

Abiding present. Challenging time in art history (London, 11–12 May 23)

The Warburg Institute, London, May 11–12, 2023

Deadline: Nov 30, 2022

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“The art historian [...] has before him a product of the past that is still present today”. Coined by Leopold Ettlinger at the 1970 Kunsthistorikertag in Cologne, this maxim encapsulates an essential principle behind art history, as well as an arduous challenge for its practitioners. Since the past is perpetually renewed by dint of confrontation with the present, how can art historians attend to the worries of their own contemporary moment, while capturing an object’s bygone reality and continuing reception?

More recently, such historiographic ambiguities have been amplified by art history’s critical revision of its core terms and values to accommodate cultural diversity. Dan Karlholm (2018), Partha Mitter (2013) and Keith Moxey (2013), among others, have called for a reassessment of our relationship with the past, questioning linear accounts of time and the status of artefacts as material witnesses. Central to these inquiries is a charged notion of the present: due in part to postmodern discourses and the demise of social models of history the perception of a singular, boundless now has ushered in a “presentist” mindset that shapes scholarship as much as university and museum politics. Levelling out historical consciousness, this presentism responds more directly to the needs of our times and yet it fails to encompass the critical potentials of the past. While the “contemporary” in its many nuances has become a globally accommodating term, there are risks: the concerns of today encroach on another time, mischaracterising historical records, substituting for textual archives that no longer exist, or imposing models of periodisation derived from colonial or ideological discourses.

Our workshop addresses these issues by considering the notion of an abiding present – a call for discussion rather than a temporal marker. Different to the contemporary, the phrase gestures towards art history’s complex temporal dealings and its commitment to both historical contextualization and political awareness. Sensitive to the issues outlined above, we hope to explore anew the relationship between the present and the past in art history, initiating a dialogue that critically considers old and new methods in our field. Our discussion will be complemented by a review of selected materials from the Warburg Institute Archive that address the interplay of art and its temporalities in both theoretical and practical terms. We invite papers that respond to these ideas by engaging with key methodological positions or, alternatively, with individual objects roughly situated within, but not necessarily limited to, three areas of inquiry:

Questioning the Present

How and under which conditions may the art historian mobilise his expertise to advance social

and political agendas of his present, and what is art history's aesthetic or educational mission today? To what extent can we regard art historians as critics of their time?

Rewriting the Past

Historical artworks supposedly undermine the divisions between past and present, making and perceiving. Every artwork was once contemporary, and all contemporary art is historically situated. What is the art historian's licence in framing historical objects through contemporary and, perhaps, anachronistic methodologies? What are the potential advantages, as well as some of the hazards, of this practice?

The Structure of History

With the onset of a "new time" in the late 19th century, the "modern" mindset drove a wedge between the receding past and the progressing present. However, recently, it has become more and more apparent how such temporal linearity is informed by exclusively Western sensibilities. What are the theoretical and political consequences of a "modern" structure of history? How to diversify historical consciousness and how to update established models of periodisation?

Papers should be 15-20 minutes in length and will be divided into panels of 3-4 speakers, with allocated time for discussion following each panel. Early career researchers are particularly encouraged to apply. Travel and accommodation costs may be supported, subject to funding availability. Interested speakers should submit a title, a short abstract (max.150 words) and a short bio (max. 100 words) in English to Ambra D'Antone at ambra.dantone@sas.ac.uk by 30 November 2022 5pm GMT.

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Reference:

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