

PAINTING FOR KUBLER

THIS PAINTING OWES ITS EXISTENCE TO PRIOR PAINTINGS. BY LIKING THIS SOLUTION, YOU SHOULD NOT BE BLOCKED IN YOUR CONTINUED ACCEPTANCE OF PRIOR INVENTIONS. TO ATTAIN THIS POSITION, IDEAS OF FORMER PAINTING HAD TO BE RETHOUGHT IN ORDER TO TRANSCEND FORMER WORK. TO LIKE THIS PAINTING, YOU WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND PRIOR WORK. ULTIMATELY THIS WORK WILL AMALGAMATE WITH THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

Variations on a Theme

George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*

In his influential and deceptively short book *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962), George Kubler declares that: 'The aim of the historian, regardless of his speciality in erudition, is to portray time.'¹ This isn't as straightforward as it sounds. 'Historical time', he writes, 'is intermittent and variable' and 'Time, like mind, is not knowable as such. We know [it] only indirectly by what happens in it.'² Kubler, who was born in 1912 and died in 1996, was a Yale art historian of Pre-Columbian and Ibero-American Art. His writing was as informed by anthropology and linguistics as it was by traditional art history: he considered the art of different periods to be linked by different versions of the same action, which he describes as 'the transmission of some kind of energy.'³ Kubler recognizes history to be both linear and looped; it changes direction, stalls and re-starts, describing a story built on both connections and detours. He implies that the art historian, like a detective, is, in a sense, attempting to solve a case in which the witnesses have all died but the evidence remains extant in what is left behind. His book is about the myriad possibilities of grasping the past's relationship to the present, not through style but via something messier: speculation, observation, and comparison.

The more you look, the clearer it becomes that the art of the past is in active conversation with that of the present. Despite changes in technology, much of what has preoccupied humans for centuries – from the machinations of politics to the enigmatic glance of a lover and the solace of the table, from the metaphysical potential of things (such as fruit or flowers) to the seemingly infinite possibilities of representing nature – has remained remarkably unchanged. The objects we use and the art we make and exhibit represent our need to shape and to understand the world we live in. Kubler understood this: he believed that no visual language exists in a vacuum. He writes: 'for as long as the old pictures or their derivatives survive, painters of a certain temperament will feel summoned to meet their challenge with a contemporary performance.'⁴ Discussing the influence of Nicolas Poussin on the landscape paintings of Paul Cézanne, Kubler observes that: 'The anonymous mural painters of Herculaneum and Boscoreale connect with those of the seventeenth century and with Cézanne as successive stages separated by irregular intervals in a millenary study of the luminous structure of landscape, which probably will continue for many generations more upon equally unpredictable rhythms.'⁵ Thus, art is the visible manifestation of a stuttering line of exploration that has run from the beginning of time to the present: a sequence of solutions that are the result of shared problems. Radical art-historical ruptures are embodied by works that Kubler describes as 'prime objects'.⁶ These are created by the great innovators, who, the art historian believes, belong to what he describes as a 'functionally lonely class'; often their work can only be fully understood long after they have died, 'when we can place it in relation to

John Baldessari, *Painting for Kubler*, 1966–68, Acrylic on canvas, 172.4 × 143.5 cm

preceding and subsequent events.’⁷ These artists are often misjudged because, in a sense, they are out of time in their ability, ‘by an extraordinary feat of the imagination, to anticipate a future class of forms’.⁸

According to Kubler, history is a process that involves the expansion of our knowledge – both factual and sensory – via repetition and renewal. In articulating his rejection of art history as a sequence of neat facts or styles and his belief that to comprehend it one must be sensitive to myriad cultural and social shifts, *The Shape of Time* has had an inestimable effect on the imaginations of many artists of the last half-century or so. Jarrett Earnest writes that:

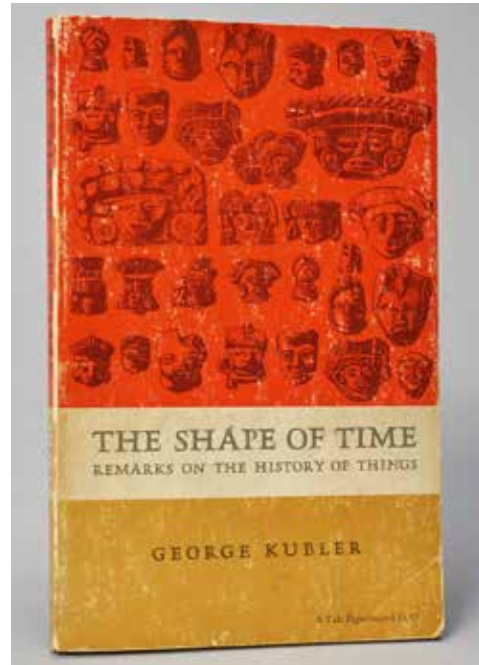
‘Kubler reverberates throughout [Ad] Reinhardt’s writing and is frequently named in the interviews and essays of the 1960s. Anna Reinhardt remembers her father buying many copies of *The Shape of Time* to give to younger artists who would be receptive to it, including Robert Smithson. “If you want to understand modern art, read this,” he said as he handed a copy to sculptor Mary Fuller.’⁹

Smithson grappled endlessly with Kubler’s ideas. In his illustrated text *Quasi-infinities and the Waning of Space* (1966), he cites Kubler: ‘Although inanimate things remain our most tangible evidence that the old human past really existed, the conventional metaphors used to describe this visible past are mainly biological.’¹⁰ He prefaced his 1967 essay in *Arts* magazine, ‘Some Void Thoughts on Museums’, with the following lines from *The Shape of Time*: ‘Tomb furniture achieved apparently contradictory ends in discarding old things all the while retaining them, much as in our storage warehouses, and museum deposits, and antiquarian storerooms.’¹¹ It is clear, too, that Kubler’s writings on pre-Columbian art influenced Smithson’s earthworks. Similarly, John Baldessari’s *Painting for Kubler* (1966–68) is a blunt statement of the art historian’s influence on the artist’s thinking. On a grey background, black, hand-painted words declare:

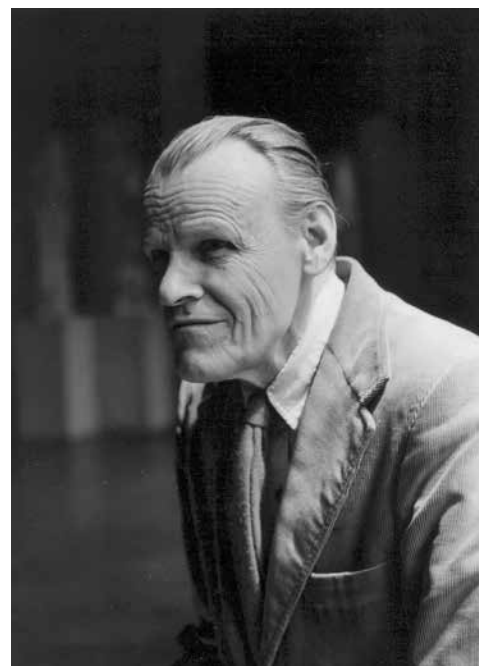
‘This painting owes its existence to prior paintings. By liking this solution, you should not be blocked in your continuous acceptance of prior inventions. To attain this position, ideas of former painting had to be rethought in order to transcend former work. To like this painting, you will have to understand prior work. Ultimately, this work will amalgamate with the existing body of knowledge.’

The contemporary artist Sheila Hicks, who trained at Yale, told me that her interest in using textiles came from a seminar in the 1960s in which Kubler discussed ‘the richness of the pre-Incaic textile language – the most complex of any textile culture in history’.¹² She also mentioned that reading *The Shape of Time* had had a huge impact on her thinking around what constitutes contemporary art: it gave her permission to acknowledge that textiles created thousands of years ago were as vital to her as work made yesterday – and that that was OK. I remember most students having a copy of the book in their studio when I was at art school in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. It could be argued that Kubler’s idea that the history of things is the story of complex impulses manifested in physical form led the way to a wide-spread acceptance of conceptual, or ‘dematerialized’ art: it is no coincidence that Lucy Lippard’s influential book of essays, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* cites *The Shape of Time*.

The most powerful art is both a reflection of its period and relevant to the here and now. Walking through an art museum is to time travel, yet what is often most startling about



First edition of George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962)



Portrait of George A. Kubler, 1983

looking at historical paintings is not how alien the worlds they depict are, but how familiar. A Roman sculpture of a torso finds echoes in a Cézanne painting of bathers; a nude by Peter Paul Rubens resonates in a portrait made three hundred years or so later by Maria Lassnig; the melancholy tones of a Rembrandt self-portrait are distilled in a painting by Mark Rothko; and the hard, clear light in a 17th-century marriage painting by Dirck Dircksz. Santvoort is echoed in a series of contemporary photographs by Catherine Opie.

At one point in *The Shape of Time*, Kubler compares looking at art to star-gazing. He writes:

‘However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time. It is a graph of an activity now stilled, but a graph made visible like an astronomical body, by a light that originated with the activity.’¹³

His beautiful analogy is clear: we look at stars which we can see as the light they have emanated travels across the vast expanse of the universe, although they no longer physically exist. This does not, however, make them any less real to us. So it is with the art of the past: time has moved on, but its shapes morph, are re-arranged, endure.

1 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962), 12.

2 Ibid. 13.

3 Ibid. 9.

4 Ibid. 87.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid. 41.

7 Ibid. 53.

8 Ibid. 89.

9 Jarrett Earnest, ‘Ad Reinhardt and *The Shape of Time*’, *The Brooklyn Rail: Ad Reinhardt* (16 Jan. 2014) <http://brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/ads-thoughts-and-practices/ad-reinhardt-and-the-shape-of-time> accessed 21 October 2017.

10 Robert Smithson, ‘Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space’, in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), 35; see Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 5.

11 Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 78.

12 Jennifer Higgie, ‘Fibre Is My Alphabet’, *frieze*, 169 (March 2015), 130.

13 Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 19.