

From allegory to activism

On the Museum's Ruins, by Douglas Crimp, with photographs by Louise Lawler. MIT Press, 1993, 348pp, b&w illus. £24.95.

"Allegories are to the realm of thoughts what ruins are to the realm of things" – Walter Benjamin.

On the Museum's Ruins is a collection of essays written in the 1980s by Douglas Crimp, art critic, visiting professor in cultural studies and in gay and lesbian studies in New York, and more recently Aids activist. They trace the development of Crimp's understanding of the phenomenon known as post-modernism. In the early 1980s he argued for a post-modernism founded on "the collapse of the museum's discursive system": "My post-modernism subjected the reigning idealism of mainstream modernism to a materialist critique and thereby showed the museum – founded on presuppositions of idealism – to be an outmoded institution, no longer having an easy relationship to innovative contemporary art."

Commenting on his earlier optimism in "The Postmodern Museum", Crimp writes with self-mocking irony of his sense of "paranoia" on encountering

the decomposition into ruin of the slick, new front wall of Jim Stirling's Stuttgart Staatsgalerie – which he chooses to take to be a sly thumbing of the nose at his essay "On the Museum's Ruins" of 1980 which lends its title to this book.

Crimp's thesis was that "the museum" as the "paradigmatic institution of artistic modernism" would be unable to contain and frame innovative art within its ideal of the autonomous object (where the autonomy of art always defers, if only implicitly, to a prior autonomy, that of the sovereign human subject, the artist) – that is, neither the politicised materialist practices of the 1960s and 1970s, nor the post-modernist works of institutional critique of the late 1970s and more recent photographic practices which refused tenets of authorship and authenticity.

But what he documents in other essays here was his underestimation of the power of the museum. Its capacity, on the one hand, to re-appropriate art's radical impulses, and, on the other hand, to represent an apparently uninterrupted continuum of "museum art", thus excluding and rendering invisible and illegitimate "political art", be it from the Soviet Union, Weimar Germany or Cold War America and Europe.

Crimp makes an historical analysis of the relation between the Staatsgalerie and Schinkel's Berlin Altesmuseum. The founding of the Altesmuseum to house the newly returned Prussian art treasures appropriated by Napoleon, marked an interrelation between the advent of the academic subject of art history with Hegel's appointment to the University of Berlin, where he delivered his lectures on aesthetics, and the heated debate around the role of the new museum.

It was originally conceived as a department of the Academy of Sciences to house a study collection, thus putting artworks to practical use. However, Schinkel's radical proposals for the complete renewal of the heart of Berlin with a neo-classical museum at its centre, independent of the Academy, planned around a central rotunda with separate painting

and sculpture galleries, and with each work in its designated space, was accepted instead.

The other "antique objects, casts, rarities and curiosities" were either relegated to a basement or excluded. The works, in fixed relation to one another as discrete, acontextualised objects, demonstrated an idealist aesthetic, where art could only be produced to fit into a pre-existent order.

According to Crimp, that Stirling should have taken his cue from the Altesmuseum in planning the Staatsgalerie as "a sequence of 19th century picture galleries", numbered in continuation from the old Galerie, was to have reinforced, in this respect at least, the marginalisation of resistant practices. Indeed, Crimp comes to the conclusion that there are two post-modernisms – that of "resistance", and that of "accommodation", or "complicity". Where exactly Stirling fits in this debate is something that for us is an open question, and Crimp is careful to acknowledge Stirling's erudite wit, his sense of parody and irony, and the difference between the architect and his often "irresponsible apologists".

Crimp is unequivocal, however, in his association of the rhetoric surrounding the Staatsgalerie and the new German art of "accommodation" ("...art still has a redemptive power of transformation over history" and "can signal a new German freedom... The new German painters perform an extraordinary service for the German people. They lay to rest the ghost... of German style, culture and history, so that the people can be authentically new" – Donald Kuspit, catalogue to "New Art from Germany") with "the new freedom of the German people today to forget recent history, in the resurgence of xenophobia, expressed against Jews, Gastarbeiter, political refugees", homosexuals, and all "foreign and resistant bodies".

Far from heralding the ruin of the museum, Crimp eventually sees that "resistant" art practices tend either to be appropriated (ruined) or excluded (disappeared) by the museum. Even while there was

an intensification of the critique of art's institutionalisation, "there has been a concerted effort to suppress this fact and to re-establish the traditional fine art categories by all conservative forces of society, from cultural bureaucracies to museum institutions, from corporate boardrooms to the marketplace for art..."

"And this has been accomplished with the complicity of a new breed of entrepreneurial artists, utterly cynical in their disregard of both recent art history and present political reality. These newly heralded 'geniuses' work for a parvenu class of collectors who want art with an ensured resale value, which will at the same time fulfill their desire for mildly pornographic titillation, romantic cliché, easy reference to 'past masterpieces' and good decor."

This book is a collaboration between Crimp and artist Louise Lawler, whose photos of artworks in private and corporate collections, at auction, and relegated to museum storage, punctuate the text as a parallel photo-essay. The dust jacket is overprinted with a photo of artworks wrapped in polythene for long-term storage in the basement of a museum (library).

Crimp's introduction indicates the extent of his development beyond its scope. He also points towards the complex relation between internal institutional critique as social praxis with real consequences, and his involvement with direct Aids activism. He concludes with the possibility that post-modernism may be at best "the eruption of difference itself within the domains of knowledge" which also lies beyond the scope of the collection but is ever present within it as a "viral referent".

A journey of self-discovery, he moves from the collective state memory of the museum to representation itself, and on the way he criticises his own argument that "art can only play a useful role in society once society itself has been thoroughly transformed", which assumes that art is merely reflective, not productive of social relations... from allegory to activism. Highly recommended.

Art In Ruins
(Hannah Vowles & Glyn Banks)