

REVIEW

Joseph J. Tanke, *Foucault's Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 2009), ISBN: 978-1847064851

The two most notable achievements of Joseph J. Tanke's book are, firstly, its careful collection of all the dispersed essays, fragments and interviews where Foucault deals with the problems of art, and secondly, the impressive feat of conveying in accessible language the development of Foucault's understanding of these problems and their relevance for his greater philosophical project. This double achievement should enable any student of art history or visual culture to approach Foucault's original discussions with an improved sense of understanding and confidence. But the aim of Tanke's editorial interpretation reaches beyond a textbook introduction: "when viewed together, we can see in these essays the emergence of a form of thinking that can serve as a necessary corrective to the ahistorical tendencies of philosophical aesthetics." (5) Now, considering the strong modern tradition for historical aesthetics based on philosophers like Hegel, Gadamer and Adorno, one should think that the need for a corrective might be less than absolutely necessary. Since anything like a fundamental critique of philosophical aesthetics fails to materialize, what emerges instead is a synthesis of Foucault's writings on art: a forceful attempt to bring together a heterogeneous body of work to underscore its intrinsic autonomy and unique consistency.

Laboriously and carefully, the author has selected only the texts that specifically address art. Thereby the book navigates outside of works dealing with visuality in more general terms. As is well known, Foucault explored knowledge formations both in terms of discursive statements and visual formations. The memorable passages about the control of the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*; the analyses of visuality in Raymond Rousel; the public torture spectacles and the prison architecture in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; the institutionalized observations and inspections for signs of lewd behaviour that color the pages of *The Will to Knowledge*: none of those have been considered relevant.¹ In a sense that is understandable: the title promises a philosophy of art, not a genealogy of the visual, but the distinction is nevertheless paradoxical. For one thing, the motif of the artwork that inaugurates Tanke's investigation, Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, was for Foucault a crucial artwork precisely because it expressed the complexity of the Classical order

¹ I should mention the brief passage on page 22 as an exception. Those sparse comments, however, do not illuminate on the assumed distinction between "visuality" and "art" but serve merely to remind of Foucault's expanded engagement with formations of visibility.

of visuality. The painting is remarkable for its ability to allow the visual order to express itself, but it is not therefore ontologically privileged above other modes of expression. The question is whether the distinction between art and visuality that Tanke introduces performatively, that is, by way of composing and selecting, is true to the philosophical context of the writings he admits for analysis. Architecture, for example, does not pass for art, whereby neither the panopticon prison drawings nor the text "On Other Spaces" have been included—ostensibly for their proximity to vernacular visuality. The meaning of the word "art" in the book's title could indeed be suspected of belonging to a rather unFoucauldian discourse. As I will return to, this would not be the only divergence from Foucault's thinking.

There are five chapters in *Foucault's Philosophy of Art*, each devoted to a separate body of analysis. The first, as already mentioned, recaps the analysis of *Las Meninas* from *The Order of Things*. Tanke summarizes the main points of the archeological masterpiece and guides the reader through Velazquez's portrait, seemingly in a faithful rendering of Foucault's text. But while Tanke's description of *The Order of Things* is thorough, poignant and effective, I find the interpretation of *Las Meninas* rather curious. It is not the first time I have come across this interpretation, but it seems to me unfounded, not to say absurd. Tanke suggests that Foucault reads Velazquez like a time machine. According to this interpretation, Foucault saw in *Las Meninas* the opportunity to contain all of the three epistemic orders (the Renaissance, the Classic and the Modern) in one expression, by instilling in the painting's voided point of sovereignty each of the successive forms of experience: resemblance, representation, and man. (18-19) It is a fanciful interpretation that has no bearing on Foucault's text. Velazquez's work should, so to speak, have transcended its epistemic order or else Foucault should have read *Las Meninas* merely as an ahistorical illustration of his own archeological analysis. Neither hypothesis is consistent with Foucault's work and Tanke is hard-pressed to support the idea. None of the quotations backing it up are from the *Las Meninas* analysis, but refer to passages elsewhere in *The Order of Things*.

The second chapter is called "Rupture." In its first part, Tanke establishes the ontology of the artwork as an event. It means that artworks are understood on the same level of interpretation as statements, although formally irreducible to the discursive order. Manet is the artist who "caused" this rupture in the history of art: he was the first "to compose his work explicitly in an exchange with the general system of painted-statements known as the archive." (63) In a number of telling formulations, however, the confusion between "the visual" and "art" reaches new heights. At times they seem synonymous, or at least interchangeable, as when Tanke writes: "As we have seen, Foucault opposed analyzing the visual according to models borrowed from linguistics. He thought that art would not be reduced to a form of language..." (54) At other times they seem mutually exclusive: "Speaking, therefore, of an archeology of painting [...] should not be understood as equating the visual with the discursive. It is the attempt to use notions formed in the analysis of discursive regularities to describe patterns found in the history of art." (55) Furthermore, a new concept of "culture" is invented to supplement Foucault's terminology: "The archive is the totality of discursive practices that govern the appearances of statements within a culture." (59) Indeed, Tanke

refers to "the archive of a culture" (59), assumingly to verify his new superior category of archaeology. Based on this idea of a cultural determination of the archive, Tanke suggests an analogy between Foucault's conception of the archive in "Fantasia of the Library" and the painterly inventions by Manet, "The Artist of the Archive." (63) As Foucault discovered ways of letting the epistemic conditions of language and visuality reach philosophical expression in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Manet discovered ways of letting the substratum of visual representation come to view in painting. "No longer is painting content to represent things, but now acquires a self-referentiality about its ability to represent, a process that ultimately 'throws off' [débarrasse] representation itself." (67) The preconditional ability to represent may be located in the materiality of painting, to which Manet refers while at the same time evoking his motif. The flatness of light, for example, highlights the material quality of the canvas, and challenges the "fictional" light that, since the Renaissance, has worked to privilege the visibility of the motif above the visibility of the painting as a material thing. By contrast, in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* the two visibilities coexist within the painting. The group of three in the foreground "is outfitted with a different regime of visibility" (77) than those in the background. (At this point, the word "visibility" suggests a mere abstract form that art objects express.) Apart from a very fine, but all too brief mention of Foucault's essay on Paul Rebeyrolle, "The Force of Flight", most of the analysis of Manet is a summary of Foucault's *La Peinture de Manet*, supplemented with the brief essay, 'Fantasia of the Library.'

The feeling of reading extended and edited resumé grows stronger with the third chapter, entitled "Nonaffirmative Painting." It reiterates *This is not a Pipe* (1968), Foucault's important close reading of Magritte. By means of careful comparisons with Klee and Kandinsky, Foucault explicates in this little book the intricate relationships between word and image. It is their disjunctive nature that motivates Tanke's chapter heading. Apart from the somewhat misleading title (as Foucault identifies a body of work that indeed affirms the capacities of disjunction), this is one of the best chapters in the book. Tanke manages to convey very faithfully the nature of Foucault's problem and he also shows how Magritte's works and letter correspondence with Foucault were crucial influences on his thinking. One might have wished for a more thorough commentary on the final chapter of *This is not a Pipe*, a text whose original density would have benefited from a close analysis. Only the last line, "Campbell, Campbell, Campbell," prompts Tanke to link the "unravelling calligram," as discovered in Magritte, to the notion of simulacrum as found in Andy Warhol and Gilles Deleuze. This is the breaking point of representation, conceived not merely as a general semiotic relationship, but as a fundamental condition for thinking. To think differently is to think independently of representation.

Hence the fourth chapter, "Anti-platonism" turns to Foucault's "Theatrum Philosophicum," the famous review from 1970 of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. At first, Tanke summarizes Foucault's reading of Deleuze. Then follows an exfoliation of a particular passage in *Theatrum Philosophicum* where Foucault discusses Warhol. This is the first critical reading, according to Tanke, that recognizes something other in Warhol than an artistic negation of popular culture. Foucault discovered "the universally affirmative nature of his

work," which is to say also that Warhol is recognized as "the twentieth century's most stupid artist." (132) By turning incessantly to the repetitive machinery of the capitalist reproduction of knowledge, that is, by focusing hard on the order of iterated artificiality Warhol becomes in his stupidity bound to discover the differences and events that individuate volatile identities. We might call them new statements, new visualities. The strategy of stupidity, which Foucault extracts mainly from Warhol's films, is then allowed to inform his own later readings of hyperrealist painter Gérard Fromanger and photographer Duane Michals. Tanke's analysis is observant, his summaries are faithful and instructive but they are not stupid. Although he praises Foucault for his courageous attempt to confront "a black stupidity and, in a flash, to distinguish oneself from it," (131) Tanke pursues no similar attempt for himself. The effect of Tanke's controlled exposition, his traditional composition (one in which philosophy still determines the proper reading of artworks) is, as it were, a replatonization of the anti-platonism that Tanke intends to celebrate. "We must," says Tanke, turn Plato upside-down and "reconsider those long-disparaged counterparts to ideas—emotion, passion, and sensation—precisely because they lead away from where we've been." (152) This is unfortunately dialectics once more: a turn to the opposite, an antithesis that asks us—that compels us—to confirm *the idea* of simulacra, only to lead us back to where we came from, to affirm the same way of thinking albeit from the underdog perspective. Nietzsche's hammer is applicable here.

The final chapter, "The Cynical Legacy," assumes a more autonomous and refreshing stance than the previous ones. It is a question of tracing the genealogy of the modern idea of art as a particular expression of truth back to the Cynics. Central to this analysis is the notion of *parrhēsia*, a kind of frank speech that the Hellenic Cynics paired with an ascetic life style to procure a nonconforming path toward true being. But, as Foucault never wrote an artist-centered text that may serve this chapter with a privileged reference, Tanke is fortunately bound to leave his previous format and compose his reading from a number of sources. *The History of Sexuality* and the two courses, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres; le courage de vérité*, are his main reference texts. The latter is given particular attention because of the extended treatment of Cynicism and its proposed legacy for modern art. Of overarching importance is Foucault's attention to ethico-political questions, framed as a question of the self; of relating to oneself, of giving to oneself a form of subjecthood, of subjecting oneself and others to a governing rule, of caring for oneself, etc; these questions attest to a different problem for art. Because Foucault finds that the Cynic subjectification—i.e., the self-manifestation of truth through an ascetic life style and the frank speech of *parrhesia*—mutated and migrated across Europe in three ways: Firstly, in the Middle Ages, as practices of poverty and asceticism in the Christian tradition; secondly, and much later, through revolutionary political movements; and thirdly, and most importantly here, through modern art. On the final pages, Tanke retraces Foucault's idea of a Cynic subject revitalized in the figure of the modern artist and he does it with his usual enthusiasm and pedagogical clarity. But, also as usual, he retraces Foucault without any problems, without any questions that might engender a deeper understanding of his thought.

To conclude, *Foucault's Philosophy of Art* is a useful introduction and a valuable pedagogical contribution that will certainly find appreciative readers. But as a scholarly work it is still too modern, too oeuvrecentric and too pedagogical. The tone is invariably celebratory and the analyses are unreserved in their exclusive focus on Foucault and his writings. Foucault reigns supreme, unchallenged, decontextualized, and preserved in his own work. I am not convinced that a sarcophagus is the way to do justice to his thought. I am not even sure that in this case it contains anything like a proper philosophy of art. Although Foucault may have laid the grounds for a philosophy of art to come (whatever such a philosophy might be), and although Tanke's contribution may represent a step in that direction, I wonder what a title of such grand and categorical connotations imply for a body of work whose fundamental merit is its pioneering, minor probings and openings scattered around a corpus that is fundamentally unimpressed by grandeur and categories alike.

Dag Petersson
Associate Professor
The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts
School of Architecture
Philip de Langes Allé 10
1435 Copenhagen K
Denmark
dag.petersson@karch.dk