Last Works, 1500–2000, AAH 2023 (London, 14 Apr 23)

University College London, Institute of Education, Apr 14, 2023

Alejandro Nodarse

Last Works, 1500–2000.

Art history is, most often, a history of beginnings. Its art historical chronologies invoke a history of firsts: first artists, first artworks, first movements. Classification and periodization often accord with an artist's life, and acts of initiation and points of inception have overwhelmingly been afforded significance and scholarly exposure. In his 1936 essay, "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin sought to reverse this naturalization: death, rather than life, provides its own artistic and narratological source. Or put another way, finality proffers creative authority. Several decades after Benjamin's pronouncement, we ask again: How has the idea of an "end" shaped and reshaped artistic and art historical enterprises?

In this session, scholars will contemplate "lastness" as an art historical concept. Three interrelated lines of inquiry will guide our conversation. First, how do works come to an end through the willed actions of their creator(s) (for example, via verbal renunciation or, in extreme cases, physical destruction)? Second, what authority do last works accrue because of their finality? And third, what historiographic pressures are placed on an artist's last works to testify to a mythologised self?

Session Convenors:

Alejandro Nodarse, PhD Candidate, History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

Tai Mitsuji, PhD Candidate, History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

PROGRAMME

10:30 AM
Introduction: The Idea of the Last Work

10:40 – 11:00 AM
Danielle Canter, PhD Candidate, Department of Art History, University of Delaware

"Final State: Defying Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Printmaking"

In 1863, the critic Philippe Burty created a furor among fellow art collectors when he proposed destroying the copper plate for Jean François Millet's etching, Le Départ pour le travail, after only

ten impressions had been printed. Although Burty failed in this endeavor, which Millet referred to as “barbarous,” he soon successfully promoted the destruction of plates among French artists as a means of ensuring the rarity or singularity of prints. The possibility of a final printed state, resulting from this destruction, rose in popularity as artists responded to new forms of photomechanical reproduction that threatened to devalue original prints.

This paper examines the divisive origins of plate cancellation in the nineteenth century and the motivations for shifting printmaking practice away from the infinitely mutable and reproductive matrix. The seemingly drastic act of cancellation, which involved marring the surface of the copper plate, was intended to heighten the interest of collectors and increase market values for prints by manufacturing scarcity. By the 1870s, artists increasingly embraced cancellation as an artistic tool, in defiance of the reproductive capacity of printmaking. At the same moment, monotype and other non-reproductive printmaking practices emerged as the value of the multiple was reconsidered in an increasingly industrial print culture. By embracing plate cancellation and unique printing techniques in this period, artists fundamentally transformed the function of reproduction in nineteenth-century printmaking.

11:05 – 11:25 AM
David Ehrenpreis, PhD, Professor of Art History, James Madison University

“Vision and Sacrifice: Philipp Otto Runge’s Fall of the Fatherland”

Thirty years after the German Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge’s death in 1810, his brother published an exhaustive set of the artist’s writings. Containing more than one thousand pages of letters, essays, and critical reviews, it was intended to secure Runge’s place for posterity. When he died at thirty-three, Runge had achieved renown for his picture cycle Times of Day and was in regular correspondence with important thinkers from Goethe and Brentano to the philosophers Schelling and Görres. For the frontispiece of this compendium, however, instead of a well-known painting, his brother selected “Fall of the Fatherland,” a small unpublished drawing for the cover of a patriotic journal. Produced during the French occupation of Prussia, it fused Christian theology, classical myth, and personal experience, underscoring the conception of Runge as a pious mystic whose singular devotion (and untimely death) had endowed him with unique insights. In this family romance, the sacrifice of the fallen father ensures his family’s future. Runge’s fallen hero is based on a Baroque print of Hector and on Holbein’s Dead Christ, while the mother and child are based on recent portraits of his own wife and son. In 1810, Runge wrote that if an artist had a deep enough understanding of the present, “everything past and future is reflected in his immediate surroundings.” This picture would shape a new understanding of Runge as a creator whose Christ-like sacrifice and transcendent vision could forge a new art and bring a future nation into being.

11:30–11:50 AM
Kevin Lotery, PhD, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, Boston College

“The Anteroom Dweller: Siegfried Kracauer’s History: The Last Things Before the Last”

Though his writings of the 1920s and 1930s have long been celebrated as canonical texts of media theory and cultural criticism, Siegfried Kracauer’s last work, the enigmatic History: The Last

Things Before the Last (1969, posthumous publication), has only recently been given critical attention. Written in English in 1960s New York and left unfinished at the time of his death, the History book lies at the intersection of film theory, historical philosophy, and theological speculation. It is a book haunted by the figure of “the last” and what Kracauer terms the realm of “last things”: the desired, but impossible, final place of authority from which history can be viewed and measured as a totality.

My paper examines the question of “the last” and of lastness in general through the prism of Kracauer’s History book and some of his key Frankfurt School interlocutors. Of particular interest is the book’s historical position within 1960s art and culture, a position that has not received sustained investigation. It is only by paying attention to this context, I think, that we might begin to understand the book’s structuring conceit: that film (“camera reality”) and history (“historical reality”) represent parallel practices. In his enigmatic phrasing, Kracauer names both the work of the filmmaker and the work of the historian as “anteroom” activities, belonging to an “intermediary area” in ambivalent proximity to the domain of “the last.”

In my presentation, I probe Kracauer’s “anteroom” and unpack its peculiar status as both before and after the “last”: a space of waiting in which the authority of the historian to construct final, last truths might be challenged—and even usurped—by the nonhuman, machinic intelligence of the camera.

11:55–12:15 PM
Discussion

2:30–2:40 PM
Introduction: Temporalities of the Last Work

2:40–3:00 PM
Maria Gabriella Matarazzo, PhD, Melville J Kahn Fellow, I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies

“Raphael’s Unfinished Challenge: the Legacy of the Room of Constantine outside the Vatican Palace”

This paper explores the legacy of Raphael as transmitted in the Room of Constantine, the last of the Vatican Rooms to be decorated. According to Giorgio Vasari, Raphael managed to paint only two figures before dying in 1520: Iustitia and Comitas. The recent restoration campaign undertaken by the Vatican Restoration Laboratory has proved the reliability of Vasari’s account: not only did Raphael attempt there the experimental oil-on-wall technique, but he also planned to adopt it for the entire room. By leaving this endeavor unfinished, Raphael posed a technological challenge to his pupils, a challenge that even Leonardo had previously failed. Yet, Raphael’s pupils did not dare to continue the decoration in oil on wall, evidently considering it unstable and unreliable, and they finished the room in fresco. However, the fascination with the glowing surface of the wall painted in oil grew, and they continued to experiment with oils outside the doors of the Vatican Palace, namely Polidoro da Caravaggio in the Roman church of S. Silvestro al Quirinale, Giulio Romano in Palazzo Te in Mantova, and Perino del Vaga in the Villa del Principe in Genoa. This paper frames Raphael’s Iustitia andComitas (the surviving fragments of his unfinished project) as

a pictorial testament and assesses their influence on his pupils. It suggests to interpret Raphael's technical mastery proved in the two Vatican figures as a legacy his pupils had to measure themselves with after his death.

3:05–3:25 PM
Ji Mary Seo, PhD Candidate, History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

"Loose Threads: Inca Quipus, Jorge Eduardo Eielson, and the Enduring Allure of Illegible Objects"

This paper examines the wide-spread destruction of sixteenth-century Inca quipus, knotted-string recording devices made by skilled administrator-artists called quipucamayocs, and the ways in which extant but illegible "last" quipuscame to inspire, some four hundred years later, a new mode of artistic practice for Swedish-Peruvian artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson (1924-2006). After the Inca Empire fell to Spanish forces in the mid-sixteenth century, many quipucamayocs were forced to renounce their quipus to avoid persecution from Spanish conquistadors who declared the objects demonic works of the devil. Thousands of quipus were consequently destroyed, both at the hands of their creators and those of the Spanish authorities. The 600 or so quipus that exist in museums today remain indecipherable, as the Inca employed no written language and the knowledge of the quipucamayocs no longer survives to the present day. But quipus, precisely because of this esoteric and "final" nature, persist as objects inordinately disposed to interpretation, as is evinced by twentieth-century artist and poet Eielson, who mobilized the illegibility of the quipu to educe notions of loss and strain. Eielson created his earliest quipu-inspired work in 1963, the first in a long series of knotted, twisted, and stretched canvases that explore the only accessible elements of the Inca record-keeping device, namely its formal and structural features. In doing so, Eielson not only contemplates an ancestral heritage forever disrupted by colonialization, but also imbues new life and meaning into some of the most enigmatic last works of a once great culture.

3:30–3:50
Filip Pręgowski, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of the History of Contemporary and Non-European Art, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń

"In Search of the Miraculous: Bas Jan Ader's Last Project"

One of the most staggering examples of "lastness" in art of the late-twentieth century is the 1975 project by Bas Ader, In Search of the Miraculous. Ader, born in 1942 in the Netherlands, belonged to the generation of conceptual artists working with performance, film, and photography. In Search of the Miraculous turned out to be his utmost tribute to sailing, of which he was a devoted enthusiast. His idea was to put himself at the mercy of the sea and cross the Atlantic alone in a small sailing-boat. He intended to take off from Los Angeles and arrive at the port in Amsterdam. The project was supposed to end with a choir singing sea shanties in the Groningen Museum, similar to the concert he had organised in Los Angeles before starting the sea journey. The venture was never completed since Ader disappeared during the journey – the following year his empty craft was discovered off the coast of Ireland. His body was never found.

This extreme case of the last work of an artist, which has become a record of fate, absence and tragic inevitability, provokes various questions, orbiting the crucial one: did the artist predict or calculate his own death? In my paper I intend to rethink how the project is perceived in view of the

tragic end. Would we still discuss it if it had been successfully completed and Ader had arrived safely at the port? Or, can we possibly think of last works ignoring the fact of their “lastness”?

3:55–4:30
Concluding Discussion

Reference:
CONF: Last Works, 1500–2000, AAH 2023 (London, 14 Apr 23). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 22, 2023 (accessed Nov 5, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/38851>.