

Pellizzi, Francesco. 2017. "Esther Pasztory: A Brief Personal Recollection." In *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives, Online Addenda*, edited by Andrew Finegold and Ellen Hoobler. Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology, < <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Pasztory/Online-Addenda/01-Pellizzi.pdf>>.

ONLINE ADDENDUM ONE

Esther Pasztory

A BRIEF PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

Francesco Pellizzi

Thinking of Esther Pasztory's penchant for paradoxes, double-identities, and the like, I would like to start by mentioning—as an Italian transplanted to this country, who, like Esther, has had a decades-long involvement with Mexico—some of her non-scholarly writing, in the form of fiction and recollections, for which I feel much sympathy and appreciation. *Remove Trouble from Your Heart*, for instance, her memoir of 2008, in which she so vividly recollected images of the Hungary of her early youth and of her first American experiences, with insights that remind me of some of the writing of her great compatriot Sándor Márai (who was also an expatriate), resonates with aspects of my own experience of triple voluntary expatriation (to France, America and Mexico). And I recently received Esther's new book, *Conversations with Quetzalcoatl and Other Stories*, in which her keen awareness of her Hungarian-American double-identity, or split-consciousness—and the way in which, as voluntary exiles, we are never truly at home anywhere, nor could we imagine ever *wishing* to be—is subtly but also dramatically and humorously made to resonate with scholarly concerns and the intricate problems of unraveling complex Pre-Columbian, Colonial, and post-Colonial mythological identities and even theological-political themes.¹ In fact, I would make the story in the title of this collection required reading for anybody—anthropologists, art historians, and others—planning to embark on a study involving multiple iconographic and ideological recombination of past and present *figures*, 'real' and 'imagined', of our own or other histories. Her brief and spirited evocation in it of the religious-mythological entity commonly labeled "Quetzalcoatl", through the mists of two millennia, in conjunction with a scholar's self-conscious struggles to unravel its layers of truth and mystification, I see as having deep, if light-handedly and subtly hinted, implications for our understanding of the dynamics of cultural creations through time that—as Aby Warburg taught us—well transcend, even, the *technical* domain of 'art'. Thus Esther's irritatingly intrusive, and vanishing, Quetzalcoatl, with all his *disfrases*, even reminded me of that enigmatic pre-Apocalyptic figure—or entity—which the Pauline second letter to the Thessalonians called *to*

Kathekon, or “the power that ‘detains’, that ‘holds back’” the Antichrist: because like Esther’s Quetzalcoatl, the *Kathekon*, as in the reading of a contemporary Italian philosopher, “appears ever more as a complex of *personae* that play in distinct fields, assuming disguises now definitely political, now religious, now of imperial functionaries, now of priests [...] and liturgists [...] whose lasting and [...] transcultural *energía* depends exactly on its belonging to the two great political-spiritual fields [the secular and the sacred], to its *familiarity* with both [emphasis mine]” (pp. 65-66).² There are treasures of heuristic thought that we can still confidently expect to spring out of Esther Pazstory’s ‘retreat’ in Maine.

My modest evocation of Esther Pazstory’s far-ranging contributions to the history and theory of art will be limited to the areas of my two-decade collaboration with her. One of these brought my way the happy task, and honor, of planning and co-organizing the Symposium celebrating her life’s work, from which the present Festschrift in her honor originated, and which also came to represent the entire 2012–13 program of the *University Seminar on the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas*, at Columbia University, which I have been running at her invitation since 2005. Even after I took it on, Esther remained a constant presence at our sessions, from time to time suggesting to me names of colleagues, both known and less known, who invariably contributed something new and original.³ Professor Pasztory had herself taken on the University Seminar, which she ran for thirty years, from its founder, Douglas Fraser, on his untimely death. While a pioneering figure in the study and interpretation of African arts in their own terms, Fraser (after Paul Wingert, also at Columbia), had entertained the vision of not isolating fledgling Africanist research from that concerning other non-Western (and prevalently non-literate) cultural horizons, in the Americas as well as in the Pacific—an implicitly comparative position that at the time was more ‘anthropological’ than ‘art historical’, but with which (and I am certain because he told me so himself), Meyer Schapiro fully agreed. This was the vision that Esther carried forward, as her own research moved ever more deeply into the Pre-Columbian field. By a significant coincidence, my own work on *RES - Anthropology and Aesthetics*, an academic journal rooted in social anthropology but also quite open, from the start, to multiple and quasi-Warburgian art historical interests, fit quite well with what Esther was pursuing both in her own research and theoretical work.

This is what made the other principal area of our long-standing collaboration, her own scholarly and critical presence in the pages of the journal, very natural—first of all as author, but also, though less visibly, as advisor and interlocutor. Allow me to mention, if briefly, some of Esther’s very important articles in *RES* relating to theoretical concerns that have occupied and shaped her writings and teaching in recent decades: first came, in 1990/91, “Still invisible: the

problem of the aesthetics of abstraction for pre-Columbian art and its implications for other cultures”, in which her characteristic flair for extrapolating from the analysis of pre-Columbian artifacts and their historical contexts took imaginative turns that laid the seeds for her ambitious book, *Thinking with Things*, whose title inspired that of the Symposium in her honor. In it, she moved beyond debates about so-called “Primitivism” in Western aesthetics, still prevalent in the late 1980s, while revisiting questions about transcultural aesthetics in our world of supposedly globalized transmission and consumption of images.⁴ She evoked and discussed, at the start of this seminal study, Albrecht Dürer’s much quoted inability (or disinclination) to describe in any detail—much less, apparently *sketch*—any of the New World artifacts he saw in Brussels’ Town Hall, in 1520, on the occasion of Charles V’s installation as Holy Roman Emperor—despite finding these “much better worth seeing than prodigies” and even noticing “amongst them wonderful works of art”, testifying, in his words, to “the subtle *Ingenia* of men in foreign lands”, but confessing in the end: “Indeed I cannot express all that I thought there”. Noting how this artist, among the greatest of his time in Europe, had no such difficulty writing about ancient Roman columns (e.g., in Aachen), or a Jan van Eyck painting, Esther Pasztory raised questions about what I came to call *visual aphasia* in cultural encounters that have much influenced my thinking ever since.⁵ I found her conclusion, in the same article, equally significant, against the widely accepted Gombrich opposition between “conceptual” and “perceptual” art, the “all art [...] is conceptual [...] The difference is that some seek the illusion of reality, while others attempt to create a reality that is not in the visible world, a process interpreted as abstraction,”⁶ though of course the definition of this *abstract* reality, particularly in our modern world, remains quite problematic. Moving on to a discussion of related and equally thorny issues regarding the statute of “ornament” in the arts of all cultures and times, Western and non-Western, Pasztory cut to the bone of old debates and misconceptions, stating that “the real question is not what ornament *means*, but what it *does* (emphasis mine)” (p. 124) and that “a willingness to decontextualize works of art is essential to this task” (p.127). But then she also proceeded to hypothesize, in the closing paragraphs, how the Pre-Columbian “inventiveness” noted by Dürer, in many of its “non-mimetic” and “imaginary” forms—so prominent in the Teotihuacan murals that have provided the focus for some of Pasztory’s most searching and innovative studies—had “devised” a “decorative matrix” and an “arbitrary image system” that in turn seemed to correspond, somehow, to a “small or highly integrated socio-political context”, and well represent even the playful and “amusing” inclinations and tastes of an “upper-middle class” favoring “arrangements that convey the illusion of a visible world” (p. 133). And these in turn she dared to relate and compare to certain trends of the Western Avant-garde. So, in Esther

Pasztory's mind, close attention to formal specificity does not in fact exclude historical context, nor meta-historical (and hence 'anthropological') comparison but ultimately can serve to give it greater relevance, depth, and perspective.

In 1995, Esther Pasztory contributed to *RES*'s 15th Anniversary Symposium—which doubled as one of the 'inaugural' celebrations of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, at Columbia University, called *Tradition – Translation – Treason*, and which was published as a special volume of the Journal in 1997. On that occasion, in a response, titled "Treason", to one of Robert Farris Thompson's characteristically spirited presentation-performances, she argued, among other things, not only against what she called the "re-primitivization of African Art", and that while "contextualization is [...] a very good game" there is "such a thing as too much contextualization" and that "art works have always transcended context and always will", but also in favor of the "paradox" of cultivating the study (and even the *impersonation*, as in Thompson's case at hand) of "context while transgressing the contexts and traditions of academic discourse". She also stressed, in that same brief text, how in dealing with the thorny issues of cultural, and artistic, translation, "little [has been said] about *who* translates [emphasis mine]". That there "is translation going on out there", in other, 'non-Western' worlds, that should concern us, "whether we find the result appealing or not"—"and that too *is context*" [emphasis mine], she concluded with her characteristic dialectical ability to uphold two apparently diverging views at the same time.⁷

Then, a few years later, in November 2000, Professor Pasztory planned a 'Pre-Columbian' conference at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for which she invited me to give the keynote address and to which she gave the suggestive, somewhat playful and, once more, "paradoxical" (in her own words) title *West by Nonwest*. It was eventually published as a special volume of *RES*.⁸ Both Esther's introduction and her paper for the conference and for that volume of the journal tackled, once more, problems that have occupied her whole life as a thinker and a scholar—for instance when she evoked the (quasi-Duchampian) notion of "detour", as characterizing the "necessary but unexpected twists and turns of one's scholarly plots" that result from "analyzing the Nonwest through the West." And referring to the "imaginary" relation of the West to America, she stressed, in an almost post-Modern mode, how "its function seems to be to fulfill unconscious needs rarely analyzed" and that "our role as art historians in our analysis is to try to reveal the 'real' pre-Columbian world *as well as the role it is playing for us even as we analyze*." In her own paper, significantly titled "Truth in Forgery", analogous paradoxes were confronted. I cannot go into them in any detail, here, but will only recall Esther pointing to "how close the two categories" of "forgery" and unique "masterpiece" can be to each other and how

“rather than disowning them we need to look at [now obvious] fakes to find out who we were, which is relatively easy, and who we are now, which is much more difficult” (op. cit., p. 163). And ‘forgery’, or replication, as the hypostasis of a *master-piece*—for/of our time—is a recurrent theme of our artistic landscape (suffice it to mention Mike Bidlo, Sherry Levine, Raymond Pettibon). Continuing this theme, Esther Pasztory’s most recent book is called *Aliens and Fakes*.

¹ E. Pasztory, *Conversations with Quetzalcoatl and Other Stories*, Solon, Maine, 2013.

² Massimo Cacciari, *Il potere che frena*, Milano 2013. But see also, for a somewhat different take on the question, Giorgio Agamben, *Il mistero del male: Benedetto XVI e la fine dei tempi*, Roma-Bari 2013, and Piero Stefani, *L’Apocalisse*, Bologna 2008.

³ The initial idea for today’s symposium was chiefly promoted and managed by two of Esther’s recent PhDs, Ellen Hoobler and Andrew Finegold, with the assistance of one of our Seminar’s Rapporteurs, Andrea Fabiola Vazquez, and of Josh Sakolsky and Sonia Sorrentini, at Columbia’s Department of the History of Art and Architecture. I want to thank them all for their initiative and hard work. To me fell the happy and gratifying task of inviting the Symposium’s main speakers, on behalf of our University Seminar, all of whom enthusiastically accepted and are now present in the volume and its online addenda.

⁴ E. Pasztory, “Still invisible: the problem of the aesthetics of abstraction for pre-Columbian art and its implications for other cultures”, in *RES 19/20, 1990/1991 – Anthropology and Aesthetics*, pp. 105-136.

⁵ See some of the works Dr. Pasztory referred to in this discussion, such as E. Panofsky’s, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955), and W.M. Conway, *The Literary remains of Albrecht Dürer*, London 1889.

⁶ She further noted, in one of her often enlightening footnotes, how “realistic traditions may seek to represent an invisible world as well [...], but the aim of such representations is the creation of the illusion that these might be real, and it is a way of adapting the imaginary to the real world.” (Ibid. n. 9, pp. 114-115).

⁷ E. Pasztory, “Treason”, *RES 32 Autumn 1997 – Tradition—Translation—Treason*, pp. 35-36, *passim*.

⁸ E. Pasztory, “Editorial: West by nonwest”, pp. 5-7 and “Truth in forgery”, pp. 159-165, *RES 42 Autumn 2002 – West by nonwest*.