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book review of

World History of Realism in Visual Arts, 1830–1990: Naturalism, Socialist Realism, Social Realism, Magic Realism, New Realism, and Documentary Photography by Boris Röhrh

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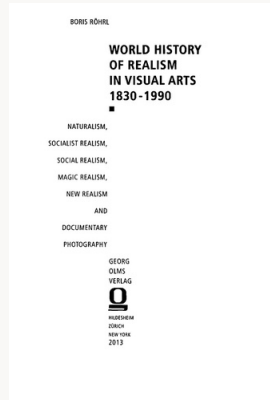
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Boris Röhl,
World History of Realism in Visual Arts, 1830–1990: Naturalism, Socialist Realism, Social Realism, Magic Realism, New Realism, and Documentary Photography.
Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlag, 2013.
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The literature on Realism is extensive and includes theoretical texts, historical analyses, and artist monographs, and at the center of many of these intellectual projects is a persistent debate surrounding the term itself. In 1856, the art critic Edmond Duranty declared, “To give a definition of realism regarding aesthetics would be time lost—an opening of sluice gates releasing a flood of discussion solely about words” (1). Indeed, since its earliest invocations by French critics and publicists around 1840, the term ‘realism’ has been employed, sometimes divisively, within the discourses of aesthetics, philosophy and history as well as more generically in common language. In the discipline of art history, scholars have been challenged by the complex and often contradictory definitions deployed when discussing realism alternately as a style or as a movement. It is within this diverse field of terms, definitions, themes, and methodologies that Boris Röhl has offered a substantial book, the first extensive historical survey of realism that attends specifically and methodically to the variety of its international conceptions and iterations.

World History of Realism in Visual Arts, 1830–1990: Naturalism, Socialist Realism, Social Realism, Magic Realism, New Realism, and Documentary Photography is a kind of manual, assembled by the author between 1998 and 2011, conceived as an attempt to explain realism in connection with its own theories and to categorize the different forms of realism in the visual arts according to accepted definitions. In Röhl’s view, the principal obstruction to a comprehensive consideration of realism is, and has been, “complicated and ambiguous terminology” that impedes the art historian’s ability to accurately describe or classify the theories and praxes of realism (1). He also opines that while certain types of realism have received systematic treatment in the past, others have been conspicuously omitted (595). Thus, his objective is twofold: to survey a stylistically, historically, politically, and geographically broad range of material and to establish a rigorous system of classification for that material. The book is divided into three chronological parts with geographic subsections. The first, covering the years 1830 to 1917, details what the author perceives as a

critical distinction between bourgeois and socialist theories of realism by describing the origins of realism in Europe and North America, including the emergence of Naturalism, and then contrasting that bourgeois tradition with the beginnings of socialist art. The second and third parts, covering 1917 to 1960 and 1960 to 1990 respectively, are further divided into sections on realist art in socialist, western, and emergent countries.

Despite the ambitious scope of this project, or perhaps because of it, Röhrl approaches it rather self-consciously with a heightened awareness of his own subject position, as articulated in the introduction:

Today, the discussion about realism seems to have lost much of its actuality, and dealing with realism has no practical application. For these reasons, an unbiased and factual view on its evolution seems to be possible. No writer in the field of humanities can lay claim to objectivity, because the philosophical background of an author determines, whether consciously or subconsciously, his discourse. Beware of this; this book was an attempt to provide a neutral description of different central theories incurred in connection with their world view (21).

Just as Röhrl lauds the objectivity afforded by temporal distance, he recognizes the implications of working from a twenty-first century cultural framework. Whether a “neutral description” of any theory or worldview is plausible should remain a concern for the reader, especially given the history and historiography of the topic—the relationship between objectivity and realism in representation is what, at least in part, incited the *bataille réaliste*.^[1] Nonetheless, Röhrl’s fastidious account of the history of realism, its concomitant terms and theories, and the existing body of criticism and scholarship is impressive, and this volume will prove an important resource for students and scholars of realism.

Having established the methodology, the author begins his historical account with the declaration that “all modern definitions of realism in visual arts have their origins in French aesthetics” (37). This French intellectual tradition included both bourgeois and socialist perspectives. Distilling the content of many nineteenth-century French reviews, articles, treatises, and journals, Röhrl asserts that bourgeois writers held up three aspects of realism: its mimetic quality, its documentation of the contemporary world, and its depiction of the lower classes (52–60). For French socialist writers, however, realism was further defined as a form of social engagement predicated upon the critique of capitalist society (208–11). This distinction underpins much of what follows, for while the author concedes that both lines of definition were based on materialist philosophies, he insists that “bourgeois art and its theories must not be intermingled with socialist theory” (4, 43).

The succeeding sections of Part I describe realist and naturalist impulses in art in Western Europe, Britain, Scandinavia, and the United States; in each instance, the author discusses the extent to which these aesthetic developments were rooted in native traditions versus part of a broader realist ethos. For example, British aestheticians regarded realism as a phenomenon present throughout history, separating “method” from “movement.” Method was understood as the concept of depicting reality, and Röhrl suggests that protorealistic tendencies might be detected in British art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which developed quite independently of continental influences. In contrast, the

concept of realism as a “movement” referred to a style that could be observed more readily and fully developed in British art of the late 1850s, and here the author makes a compelling comparison between the *Stone-Breaker* (1857–58; Birmingham City Museum) by Henry Wallis and Gustave Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers* (1849–50; destroyed); Wallis may have adopted Courbet’s subject, but his realism was evidently infused with a certain Pre-Raphaelite romanticism (79–80).

The remainder of Part I recounts the emergence of socialist art around 1900 and analyzes its development up until the First World War. The term ‘socialist art’ was in use during this period, but referred to a political attitude towards art making rather than a certain style: the works of socialist artists, in general, combined a realistic portrayal of subjects with some idealizing features, though they varied greatly (208). For this reason, Röhrhl claims that a stylistic classification would be unproductive, and instead focuses on the contributions of key socialist artists, from Constantin Meunier in Belgium to Käthe Kollwitz in Germany, and variations in the semantics of socialist art that aligned with the different theories of socialism proliferating in different countries. Studies of realism in Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany demonstrate the longstanding connection between the worker’s movement and the idea of a socialist realism. For Röhrhl, this is an important corrective to the assumption that socialist realism was an expression of totalitarian thought. Socialist art, he insists, was conceived in the nineteenth century when realism was directed towards the depiction of the working class with dignity (246).

Having examined the genesis of both bourgeois and socialist realism, the second and third parts of the book consider the evolution of realism in the twentieth century, which Röhrhl argues is distinguishable from academic nineteenth-century Realism both art historically and sociologically: the influence of modernism and the formation of the first socialist state following the October Revolution in Russia mark decisive points in the periodization of realist art and theory (249). The author’s most significant intervention into this history concerns the trajectory of modernism. He claims that previous attempts to explain the history of realism in the twentieth century have adapted an international context similar to those applied in histories of modernism, and in so doing, have overestimated the veracity of a “realist avant-garde” (249). Instead, he contends, realist artists reacted to the political and cultural conditions of their respective countries, and he extends the system of classification imposed on nineteenth-century art to his consideration of art in Western and socialist countries up through the contemporary time period, even while he concedes that the 1960s marked another decisive turn in the history of realism with the global dominance of modern art. Röhrhl insists that the Soviet Union, China, and the German Democratic Republic remained, to some degree, isolated as late as the 1990s, and while the influence of official socialist realism receded and terminology changed, realism in socialist countries was distinguishable from trends in realism in Western countries, such as Pop art and Photorealism, which he argues were inextricably tied to the dominant economic and social class (528).

An important impetus for this project, Röhrhl states, was extending a systematic analysis to certain forms of realism, which he believes have been insufficiently studied. This perception of the state of the field is what seems to have informed his creation of a third discrete category of “emergent countries,” where Röhrhl argues “realism can be defined as a mixture

of certain axioms of European realist theory . . . with Marxist thought and, most important of all, native traditions in theory and artistic expression” (434). In the case of Mexican Muralism, a confluence of native figurative traditions, European academic education, and the enabling of “free artistic expression of critical thought” fostered social realism, or what is sometimes referred to as ‘revolutionary art’ (434). According to Röhr, Mexican Muralism showed features of the art of the avant-garde and of realism during its development, and the idea that it represented an alternative to both European modernism and socialist realism can be ascertained in both the period literature and subsequent histories (436). As with other well-documented movements discussed in the book, the author endeavors to move beyond description and documentation towards classification. He concludes that Mexican Muralism and related graphic arts there were truly “the first demand of an emergent country to create a culture outside the European sphere,” and goes on to trace their influence on developments in other Spanish-speaking countries (437).

However, not all of the “emergent countries” under review can be fitted into the author’s classification scheme. The Philippines, formed by Spanish colonial powers, is an interesting case of a South Asian country in which realism has been comprehensively documented in art historical literature, with attention to both academic realism and social art (470), while the absence of realism in India, Röhr argues, should be attributed to the social system of castes and the selective and insular culture in which art was made and studied (475). His examination of realist art in these so-called “emergent countries” in the latter half of the twentieth century is, by the author’s own admission, rather fragmentary (578). Indeed, because of their relatively speculative nature, these entries do not substantively contribute to the overarching attempt to systematically account for all forms of realism. The final chapter focuses on Indonesia, where a native realism developed in concert with Dutch colonial traditions to produce a form of social realism that persisted into the 1960s. However, in the late twentieth century, a reinvigorated form of realist art predicated on an explicit refusal of Western modernism and relative indifference to indigenous forms of art was promoted by a younger generation of artists, who organized as the New Art Group. Röhr cites this socially critical form of realism as typical of emergent countries. However, typical does not translate to easily classifiable, as social art is often inspired by aspects of local religion, culture, and politics, which may be difficult to interpret (594).

The book lacks a comprehensive conclusion, though an Epilogue recapitulates some of the convictions laid out in the introduction. Perhaps most startlingly, the author states, “Today, the debate on realism seems to have lost much of its relevance” (595). If this is the case, one wonders what the significance of such an ambitious text should have for the field of art history. Nevertheless, Röhr’s effort to explicate the history, historiography, and discourse of realism will be appreciated by those of us who do not believe the debate on realism has lost relevance. The writing and publishing of this volume was undertaken without any institutional support, which explains the limited illustrations, a shortcoming that is to be forgiven in light of the extensive dictionary of terms and thoughtfully selected list of literature and documentary sources. Consequently, the book will surely remain a useful reference on realism in the visual arts.

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[1] The author defines the *bataille réaliste* (realist battle) as the discussion on realism in literature and art in France around 1850, including conceptions by both bourgeois and socialist writers. This is also the title of a formative text on realism written by the historian Émile Bouvier in 1910. See Émile Bouvier, *La Bataille Réaliste (1844–1857)* (Paris: Fontemoing et Cie, 1914).