

BOOK NOTE by Jennifer A. McMahon in *Australasian Philosophical Review* 79: 1 (2001): 142-143.

Elkins, James. *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. xvii + 300, US\$55.00 (cloth).

In order to say what one means, and be understood, one needs to know to whom one wishes to communicate, the particular mindset one addresses. Expressing oneself clearly and naturally requires some art.

Style, then, is an important component of the message received, or so it is in art history writing according to James Elkins. He attempts to demonstrate that what constitutes art history writing is consequently unanalysable; that art history under analysis becomes something else. 'The glare of logic' Elkins claims, 'bleaches the carefully modulated colors of art history and makes whole stretches of it appear blank' (225). Art history is shrunk when it becomes the patient of the philosopher, the sociologist, the cultural theorist.

This feature of art history writing points to the problem concerning whether there can be criteria for judging the relative objectivity of art historical writings. 'Normal' art history writing combines both a legalistic and poetic style. It is legalistic in its attention to precision regarding features relevant to attribution, poetic in relation to entering into the phenomenon of the work of art. When does the former sink from relevant to unnecessary detail, the latter from what is in the work to what is pure fancy on the historian's part? One cannot say. But Elkins' enthusiastic endorsement of certain art historians such as Michael Fried over others suggests that one can recognize irrelevant detail and subjective fancy when one perceives it.

Elkins attempts to talk about art history in a meaningful way without explaining it; without analysing it; without deconstructing it. For example, order and disorder are used to frame his discussion of the importance of style in art historical writing through the metaphor of the spider web in its two extremes (226-228). The orb, which is the more advanced web, geometrical, symmetrical and very simplified, he likens to some postmodern theory; and the cobweb, which is disorderly, to the more conventional or 'normal' art historical style of writing.

Underneath, within, between and amongst all the bits and pieces that converge into an art historical treatment of an object, is an author's voice. His discussion of Michel Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' is used to make the opposite point to the one usually associated with Foucault (105). Elkins interprets Foucault's intention to be that a text is the sign of an intention and to consider it so is a condition of writing. It is also at the enabling centre of the act of reading, among other things, art historical texts.

Elkins intention in writing this book will be of philosophical interest to those exploring the relation between style and meaning in writing.

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