Archaeologizing Art History

An Encounter with:

Joseph Tanke. *Foucault's Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity*. London and New York: Continuum, 2009. 222 pages.

CHLOË TAYLOR

Joseph Tanke's *Foucault's Philosophy of Art* is a provocatively titled book. Does Foucault *have* a philosophy of art? Although Foucault scholars are certainly aware of the philosopher's fragmentary writings on painting, architecture, music, literature, and film, few would have thought that these amounted to a philosophy of art. Indeed, one might think that Foucault's frequent discussions of artworks do not so much constitute a philosophy of art as they illustrate the kinds of epistemological and political arguments for which Foucault is best known. Foucault's writings on architecture, for instance, arguably reflect less a concern for the aesthetics of built spaces than for the power relations that these structures instantiate. In fact, "art" for the purposes of Tanke's study is limited to painting and photography, with a brief mention of some Warhol films; the book thus does not include discussions of Foucault's writings and interviews on architecture, literature, music, or feature-length films such as René Allio's *Moi, Pierre Rivière*. Despite these delimitations of his project, Tanke draws on a surprising number of rarely read and sometimes untranslated works, as well as the familiar analyses of Velásquez's *Las Meninas* and Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Reading Tanke's book, we also learn that Foucault taught a course on fifteenth-century Italian painting during his time in Tunisia and that he intended to write a book-length study of Manet's paintings. In unearthing these little-known aspects of Foucault's intellectual biography as well as a number of neglected texts—some of

which had not yet been published at the time of Tanke's writing—and by piecing these writings together in order to create a sustained argument about a coherent body of writings, Tanke makes a novel contribution to Foucault studies and a strong case for the importance of visual art to Foucault's thought. Despite his title, however, what Tanke aims to show in *Foucault's Philosophy of Art* is not so much that Foucault has a distinct philosophy of art as that Foucault's writings on art are an integral part of his larger philosophical project, his genealogy of modernity, and his ontology of our selves. Tanke thus does not want to argue that Foucault's writings on art challenge our usual readings of Foucault, but that they reinforce, expand, and enrich the Foucault we already knew, complementing Foucault's other accounts of how we became modern.

In the first four chapters of his book, Tanke argues that from *The Order of Things* until the eighties, Foucault was repeatedly concerned with showing that modern art (like modernity generally) broke with the classical *episteme* of representation described in his 1966 opus. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* foreshadows this rupture with representation, while late nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists from Manet to Magritte to Warhol engaged in ever new onslaughts on the classical *episteme*. Although united in a common cause, each of these artists is interestingly unique in Foucault's (and Tanke's) discussions in virtue of the diverse tactics that they deployed in dealing their collective death blow to representative art. While this may not sound like a groundbreaking claim, Tanke is at pains to show that Foucault did not naïvely rediscover Clement Greenberg's thesis, but provided innovative readings of artworks and art history that complement his argument in *The Order of Things* as well as demonstrating a unique archaeological and genealogical methodology for approaching images.

According to Tanke, Foucault's method of interpreting art is not to ask traditional art historical questions such as: What does this work mean? or What were the artist's intentions? but

rather to ask: What does this work do? How does it disrupt the history of art? and How does this work change the ways that we can see? Since the majority of Foucault's writings on art concern nineteenth- and twentieth-century images, he tends to ask of the works under consideration: How does this image enact a shift from a classical to a modern *episteme*? Tanke thus argues that Foucault's writings on art function similarly to his writings on other historical phenomena, or may be read archaeologically and genealogically. Foucault is thus interested in artworks for much the same reason that he is interested in other historical phenomena, for the ways that they introduced ruptures into history—or, in this case, into art history.

While arguably some art works have had an impact not just on *art* history but on history more generally, on Tanke's reading—and with the possible exception of Foucault's explicitly political essay on Rebeyrolle—Foucault was interested in images for the ways that they challenged the artistic rather than the political or social conventions of their time (57). If this seems strangely apolitical for Foucault—a history of images abstracted from relations of power, in contrast with his more familiar writings on visibility (the medical gaze, surveillance, and panopticism)—Tanke cites Foucault's comments in an interview in which he states: “What pleases me precisely in painting is that one is really forced to look. It is my rest. It is one of the rare things on which I write with pleasure and without battling with anybody. I believe I have no tactical or strategic relationship with painting” (cited, 137). As such, Manet's *Olympia* is not taken up by Foucault (as it has been by so many art historians) in terms of struggles of gender, race, and class, but in terms of the formal challenges it posed to representative art, while even works of art depicting prison riots and prison breaks interested Foucault, on Tanke's reading, at least as much for their tactical breaks with the classical *episteme* of representation as for their

tactical resistance to disciplinary power. For those who are drawn to Foucault as a political philosopher, this means that his philosophy of art may be disappointing.

Tanke's book works chronologically through Foucault's oeuvre at the same time as it works chronologically through the paintings that Foucault discusses. Thus Chapter One begins in the seventeenth century of art history and Foucault's archaeological period, with an admirably elucidating reading of Foucault's discussion of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*. Chapter Two moves into the second half of the nineteenth century in art history and slightly later in Foucault's archaeological period, reconstructing the outlines of Foucault's never-completed book on Édouard Manet undertaken at the same time as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Chapter Three brings us into the early twentieth century of art and Foucault's study of Magritte in *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, published in 1968 and later expanded. Chapter Four focuses on Foucault's 1970 "*Theatrum Philosophicum*," the 1975 article, "Photographic Painting," and the 1982 article, "Thought, Emotion," which examine works by later twentieth-century artists Andy Warhol, Gérard Fromanger, and Duane Michals. Finally, Chapter Five is an account of Foucault's last lectures at the Collège de France, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres: Le Courage de la vérité*, delivered in 1984 shortly before the philosopher's death. These last lectures do not consider any particular works of art, but the role of the modern artist more generally, arguing that the modern artist is a kind of *parrhesiast*.

In each of these chapters Tanke contextualizes the art works in question as well as Foucault's articles, thus providing an engaging and useful overview of Foucault's intellectual trajectory from *The Order of Things* until his final, ethical writings. Given this structure, two aspects of Tanke's book are, however, surprising. First, we may note the absence of an account of Foucault's 1961 discussion of the paintings of Bosch and Brueghel as well as Van Gogh in *The*

History of Madness, which might have served as a prelude to the account of *Las Meninas* and *The Order of Things*. Mentioning Foucault's accounts of paintings in *The History of Madness* would have allowed Tanke to discuss the significance of Foucault's writings on art from his first major work up to his last lectures, and from the Renaissance to the contemporary moment, further bolstering his demonstration of Foucault's sustained interest in visual culture.

Second, we may note a moment in Tanke's book that is out of sync with his otherwise elegant chronological structure: this is the placement of his discussion of Foucault's 1973 article, "The Force of Flight," in Chapter Two. "Force of Flight" is Foucault's essay on Paul Rebeyrolle's 1973 exhibition at the Maeght Gallery in Paris and, as Tanke notes, is the most explicitly political of Foucault's writings on art. The placement of his discussion of this work in Chapter Two means that Foucault's response to Rebeyrolle's collages is paired with his writings on Manet, rather than in Chapter Four, where it might have appeared alongside Tanke's discussion of Foucault's article on Fromanger. Juxtaposing Foucault's writings on Rebeyrolle and Fromanger would have made intuitive sense not only since the texts date from 1973 and 1975 respectively, but because the artworks under discussion are thematically linked by their depictions of imprisonment and prison rebellions. Rebeyrolle's collages concern an imprisoned dog who eventually breaks free of his bars; they were set in a gallery space that invoked the experience of confinement in the spectator. Fromanger's canvases rework media-circulated images of contemporary prison riots. The two bodies of works are thus connected by the theme of resistance to the modern institution of the prison and the modern forms of power that this institution exemplifies. As Tanke notes, they are thus closely tied to Foucault's writing of *Discipline and Punish* and his anti-prison activism. Placing the discussion of Rebeyrolle in Chapter Two means that we must backtrack in Chapter Three both in terms of art history (to

Magritte) and in terms of Foucault's writings (to the archaeological period), whereas placing the two bodies of work that concern imprisonment together might have served to emphasize the ways that Foucault's most political and genealogical work (which is relatively neglected in this volume compared to the space given to archaeology and ethics) impacted his writings on art.

Tanke's volume is written in remarkably clear prose and provides students and scholars of the philosophy of art, art history, and Foucault studies with an excellent source guide for the intersection of these domains. Nonetheless, like any book, this one raises a number of questions without answering them. According to Tanke, "From Manet onward, the experience of painting will be fundamentally altered along the same lines as the rest of Western culture" (51). This leads one to wonder: How is it that Velázquez's *Las Meninas* manages to be, in Tanke's words, "untimely," while other works merely reflect the same path "as the rest of Western culture"? Why, from Manet onwards, do artworks reflect their time—or, as I shall discuss below, even lag behind their time—when a seventeenth-century artist was capable of producing a work that was in some respects not of its time? How such a feat was possible on Velázquez's part remains an open question for the archaeological Foucault, while the more predictable Foucauldian claim that the works of artists reflect trends in "the rest of Western culture" appears to be in tension with the role of the modern artist as agent of rupture and *parrhesiast* upon which Foucault also appears to insist (162-194). We might therefore ask: To what degree does Foucault see visual culture as conforming to historical forces versus resisting and transforming them? How we might theorize freedom and resistance from a Foucauldian perspective is, of course, a question for his work in general and not only for his writings on art.

In fact, although Tanke argues that the paintings under question comply with general historical trends, the manner in which these artworks are described is as a series of visual

scandals; in the discussion of Manet in particular, outraged salon-goers figure heavily. While the artworks appear to have interested Foucault because of the ways that they represented ruptures in the conventions of their times, in fact, according to Foucault's periodization, these works should not have been terribly subversive. The supposed transgressiveness of these works is explained by Foucault and by Tanke as due to their break with the visual conventions and the *episteme* of the classical period, and yet since these paintings were produced in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, the classical era was well over. These artists thus appear to have been battling ghosts rather than introducing dissonances into history. If these works disrupted the bygone classical world and reflected the modern *episteme*, this is just as we might have expected them to do given the years in which they were painted. Although, according to Foucault's periodization, these works only barely avoid being backwards, we in fact know that they *did* create ruptures in the history of art. As such, they seem to trouble Foucault's historical categories rather than to illustrate them, suggesting that art history lagged behind the rest of history or that the history of art is not on the same clock as the histories of knowledge and power.

Although Tanke's stated aim is to show that Foucault's writings on art complement his writings on our becoming modern more generally, there are in fact a number of tensions between Foucault's writings on art and the rest of his oeuvre. For instance, Foucault does not normally privilege famous events as catalysts in history. Not the French Revolution, but the opening of Pinel's asylums ushers in the modern era according to *The History of Madness*, while *Psychiatric Power* takes the psychiatric disciplining of King George as paradigmatic of this rupture. In his studies of crime and sex, Foucault prefers to unearth the lost voices of Pierre Rivière and Herculeine Barbin rather than to spill much ink on Sade and Freud. It is not Augustine and Rousseau who figure in Foucault's genealogies of confession, but rather medieval confession

manuals and *My Secret Life*. In contrast, *Las Meninas*, *Olympia*, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and Warhol's soup cans are hardly obscure works. By focusing on images already canonized in traditional histories of art and by privileging famous works by "great men," Foucault's approach to art history seems distinct from and relatively conservative in comparison to his approach to history.

Similarly, in contrast to his approach to historical actors, one gets the distinct impression from Tanke's book—even before we get to the *parrhesiast* analogy—that Foucault sees artists as agents rebelling against a visual order rather than caught up in phenomena that exceed and precede them, and moreover, that they are celebrated in these uprisings. It seems that freeing art from representation and making modern art possible is admirably audacious, whereas it does not seem that Foucault's accounts of other harbingers of modernity are similarly exalting. The opening of psychiatric asylums, prisons, and the invention of human sciences are, if anything, treated critically by Foucault. Other figures whose ideas are also emblematic of the modern *episteme*—the inventors of modern prisons and asylums, the legions of human scientists—are not heroicized in the way that Manet appears to be. We might therefore ask: Why is it great to shatter the classical *episteme* with respect to art, but not with respect to the sciences, or with respect to madness and punishment, whose histories, like that of art, are also part and parcel of how we became modern? Why does modernity seem positive with respect to Foucault's genealogy of modern art, whereas his genealogies of modern power and knowledge are comparatively dark? Rather than privileging already famous men as agents in art history, should we not see them as swept up in a historical wave, the wave of modernity that has not always been a radical and heroic truth-telling venture, but an age of discipline and unprecedented bloodshed? Philippe Pinel and Jeremy Bentham, like Manet and Warhol, helped throw off a classical

episteme, but in the former cases what they replaced it with was not, on Foucault's account, necessarily better.

In contrast to his discussions of Pinel and Bentham, it is not clear *what* Manet and Warhol replaced the classical visual order with. In the account we get, the work of these men takes on the task of rejecting representation, but what they gave us instead of representation is not evident. Did modern artists break with the classical *episteme* of representation in order to participate in the "age of man"? Is this why the (male) artist comes to be a heroic figure in modern histories of art, his life becoming the subject of fascination and biographies from Vasari onwards? If so, why does this appear to be a good thing in Foucault's (and Tanke's) writings, whereas the human sciences and age of man in general are problematic for Foucault (and the "genius" approach to art history has been thoroughly problematized by feminist and social art historians)? Are there any resonances between the introduction of modernity into art and the introduction of modernity into power relations? For instance, can modern art be read as confessional, further proliferating the disciplinary mechanisms of confession? Is sexuality not a compulsive theme in modern art, as in modern science? Is sex privileged in art, as in discourse, as what we must confess and what we must know? On the contrary, Tanke follows Foucault in describing modern art according to another model of truth-telling: *parrhesia*. Modernity in art thus appears to resist dominant (disciplinary) aspects of modern power relations, reactivating ancient models of frank speech. While Tanke sets aside worries that in this account of the modern artist as *parrhesiast* Foucault is reactivating something like the author function, we might nevertheless ask: How is this story of art just another element of Foucault's overall story of how we became modern?

As these questions suggest, there seems to be considerable friction between the history of modernity that we get in Foucault's writings on art and his other genealogies of modernity, with modernity having positive and rebellious connotations within Foucault's art history that it does not have within his treatments of history generally. Tanke does not note or address this friction in the current work. Rather, as noted, he introduces his book as showing that Foucault's writings on art give us one more aspect of the philosopher's overall genealogy of modernity. While I would not suggest that Tanke—or Foucault—*should have* inscribed Manet, Magritte, and Warhol as overlooked conspirators of Pinel and Bentham, the very bizarreness of suggesting that these artists were disciplinarians or human scientists in painter's clothing may suggest that Foucault's history of modern art is not, as Tanke suggests, simply one more element in Foucault's story of how we became modern. On the contrary, it seems that art history worked differently for—and was approached differently by—Foucault than the histories of knowledge, power, punishment, and sex for which he is best known, and these differences will hopefully inspire further considerations of Foucault's writings on visual culture.