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The Shape of Time. Reconsidered

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# *The Shape of Time*

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## Reconsidered

**GEORGE KUBLER**

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THE SHAPE OF TIME WAS FINISHED IN 1961, which makes this year, in Maya terms, its Katun anniversary of twenty years. During these twenty years, the occasion has never arisen for me to speak in public about the book. Being a man not prone to autobiography, and who will go out of his way to avoid looking in a mirror, I have paid little attention to the reception of the book. Here, however, on this anniversary, I hope to look back over the reviews, to note the changes in the book's public and its author.

I was surprised, while I was preparing this lecture, to notice how, among my friends who had read the book, a division into two groups appeared. Both groups are equally discerning and educated and, as far as I can tell, equal in numbers. One group is eager to say that they don't understand a word of it, and there are artists and historians among them. Those of the other group declare that they understand it all on first reading, without difficulty.

Of course I believe them both, without knowing the combination that separates them so sharply. Perhaps distinctive and contrasting features in their comprehension of works of art are responsible. What I say speaks to some, but not to others. Some are ready and others are not. But when both someday find that they agree in understanding it, that day may be its last as a book alive in the dissension over its intelligibility.

In what follows, it seems best to limit my remarks to printed reviews and essays that are more in disagreement than in accord with the book. In this way the more searching objections to my argument are chosen.

The most exact and critical review that has appeared in this country is by Priscilla Colt, then at the Dayton Art Museum.<sup>1</sup> She notes five principal positions of the book which are at variance with entrenched practice in art history. These are:

1. *Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (1963): 78–79.

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1. the need to bring together again the history of science and the history of art;
  2. the irrelevance, to the purposeful nature of artistic invention, of metaphors of biology and cyclical happening;
  3. the inadequacy of biographical and narrative approaches to the linkages among works of art;
  4. the unnecessary severing of meaning from form in the conflict between iconologists and formalists; and
  5. the static nature of the concept of style as a means of classification.

Priscilla Colt then provides a summary of the book so concise that I have nothing to change in it, nor would I do it better. A close paraphrase of her analysis of the essential content is in order for those who have not read the book. She speaks first of seriation and change, then of time, and then of duration.

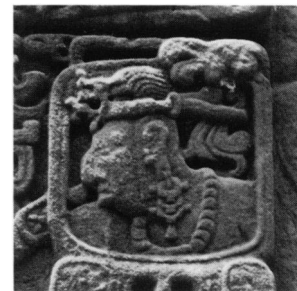
As to their seriation, works of art, like tools and inventions, are (among other things) purposeful solutions to problems. Once the problem is identified, the various solutions—which compose a class of forms—reveal themselves as related to one another in a temporal sequence—which is the formal sequence.

Change occurs in linked sequences or series, depending on whether viewed from within or without, respectively. Change seems to obey a rule of series, although interferences from images and meanings may distort the process. Within each sequence, prime objects and vast masses of replicas are to be discovered. Prime objects, described as inventions possessing prime traits, remotely comparable to mutant genes, are capable of generating change. They result in copies and variants, which also generate change through minute variants.

The propagation of things is carried on through invention and replication *in time*. Duration has different rates. It cuts into different lengths, and it displays different kinds of shapes.

Although cultural history has no adequate theory of time, a distinction is apparent between fast and slow happening. Thus artistic careers interrelate with societal phases: the full range of artistic careers can unfold only in metropolitan conditions. There a wide selection of active sequences is available. These make fast happening possible. At the other extreme, slow happening or casual drift occurs in provincial or tribal settings, where non-professionals and artisans engage in routine and repetitive actions.

Durations follow several different shapes. The morphology of duration



**"Emblem Glyph" of Copan, Honduras**  
*Stela A; Quiriguá, Guatemala*

includes continuous classes, arrested classes, extended series, wandering series, as well as guided and self-determining sequences.

Several formal sequences may coexist within one object and, it follows, within a given present. Each may have a different systemic age. These ages, as opposed to absolute age, are determined to be early or late in a formal sequence by their positions. A complex form, such as a cathedral, will contain traits belonging to different sequences and having different systemic ages, like any other organization of matter. Such would be a mammal, of which the blood and nerves are of different biological antiquities.

As a critic of my arguments, Priscilla Colt notes three unclear formulations. She asks, How does one meaningfully identify an artistic problem? My proposal was that the solutions disclose the problem, but she regards the form class only in terms of "traits or trait clusters," as many anthropological archaeologists do.

Another of her questions is whether style is precluded by sequences in time. My opinion that style is instantaneous, or synchronic, rather than diachronic, has been extended in an article that appeared in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Priscilla Colt is also disturbed by ghostly "prime objects," which cannot be found and whose existence to me is no more tangible than that of the particles of nuclear physics, known only by the disturbances they cause. This concept of the prime object has puzzled many readers, and questions about it are more frequent than about any other aspect.

In theory, being originally in the maker's mind, no prime object exists in its pristine state. They all have been altered in actuality, and they suffer the accidents of time, being known only by indirection, like stars vanishing in supernova explosions. This sounds like astrophysics, which is a field thickly populated with radical theories that are beyond proof. Black holes were first named by Archibald Wheeler in 1973. These are small, super-dense stellar corpses, which destroy matter by gravitational dissolution, removing information from the universe. Their opposites, however, are white holes, from which new matter erupts, endowed with color, texture, and chemical composition. Their existence as mathematical creatures, or objects, was first postulated in 1964, and today white holes are regarded as time-reversed black holes, renewing the universe, although none has ever been registered by observation, however indirect. They are prefigured, however, in the Manichaeon universe of light springing from darkness.

Thus, my idea about prime objects is less mathematical and more historical than white holes, but, like them, prime objects may be constructs necessary to understanding the processes which they may have originated.

2. "Toward a Reductive Theory of Style," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia, 1979).



Time Period: Completion of the Days  
Stela A; Quiriguá, Guatemala

Another of my respected critics is Jan Bialostocki, the professor of history of art in Warsaw at the University and the National Museum. He caused a Polish translation which I am told is excellent to be published in Warsaw. Bialostocki began his long review by observing that, since the 1920's, "art historians [have] hardly felt the need to concentrate on principles, to revise concepts, or to discuss ends and means of the discipline," leaving these tasks to others, such as aestheticians, philosophers, and art critics.<sup>3</sup> He notes the difficulties of the tasks facing them as being, in his words, "the revolution in all concepts of the idea of the work of art." His second point is that the old "problems of symbolism, of perspective, and of representation in general" have become "closed problems," which we are no longer "inside," but "outside." In his third point he states the need for art historians to find "points of view from which the whole world of human art can be grasped as a visual manifestation of human history." His fourth recommendation is that art historians take into account not only the visual form of things, but also "their utility, function and importance as vehicles of communication." On this point Bialostocki underestimates my concern with these aspects of meaning, which I have developed further in papers on the representation of historical time and on the concept of style.<sup>4</sup> His fifth and final wish is that art historians pursue "the expression of individuality" that characterizes every major work of art.

3. *Art Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1965): 135–39.

4. "Style and the Representation of Historical Time," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 138, part 2, no. 2 (1967): 849–55. See also note 2.

Having stated his ideas about the proper activities of art historians today, Bialostocki begins his criticism of my positions. He is opposed to what he calls the "deterministic flavor" of my argument, as when the Renaissance seems to antedate the participation of its artists. According to his reading of my argument, "universal geniuses" are demoted to the status of well-prepared individuals who have had the luck to make "good entrances." My plea, however, is only for another hierarchy among artists, and not for the precedence of the Renaissance over its makers. He also suspects a determinism in my remarks about periods, though he overlooks my repeated insistence on the coexistence of various styles. Their appearance at the same time and place, in recurrent eclectic movements and periods, is closer to random order than to historical determinism.

Bialostocki is ready to admit the theoretical validity of separating what I call prime objects from replications. Still he finds it difficult, as do other art historians, to use these terms in historical situations drawn from the Mediterranean world. On this point, however, Erwin Panofsky wrote to me in 1962 that he thought the book "achieves the apparently impossible, to prove that strictly historical methods can be applied to material which, on the face of it, would not seem to have any history." He referred, of course,

to my discussion of pre-Columbian art, which I will take up later.

Bialostocki's main difference with me is over the importance of iconographic studies. Then and now morphology has occupied a minor role in art history, where it has been seen as the "mere formalism" of iconographers and social historians who were more interested in writing history with images than in discovering the intrinsic languages of those images. Yet, these discoveries require morphological as well as iconographical analysis.

Later in the 1960's it began to appear that meanings could be extracted from archaeological finds, even when no written texts are known from their own time.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the belief that morphology and iconography require simultaneous study has gained wider acceptance, for the determination of intended meaning emerges from exact formal description as much as from the writings of a particular time. Visual form is intrinsic, whereas written evidence is adherent and extrinsic.

Boris André Nakov is a Bulgarian scholar of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, living in Paris. His preface to the French edition, which he sponsored, is entitled "Pour un nouvelle méthodologie."<sup>6</sup> In it he notes the "conceptual lethargy" among art historians, "in which they are like powerless witnesses to the burial of their own myth." He contrasts the situations after 1920 in Russia and Germany, before "totalitarian bureaucracy," and after 1935 in the United States. While Panofsky said that the United States had become, at Europe's expense, the new home of the history of art in these years, James Ackerman of Harvard expressed his concern in 1958 about the impotence of American art history with respect to theory.

Nakov's criticisms are directed primarily against a similar conformist tradition among French art historians today. His views were contested by André Chastel of the Collège de France in a review of the French edition.<sup>7</sup> Chastel questions the relevance of a "history of things." This is a veiled thrust against the "objectal order" defined by Jean Baudrillard's "Système des choses" in 1968. Baudrillard's work parallels mine, and it comes from the camp of the social sciences under the direction of Abraham Moles.<sup>8</sup>

Chastel criticizes the "naive polemic" of Nakov's introduction, but Chastel's own review is also polemic in the tradition of the *chef d'école*, or party chief, who is writing to discipline insubordinate voices in his territory.

Giovanni Previtali is a Marxist art historian of late Medieval Italian painting. He lives in Florence and teaches in Siena, where he has been dean of the faculty of philosophy and letters. Having commissioned the Italian translation, he wrote a long introduction for it, which began with an analysis of Priscilla Colt's critique.<sup>9</sup> Previtali reduces her comments to three questions that he regards as central. First, how can we identify an artistic

5. *Studies in Classic Maya Iconography*, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 18 (New Haven, 1969); *The Iconography of the Art of Teotihuacan*, *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, no. 4 (Washington, 1967).

6. In *Formes du temps*, ed. Champlibre (Paris, 1973), pp. 9–19.

7. *Le Monde*, 4 May 1973.

8. In Abraham Moles, ed., *Les Objects*, *Communications*, vol. 13 (1968).

9. *La Forma del Tempo* (Turin, 1973).

problem and reconstruct from it a form class? Second, how can we identify a prime object? Third, how can we reconstruct a sequence originating in prime objects, which cannot be found?

He argues that all three questions are contained in the first, to which his answer is that an artistic problem is revealed only by an experience of art and its problems. This experience, he asserts, cannot be separated from the historical concept of style, which he compares to the syntactic structure of language. He also reaffirms the biological metaphor of styles as being born, evolving, surviving, and dying. Previtali makes use of the book's reception in Italian Marxist circles to expose the situation of the history of art in Italy as being reduced, among its *anime belle*, to only two methods, attributionism and iconology.

*Ad hominem*, he claims that being an American has eased my escape from humanistic culture (which, in parentheses, I would deny) and from Hegelian idealism (by which I was never captured, again in parentheses). My escape, he says, took me into a domain of scientific rather than humanistic culture, among anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists, which Previtali rightly regards as a widened horizon.

Also *ad hominem* is his opinion that the "entrance," good or bad, of an artist has to do with "success." I disagree, being of the opinion that the two terms correspond to distinct domains of internal and external performance. According to Previtali, the alleged success of my book was a phenomenon of "good entrance," prepared by a long series of forerunners. He names Bergson, Nietzsche, Riegl, and Pinder. Also, Ackerman, whose complaint about the absence of an American theory of art, created, in his words, a "shortcut" to my success. Bergson, Nietzsche, and Riegl are mighty names, and my success has been fortunately unnoticed by most of my colleagues. Whether it was a good entrance is another question, which will not be cleared for a long time, if ever, because such entrances become apparent only very slowly.

On the other hand, Previtali approves of my conversion of genius into entrance. He also defends the idea of sequence, which he says has descended from Alois Riegl and is in opposition to romantic idealizations of genius. Yet Bialostocki, speaking within similar dialectical assumptions, objects to my sequencing forms as obscuring creativity by overstressing intention and overlooking individuality. More Marxist is Previtali's preference for thinking of artists as "leaders" rather than "precursors," who have the aura of prophets. He also regards my discussion of "aesthetic fatigue" (exhausting the resources of a pattern of artistic possibilities) as an evasion of those economic pressures favored in Marxism as being complete explana-



Title may refer to an office held by ruler  
Stela A; Quiriguá, Guatemala



"Lord Who Holds the Axe"  
Stela A; Quiriguá, Guatemala

10. "Continuity and Discontinuity in Style: A Problem in Art Historical Methodology," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, no. 1 (1980): 27–36.



Glyph C of the Lunar Series, 2C  
Stela A; Quiriguá, Guatemala

11. *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963): 699–704.

tions of historical change.

Joyce Brodsky is a historian of medieval and modern art who rejects "simple forms of positivism" and the "prevalent cyclical-biological evolutionary system of analysis." She considers my work to be a scheme of "art as a system of formal relations like a language."<sup>10</sup> She also sees it as paralleling, in her words, "semiotics and structuralism in their attempts to correlate all human patterns into a system of intelligible signs."

Her main criticism is with my use of the words "convention" and "invention," for which she would substitute "continuity" and "discontinuity," instead. This, she claims, would avoid the pejorative connotation of "convention" and would free artistic invention from what she calls "association with inventions or useful objects." Her wish is to center both method and theory, as she says, "in the inherent conservatism not only endemic to all cultures, periods, schools, but to individual style as well." I would agree, but only to the point at which tradition invites dissent, perhaps in the eighteenth century. Thereafter it would be unhistorical to overlook the polarity between convention and invention in the history of European art.

As to the history of art in preindustrial societies, no art historian has commented on the relation of *The Shape of Time* to my studies of American antiquity. These topics are the same as those of pre-Columbian art in Mesoamerica and the Andean area. It is a field dominated by anthropologists. *The Shape of Time* and *Art and Architecture in Ancient America* were in progress simultaneously after 1958, and the two books appeared in the same year, 1962.

The task of adjusting the data and theories of anthropology to the humanistic methods of art history mirrors the task of adapting the history of art to the Americanists' data. Thus both books were generated by the methodological differences between the study of ancient American material culture and the humanistic traditions of Old World philological research. The fields could be bridged only by using humanistic methods, by selecting American objects that would satisfy the needs of anthropologists by displaying the cognitive values of the complex urban societies of ancient America. Hence the general work, *Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, became an art historical critique of anthropology, as Gordon Willey observed in his review.<sup>11</sup> *The Shape of Time*, on the other hand, was a critique of the history of art from a point of view shaped in part by anthropological methods.

Throughout these twenty years, painters, musicians, architects, and sculptors have read *The Shape of Time*. Though they have not often written about it, they have quoted it frequently, thus acknowledging that aspect of the book that Bialostocki called "something of the quality of a work of art."



Their appreciation may be related to their being released, as artists, from the rigid hierarchies enshrined by the textbook industry or, as it was once expressed, the “pigeon-holes of art history.”

The late Ad Reinhardt, who was exceptional in committing his opinions to the printed page, wrote an article which is more about artists than about historians.<sup>12</sup> He began with two premises. First, “every artist, fine or free,” as he put it, has to know and forget art history in favor of “art-as-art”; and, second, art history as taught in our “university-academies” has something wrong with it. Reinhardt then asks twenty-eight questions dealing with his idea of the failure of the history of art. In one he asks how it should be taught; in others he inquires about true and false arts. Another query concerns “post-historic” art. Twentieth-century art and the reassessment it enforces of both past and future art are uppermost in his mind. He is also concerned about the neglect of non-European art by today’s artists.

Quoting from Bialostocki’s review (without mentioning him by name), he calls my book a “manifesto,” and declares that it has “something of the quality of a work of art.” Reinhardt then lists from memory thirteen passages from the book as being worth the attention of artists. One, from T. S. Eliot, is wrongly given to me; others show some rearrangement; and none is further explained.<sup>13</sup>

His final questions are about what he calls “the shape-up of our time.” He angrily denounces the interference of commercial interests and notes the difficulties for the artist of what he calls “getting in and coming out,” especially with so much stress placed on “coming out.” He also laments the lack of solidarity among artists, “who do nothing for the hungry and naked among them.” Finally he predicts, and here he echoes Henri Focillon’s reflections on style, that “artists’ future states and works will be states and works of conscience.” His *renvoi* is enigmatic: “The first word of an artist is against artists. The first word of an art historian is against art historians.” I suppose he means by this that artists and art historians should join together instead of opposing one another.

Younger contemporaries of Reinhardt’s are the minimalists Robert Morris and Robert Smithson. Smithson wrote in 1966 about his views on the relation of sculpture to iconography.<sup>14</sup> Paraphrasing him, I understand his argument as follows: Sculpture is more than iconography or iconology. Its power to suggest both space and time is inaccessible to ordinary meaning by being self-referential, absolute, and primal. In this account of his work he acknowledges a debt to my book.

Robert Morris enlarges on Smithson’s remarks in another direction, when he notes that the nineteenth-century faith in “creative evolution,” a

12. “Art vs. History,” *Art News* 64, no. 19 (1966): 19, 62.

13. References to the 1962 edition are from pp. viii (3 passages), 26, 32, 33 (2 passages), 61, 105, 125 (2 passages), and 126 (2 passages).

14. “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” *Artsmagazine* 41, no. 1 (1966): 28–31.

15. Rosalind Constable (unpublished research report, 1967). She quotes Morris: "There has been little definitive writing on present-day sculpture. When it is discussed it is often called in to support a broad iconographic or iconological point of view. Kubler has raised the objection that iconological assertions presuppose that experiences so different as those of space and time must somehow be interchangeable." Constable also quotes Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities." "Kubler suggests that metaphors drawn from physical science rather than biological science would be more suitable for describing the condition of art. Biological science has since the nineteenth century infused in most people's minds an unconscious faith in Creative Evolution. An intelligible dissatisfaction with this faith is very much in evidence in the work of certain artists."

16. *History, the Last Things before the Last* (New York, 1969).

17. Kracauer cites Valéry, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1960), vol. 2, p. 1453.

18. *History, the Last Things*, pp. 143–49.

19. *Renaissance and Renascences* (Stockholm, 1960).

slogan borrowed from biological science, is being overcome among artists by metaphors from physical science.<sup>15</sup>

Siegfried Kracauer, the sociologist, was writing a book on historiography when he died in 1966. It appeared with an introduction by Paul Kristeller, in 1969, as *History, the Last Things before the Last*.<sup>16</sup> Kracauer was concerned with the discrepancy between general and specialized history. His sixth chapter, entitled "Ahasuerus, or the Riddle of Time," is about the dilemma between all time and pieces of "shaped" time, or between the sequence of all happenings in a given period and the sequences specific to any one area or tradition; in short, between universal and special histories. As to the special character of history of art, Kracauer cites Paul Valéry, who wrote in 1906 that general history "leaves chaos unpenetrated," while a "comprehensible series" shows that "every event is the child of another event." In all general history, "every child seems to have a thousand fathers and vice versa."<sup>17</sup>

Kracauer then relates how Henry Focillon, following Valéry, wrote *La Vie des Formes* in 1933 to display, as Kracauer puts it, an inherent logic in the unfolding of art forms.<sup>18</sup> In the same passage, Kracauer speaks of the concept of "shaped time," which he relates to Focillon's thought and that of Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée Sauvage*, as the Focillon-Kubler proposition. Kracauer rephrases this concept and describes, instead, sequences of phenomena that bring out various aspects of problems originating with some need. Hence the "date" is less relevant than "age," which is position in a sequence. Each sequence evolves on its own schedule among other, different sequences. Kracauer states that the sequence may "fall into the same period but differ in age." (Barbara Rose, the New York art critic, has written of this argument as a "transhistorical attitude.") Kracauer further observes that the theory of shaped time is also "valid for history in general" and over a variety of areas of history, if it is assumed that "the events in each single area follow each other according to a sort of immanent logic." These intelligible sequences unfold at different times and "as a march of many times, more than as a single March of time," in Kracauer's words.

In conclusion, I am glad as an old student of Henri Focillon's and as the American translator of his *Vie des Formes* (1934) to speak of the large authority his work has commanded in the United States. Twenty-five years later his book was a point of departure for mine. Another point: Focillon's proposition in 1934 that shifting meanings attach to constant forms, and vice versa, later found its historical development in the United States with Erwin Panofsky's "principle of disjunction," as described in his book, *Renaissance and Renascences*.<sup>19</sup> Through it, Focillon's proposition has

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affected anthropological thinking in Europe and America, where its relevance to the criticism of ethnological analogy became apparent.

At intersections like these, the history of art may find renewal and expansion of its dangerously desiccated procedures. Without benefit of a general theory of man-made objects, the history of art becomes each decade more and more restricted to the interests of art collectors and museums.

While profiting from enrichment by other methods at many such intersections, historians of art can give valuable service by providing a humanistic translation and use for the data of the social sciences. These sciences, likewise, require renewal and nourishment from the study of works of art as such.



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