

Angelus Novus

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"

It's easy to think of the artist in the studio, the quiet, deeply contemplative life of reflection and production. Walter Benjamin would put this image somewhere on his unique dialectical axis in the realm of Myth. It certainly rests somewhere outside my experience as an artist. Thinking now I wonder if this image of the artist ever existed. The quiet spaces of contemplation in this culture are difficult to find, let alone imagine. Art and the artist are always in motion.

It's a bit harder to conjure an image as romantic, fallacy or no, about the art teacher. Teaching is a vocation of martyrdom. To the extent we are respected as a profession it is for the sacrifice we make to the greater good. I have always found this image of the teacher to be in direct conflict with our ideas of knowledge and power. If this culture believes that teaching is vital in the training of young minds towards successful adult lives, why is there nobility only in the sacrifice it represents? Compounding this problem of perception is the very tenacious rumor that art is something that cannot be taught, carried by the assumption that the great artist is found only in the individual eccentric,

the savant. These assumptions cloud thinking about both the image of the artist as teacher and the artist as student.

So when I start trying to think about art and teaching I feel myself in an unstable position. If art is in motion, against our historical assumptions, teaching art is certainly in a class of movement physics has yet to quantify. A coating of history, layers of assumptions deep, cover both the idea of art and of the role of the teacher. These layers say much about the a priori notions of what makes history and how knowledge is made. And perhaps this is a way to approach the problem, to consider the fantasy relationship of history and knowledge in both art and in teaching.

One of the things that makes art different from other spheres of education is its relation to process. The art process has no structure and no systematics. There are skills, histories and data sets, but art is always looking to be something other than what it is. No other field has this amorphous relationship to itself. The novice in art, trying to glibly account for this miasma, talks of people who 'get it' and those who don't. I've come to the realization that we never, ever 'get it'. Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image joins art and its fractured relation to itself in a way that is less a problem and more a space of possibility: an image flash-revealing the illusory nature of 'getting it;' that knowledge is built out of much more funky stuff.

I often think of Benjamin sitting at his desk writing, or perhaps re-filing notes for his masterwork-never-completed, the *Passagen-Werk*, stopping for a moment to consult Klee's angel above him. Anyone who lives with art knows that the work changes over time. As we pass a familiar drawing in our movements through the hum-drum of domestic space, there are times when we see something in the image we never saw before. It shocks us: 'how could I never have seen that before?' I imagine that this experience one day shocked Benjamin out of his collector's reverie and for a moment Klee's Angel's new metaphorical capacity revealed itself to him. Something that had

been the same, that had not changed one bit, was suddenly completely new. The flash goes beyond anything the image possesses, and yet I would suggest that this flash is what art is, what the drawing was there for. Not the thing as a part of a history, but the capacity of the thing to create experience that is suddenly different.

One of many mistakes the mythology of art makes is that art is a vocation. I sit in panel after meeting after colloquium being told that art is a vocational concern, that the artist makes things. I confront the same image staring into every pair of 18-year-old eyes that tell me 'I want to be an artist' each September. So ingrained is the notion that artists' labor is alienated from thought that entire movements since the modern fracture polarize around this issue. Technology seems to be a central character in these equations, but is never accurately addressed. Benjamin's historical model easily identifies this mistake: the technologies may have been new, but the metaphors we allow to define them are always already the same. Our applications of the technologically novel have always resulted in more of the same. Benjamin calls this mythology. Mythology, among other things perpetuates the idea of the new while concealing the reality that it is constructed out of the old. Benjamin saw this mythology everywhere, but nowhere is it more present than in the art school. The first task of any artist-as-teacher is about de-mythology, un-mythology. Participating in Sartre's bad faith, every young artist begins by wanting to *be* what they *do*. The artist's actual task revolves around *being* who we *are*.

We think of the 20th century as a century of change. But if there have been innumerable novelties and new ideas brought to art, we keep coming back to them. That each of the so-called movements has had one or more revivals, that a circularity to these moments of novelty exists, exposes the trap of fashion and notions of the new. Looking at our present moment of economic collapse, to some there is a feeling of new possibility, again. Benjamin was on to something with his idea of eternal return, but something he's slow to point out is the idea of collective amnesia. Not only do we keep coming back to the same ideas, but no one seems to remember that what these motions represent is a

return. Repetition is not caused by amnesia, but is an *effect* of it. The greater cause stems from our mistaken ideas of history and how it functions. Novelty is not historically generated, it is determined by its inherently accidental nature. What informs (and potentially invigorates those in) the now is the ruin of the past and the fossils that lie dormant in the previous layers. Their accidental reappearance is always an opportunity, especially for the teacher.

Eternal return coupled with collective amnesia will always run end-loops around teaching that operates from a traditional notion of historical and/or ideological transmission. These methods, rather than posit new relations, at best only reinforce the problems of eternal return, and at worst amplify cultural amnesia in the abreaction of the student. Teaching solely by historical transmission emphasizes and perpetuates the problem of eternal return, while strict adherence to ideological models produce spaces of fixity that phase in and out of relevance according to the fashion of the time. Both approaches are artificial filters deployed to establish a hierarchical precedence above the individual observations of the student. The only way a student is to make use of these behaviors is by moving beyond the teaching.

In the wake of these problems in teaching art, many pedagogues would demand a revised method, to approach teaching art through teaching. We could characterize this as an approach to the specific from the general. All teachers teach, ergo a teacher cited with solving the problem can mandate what should be taught in any field, no matter how specific the terms and techniques of that field. This would be an excellent mode were the model of historical and ideological transmission accurate. I am mapping a trajectory from the opposite direction: art will give us a better definition of how to teach. A teacher of art has knowledge of the field, implying that the field has more of a fixed and closed relation to history than it in fact does. The artist who teaches makes knowledge in the field. Of these two procedures, one concept tends toward the static, the other towards motion. Not a motion that intends progress or a goal, but a motion toward the individual and its possible contribution; a direction that is multiform. The only constant is the

backwards glance into time, through the specifics of each action, the *fragments*. This re-inscribes the primacy of the individual over the hierarchy: we are not teachers of art, but artists who teach. Benjamin's invocation of the Angel of History is correct: history can only look behind itself; to imagine another view is an invocation of blindness and eternal return. Perhaps we now have a more clear image of the problem of the artist as teacher: which comes first, theory or praxis?

Benjamin's concept of a dialectical image is clearly pivotal to my thinking on this topic. In his formulations there is no history, but infinite histories. Narratives built using images from the past project the present into the future. These images are always changing, but the narratives built to assemble them are conservative, slow to change, and thus can never accurately describe the now 'as it is'. The past contaminates the future with the narrative it mandates for continuity. But how to see past the narrative? Benjamin looks for holes in the narrative, disregarded fragments of past narratives (which he calls fossils) or new ways of seeing the historical structures we have built upon (he calls these ruins). In these images he looks for possible counter-narrativities, places of possibility and insight into the what-could-have-been of what-was. These images, when viewed with the proper insight, produce a shock to the assumptions of the now and show light on the illusion of the narrative. He calls these volatile images dialectical images, and through them he saw a new possibility for political agency.

This idea has great implications for the teacher, and sheds light on the possibilities of art as well. Neither ideology nor history are the goal of teaching, but more a revelation of the possibility of insight. I imagine this as the dialectical result of theory and praxis. This opens the possibility of a new space for relation, on the level of the individual to the historical. The illusory nature of that same historical, recognized, granulates into images that re-avail themselves, enabling them to be redeployed. The students here are their own masters, and the teacher only a guide, assisting by showing the fictional nature of the narratives of the old, how they functioned previously, and why they must be dismantled. A genealogy of disintegration rather than transmission.

Without facticity or teleology as an aim the teacher can now use historical narratives towards their undoing. The facts do not build upon one another so much as heap in piles upon piles, disregarded ruins that we rummage through. If art has a history or histories, then they are all inadequate to the purpose of the now, and always were. If teachers merely transmit these histories in their teaching then we are only perpetuating the illusions of the past. If we are merely instilling an ideology we do the same. If instead we give the image of a potential of futurity, not a progress, but a notion that the future is a place for a new relationship to history and ideology, then perhaps the multiform histories and the potentials of the images they are assembled from can be truly transformed.

–Jesse Bransford, Brooklyn, NY 2009