

Griffin, Tim. "New Year's Resolution," *Artforum*, January 2009.

## ARTFORUM

### New Year's Resolution

**DELVING INTO ART HISTORIAN** Christopher S. Wood's consideration of legendary Renaissance scholar Michael Baxandall in the current issue, readers may have the sneaking suspicion that they are being directly and personally addressed by the text's first line: "'Money is very important in the history of art.'"

For while those droll words are, in fact, merely cited by Wood—he is, of course, quoting from Baxandall's 1972 book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*—and speak to things at a historical distance, their fundamental point, and intended implications, are entirely pertinent to our contemporary context. True enough, Baxandall was concerned with extrapolating ideas from masterfully imagined aspects of living culture from long ago: the typical Quattrocento businessperson's quick knack for calculating the volume of a barrel or bale, for instance, or for recognizing different configurations in dance. But such talents, in the scholar's estimation, shaped and sustained, as Wood notes, a "common repertoire of skills, mental and affective habits, and bodily disciplines" among artists, patrons, and audiences, such that the language of art was "woven tightly into the tissue of daily experience." And so there is, Baxandall argued, much to be gained by immersing aesthetic theory in the physical universe, and by surmising how art and our perception of it might be shaped by the breathing world—grasping, in effect, the intimate, and then social, links between ordinary circumstance and extraordinary artmaking. "Baxandall's achievement," Wood writes, "was to reintroduce art to life by restoring life to the people who paid for



Leandro Erlich, *Window and Ladder—Too Late for Help*, 2008, metal, ladder, fiberglass, brick, 14' 9" x 5' 3".

art and used art.” Inevitably, we must ask, the precarious economy never far from our thoughts, What would it mean to apply his model to our situation today?

The story of art during the past decade or so in this regard, if still waiting to be written, is familiar enough. It begins not with barrels and bales but rather with so many crates packed for international destinations. The unprecedented expansion of a global market for contemporary art gave rise to ever greater numbers of exhibitions and fairs, such that more artists generated more work for an ever-widening audience. Indeed, art moved into entirely different registers of scale and production—big, to make a splash at the biennial and in the mass media, and small, for portability to the fair booth; fast, to meet demand, and editioned, to facilitate simultaneous exhibition at multiple venues around the world—and art witnessed a shift as well among collectors and audiences, from a highly knowledgeable, if also insular, group steeped in connoisseurship and the academy, to another crowd, more in step with an ascendant culture of speculation.

When it comes to the matter of art “woven into daily experience,” however, there is one development of particular note to have emerged from the explosion of interest in contemporary art, one which arose specifically among the increasing numbers of large-scale exhibitions seeking to display work situated in life. Indeed, some five years ago in these pages, as part of a roundtable devoted to the effects of globalism on artmaking, curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist mentioned in passing the idea of a “‘living’ biennial,” an exhibition that would spill out from the white cube and into the streets, becoming dynamically enmeshed in the local environs. In the years following the specific example he brought up—the 2003 Tirana Biennial, which incorporated and then elaborated on the local mayor’s earlier decision to repaint many of his city’s buildings in bright colors—this approach has been undertaken with more frequency, including, notably, by the Fourth Berlin Biennale of 2006. And yet in

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all these cases a crucial question has been the degree to which such shows merely aestheticized their host cities—less engaging them as sites than rendering them as scenes. Architecture and history have been at risk of blending into an atmospheric or picturesque backdrop for art—a nearly fictional setting within which the narratives of art-

ists’ work unfolds, never truly being woven into the actual environment or negotiating it in any provocative way.

At this cultural moment, however, perhaps a converse effect, likely present all along, is finally becoming evident, with art—long insulated from the world in a hyperarticulated institutional system—ever-more obviously resolved in an image of itself, having become a representational endeavor as its practitioners adhere to conventions in order to produce something recognizable as the art it is. In the current issue, something akin to this scenario is suggested by artist Glenn Ligon as he discusses the inaugural New Orleans biennial, Prospect.1, the most recent exhibition to grapple with the problem of presenting art pointedly within the context of a given city, with the curator and artists in this case all too aware of the risks attending the placement of any work within that site. (A resonant piece might only impart a picturesque quality to the urban devastation still lingering in the city years after Hurricane Katrina.) Yet, citing Kafka’s adage about art as a mirror that sometimes “goes ‘fast,’ like a watch,” Ligon notes that in New Orleans instead “it was the art that was outrun at every turn.” In this place, in other words, the times seemed more radical than the work—more challenging, more surprising, more subversive of our expectations and conceits.

One can hardly say that such a constellation of circumstances—of art’s making of life a picture at the same time that life makes of art a mere image—summons too strongly the critical historical moment that *Painting and Experience* describes. In fact, Wood rightly concludes with the assertion that Baxandall’s thesis may be uniquely applicable to its Quattrocento subject. Even so, perhaps there is some analogy to be made—if only by way of the broadest observations—in light of Wood’s assertion that this earlier situation arose in one “magical moment” between the Middle Ages and modernity. It was in the briefest of periods, he says, when “artist and beholder met one another no longer under the supervision of the clergy, and not yet in the collector’s cabinet or the museum.” *No longer, not yet*: a beautiful construction that, one hopes, speaks in some way to the relationship of art to experience now and in the difficult years ahead. □