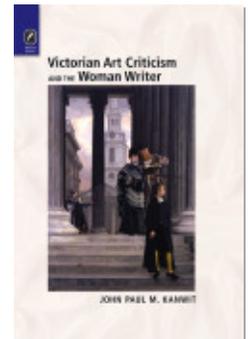
Published by The Ohio State University Press

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Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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CONCLUSION



“An astonishingly tasteless idea”?

ARTISTIC VALUE AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Speaking before a standing-room-only audience at Indiana University in March 2004 after being selected to rebuild the World Trade Center site, the architect Daniel Libeskind vowed to reconnect architecture with people and to replace what it had supposedly lost in the twentieth century: its “magic” and connection with nature. “Architecture is life” and “human meaning,” he remarked. A year earlier, Libeskind was equally enthusiastic about the competition for the site design, which he had not yet won: “From now on, architecture will never be the same. There will never be a building without people talking about what is happening and what it’s going to look like. From now on, architecture will be as interesting for people to talk about as the taste of wine” (qtd. in Iovine B5). Libeskind’s simile underscores a central problem in discussions of taste from the eighteenth century on: claims for democratization often rest on elitist assumptions. While the plans for the World Trade Center site have engaged a large section of the public, architecture and its commentary remains to many readers as foreign as the subtle differences among wines.

Admittedly, architecture has been a less prominent focus in this book than other art forms like painting. But architecture was also integral to most Victorian discussions of taste. As I demonstrate in the first two chap-

ters, worries about increased access to both household goods and architectural forms were inextricably linked in the commentaries of Pugin, Ruskin, and the architect Charles Eastlake. Further, debates about the National Gallery and other venues (the focus of chapter 5) demonstrate that buildings were considered as important to educating visitors as the artworks themselves. The embodied perspective that Jonathan Crary has seen as defining nineteenth-century viewing practices is frequently represented in relationship to actual buildings in Victorian writings on art. Dilke, for example, places her reader inside Renaissance buildings to illustrate both their formal features and their marks of individual genius, which she clearly links to Victorian notions of freedom. Pugin and Ruskin were thus not the only Victorian critics to consider the social importance of architecture. I conclude with commentary on the World Trade Center site because it illustrates such Victorian tendencies in a way that most recent art criticism does not.

Modern art criticism, whether in the popular press, at exhibitions, or in textbooks, often divorces works from their social contexts, discussing them instead in purely formal terms. The stories, embodied perspectives, and colorful language that characterize many Victorian writings on the subject—even ones that are more formal in focus—are usually absent in recent commentary. For example, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, a standard modern textbook for undergraduate art history courses, characteristically remarks of James Tissot's *The Ball on Shipboard* (1874) that the painting's "obliqueness of light direction makes for a most complex tonality. . . . the painter is concerned above all with rendering the scene as if it is occurring at an instant in time—spontaneous, unposed, natural. The effect is photographic, as John Ruskin realized" (847). The description provides a definition for realistic impressionism but neglects the interesting and important contemporary debates that surrounded Tissot's paintings, including those about his supposedly unsuitable subjects. Demonstrating his focus on subject as well as form, Ruskin remarks in *Fors Clavigera* (79) that Tissot's paintings "are, unhappily, mere coloured photographs of vulgar society" (*Works* 29: 161). By contrast, the authors of *Gardner's Art* suggest that Ruskin was merely pointing to Tissot's technique, rather than joining a historically specific discussion about form and subject.¹

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that such a preoccupation with form in modern art commentary is a way of ignoring the real emotion in a painting: that created by the relationships among artist, subject, and viewer. Berger illustrates this problem by referring to a twentieth-century study of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Frans Hals. While the art historian

(whom Berger does not name) denies any relationship between the painter and his subjects, discussing the work in purely formal terms, Berger argues that Hals must have been affected by his status as a pauper in representing the regents who provided him with charity. Berger notes that the paintings “work upon us because we accept the way Hals saw his sitters,” that is, as powerful, yet deeply flawed individuals (13). Berger encourages viewers to see this human relationship for themselves. Thus, the viewer’s emotional response as well as awareness of historical class dynamics is key to Berger’s aesthetics.

In contrast to the formal concerns of much recent art criticism, human emotions have been emphasized in much of the discourse surrounding the commemoration of September 11. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, critics assured readers that the arts could provide solace to grieving individuals and to the country as a whole.² These writers suspended their usual impulse to group the various arts into distinct value hierarchies. Traditionally “high” arts such as literature and painting were discussed in similar terms to such forms as pop music; critics commonly assumed that all these genres could both reach individual mourners and provide a common mode for sharing feelings. Writing on pop music in a *New York Times* article dated September 13, 2001, Neil Strauss argued that Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind” could provide solace for those affected by tragedy. For Strauss, the song transcends its subjects—Princess Diana, most recently, and Marilyn Monroe, originally—to connect with individual experiences and emotions (E5). Indeed, the song has been immensely popular in both the United States and Britain. Strauss’s endorsement of “Candle in the Wind,” despite its popularity and emotional appeal, is representative of the tendency to collapse value hierarchies after such national tragedies as September 11 and the death of Princess Diana.

Writing a few days after Strauss’s article, the *Times*’s chief art critic Michael Kimmelman argued that the “high” art displayed in museums could, in the words of his title, “be a haven from all the anxiety of devastating events” (D1). “While everything in the world has changed,” writes Kimmelman, “museums are about continuity” (D1, D5). “And about excellence, by the way,” he remarks in a seemingly unimportant aside; “Now is a good time to remind ourselves why quality matters” (D5). Kimmelman links good taste with social stability by suggesting that the “quality” of art contained in museums helps these venues provide “continuity.” In doing so, Kimmelman reestablishes the hierarchy of the arts that was temporarily leveled in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Like Victorian critics, Kimmelman and other recent critics find themselves in a quandary: they

want to engage readers without lowering standards by endorsing overly emotional art.

The debate about how to rebuild the World Trade Center site has presented critics with a similar problem—that is, how to protect architectural taste from the emotions surrounding the September 11 tragedy. A compounding factor is the popularity of the project’s most prominent architects, which has threatened to shift the focus away from architectural standards. “With talk of truth and beauty, memory and monument, these architects have been selling themselves like movie stars,” writes Julie Iovine in a February 2003 article in the *New York Times*. “Not since Gary Cooper appeared in *The Fountainhead* has the public been so riveted by architecture and architects” (B1). Libeskind in particular gained the kind of attention not usually enjoyed by twenty-first-century artists. Such minutiae as his cowboy boots and black glasses were spotlighted in the Style section of the *New York Times* on two different occasions (Iovine B5). While Libeskind claimed in his March 2004 speech that the project is “not about the ego of the architect” but rather involves collaboration with other builders and the public, he presented his studio’s design as a creation of his own individual genius.³ An image of the “Master Site Plan for the World Trade Center Site” on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s website carried Libeskind’s signature, not the name of his architectural firm—Studio Daniel Libeskind (the studio’s name, of course, also highlights Libeskind’s importance).

Art critics have capitalized on this renewed interest in the arts, and particularly on the design selection for the World Trade Center site, by attempting to influence public taste. Similarly to Victorian commentary on key developments in the art world, this recent writing both celebrates the supposed democratization of the arts and seeks to set certain standards of taste. Herbert Muschamp, chief architecture critic for the *New York Times*, wrote in February 2003, “One of the most heartening developments to come out of the debate over the future of ground zero has been the public’s greater awareness of what an architectural program is. . . . Throughout the debate, the public has been saying that it wants to control the program” (“Designers’ Dreams” B5). To an extent, the process was indeed democratic. The proposed designs were posted on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s website, and public comment was both solicited and seemingly considered. The initial six plans were all rejected because of the public outcry about their blandness and commercial focus. The two designs selected as finalists—that from Libeskind’s studio and the “Think” plan—were the most popular. However, the ultimate decision to choose Libes-

kind’s plan, which has itself been extensively modified over the past several years due to decisions by the developer and other architects, was made by Governor George Pataki.

In their commentaries on the most popular designs for the site, architecture critics have been primarily motivated by a desire to preserve good architectural taste. Critiquing Libeskind’s design in February 2003, Muschamp complains about the values contained in the plan but also about its overall lack of taste. For Muschamp, Libeskind’s ideas are aggressive and vengeful, especially the 1,776-foot pointed tower, which has remained a prominent feature of the current design. Muschamp asks of Libeskind’s conception, “Why . . . should a large piece of Manhattan be permanently dedicated to an artistic representation of enemy assault? It is an astonishingly *tasteless* idea. It has produced a predictably *kitsch* result” (“Balancing Reason and Emotion” 1, emphases mine). Muschamp suggests that what would have been acceptable immediately after September 11 is no longer so: “Boundaries must be placed around grief lest it overwhelm our ability to gain new perceptions” (3). Muschamp hopes to limit emotional appeal with reason rather than accepting a plan that seems calculated to please the public. Libeskind’s design “trade[s] on sentimental appeal at the expense of historical awareness” in its “quasi-religious” (2) references to American values in such features as the 1,776-foot tower.⁴ Muschamp argues that this sentimental appeal is not limited to Libeskind and his design alone; memorial architecture has become so popular that it is now simply another “branch of industry” (2). Muschamp’s complaints about seductive sentimentality and its commercialization in art are strikingly similar to those made by Victorian writers some 150 years earlier.

Despite his dismissal of “quasi-religious” sentiment, Muschamp’s review is informed by his own ideology about American values. Thus, he prefers the other finalist, the “Think” design, over Libeskind’s plan because “Think” contains Enlightenment ideals in its “abstract geometric composition” and spaces for cultural learning (1). The abstract form of the building would supposedly prevent the kind of sentimental appeal attached to Libeskind’s more obvious symbolic features. In other words, Muschamp hopes to preserve the sort of difficulty valued by Ruskin in prompting the public to think and reason about architecture. As it turns out, however, Muschamp seems as interested in social control as in individual reason or emotion. For Muschamp, the “Think” plan would provide order to the city in a way that a memorial giving voice to anger could not: the “spaces it proposes for memorial observance . . . would be enclosed within the Enlightenment framework that has stabilized this country since

birth” (3). Through its skeleton-like recreation of the Twin Towers, the building would be “a soaring affirmation of American values” (1). Thus, while seemingly about subjective interpretations and remembrance, the “Think” plan in Muschamp’s conception is simply ideological and controlling. In arguing instead for impermanent art on such memorial sites, Mark Lewis remarks, “Public art is literally an art creating a public, an art creating society—one that may or may not be commensurate with any real body of people in a real time or place” (12). Thus, no permanent art can meet the actual needs of a diverse group of people.⁵ Victorian memorials, notes Richard Stein, have served the kind of ideological and controlling functions that Lewis hopes to avoid in his argument for impermanent art. According to Stein, the Albert Memorial in London has never been primarily a site for grieving over the prince consort. Rather, it is “a power machine, a device for simultaneously representing, exerting, and rearticulating authority” in its classification of both colonized peoples and residents of London (246). The memorial focuses the viewer on British values and imperial might.

As the new collection of buildings finally rises at Ground Zero, assessments center on the question of whether or not the site should serve primarily as propaganda for American values. In a comment that sounds similar to recent commercials celebrating American resiliency after the recession, Robert Ivy, executive vice president and CEO of the National American Institute of Architects, remarks, “Of course, they said it [building the site] couldn’t be done. . . . Yet all, . . . failed to take New York grit into full account” (3). Instead of evaluating the aesthetic features of the site, Ivy seems most intent on building it up; Libeskind’s 1,776-foot tower, which “will overtop all other buildings in the United States,” “seems to be rushing upward” (4). Ivy does mention the memorial function of the site but seems most impressed with the progress of the project and with its developer, Larry Silverstein.

By contrast, Michael Sorkin, architecture critic and professor at the City University of New York, derides what he sees as the major “‘theme’ of the site”: “memory and *profit*” (6, emphasis mine). Like Mark Lewis, Sorkin had advocated that the site be left with no buildings or memorial. In its ultimate goal of profit making, the built site will be at best “uniform” and at worst “overscaled and aggressively bereft of humane meaning” (Sorkin 4). Here, Sorkin complains about the hyperformalism and lack of human emotion that Berger finds missing in much twentieth-century art commentary. Moreover, Sorkin asserts that the site’s bland appearance indicates “a steady lowering of architectural expectations” (5). Similar to much Victo-

rian art commentary, Sorkin’s anxious review hopes to return us to supposedly better times when tastes were higher.

Despite critics’ preoccupations with national values and the preservation of high taste, the recent debate about the World Trade Center site has illustrated one promising sign in modern art criticism. The critics I consider here view their advice as important not only for aesthetics but also for questioning some of our usual beliefs about responding to tragedies. Thus, Muschamp argued in February 2003 that Libeskind’s plan was particularly inappropriate for a nation preparing for war with Iraq: “Unintentionally, the plan embodies the Orwellian condition America’s detractors accuse us of embracing: perpetual war for perpetual peace” (“Balancing Reason and Emotion” 2). More recently, Sorkin has complained about the “monster infrastructure of surveillance and ‘security’” at the site, including the “bombproof bunker” at the base of One World Trade Center (4). These critics’ misgivings about the embodiment of war in architecture are reminiscent of Ruskin’s critique of nations that are too focused on arms races to prioritize quality art. Imagining a conversation in his lecture “Traffic” with a gentleman who seeks his advice on home decoration, Ruskin writes:

I think such and such a [wall]paper might be desirable—perhaps a little fresco here and there on the ceiling—a damask curtain or so at the windows. “Ah,” says my employer, “damask curtains, indeed! That’s all very fine, but you know I can’t afford that kind of thing just now! . . . [A]t present I am obliged to spend it nearly all in steel-traps . . . for that fellow on the other side of the wall.” (*Works* 18: 438–39)

A humorous situation when occurring between two gentlemen is not so when nations fight and neglect beauty, when the world “paints itself red with its own heart’s blood instead of vermilion” (*Works* 18: 439). While many twenty-first-century readers will disagree with such positions and even with the premise that art can serve a socially redemptive function, commentaries such as those by Muschamp and Sorkin may engage the public to an extent not seen since the nineteenth century. We may no longer share the Victorian faith in sages, but Muschamp’s portrayal of Libeskind’s design as a symbol of war and Ruskin’s juxtaposition of blood and vermilion should at the very least provoke thought about beliefs that often go unquestioned.

