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ONLINE ADDENDUM THREE

Praise Song

What the Teacher Taught

Holland Cotter

First I'd like to thank Francesco Pellizzi for inviting me to be part of this symposium, which is, of course, also a celebration…It's an honor to be able to honor Esther Pasztory, an esteemed teacher and mentor to so many of us, and an important presence as a thinker in the field of art history at large. I come here today not as a scholar, but as a working journalist and art critic who has been on the art-writing beat for some thirty years here in New York City, and as such, I will keep my remarks casual and personal.

I met Esther Pasztory in the fall of 1988, in my first semester as a graduate student here at Columbia. I was forty-one years old at the time, much older than most of the other students and closer in age to most of the faculty. I was long out of college at that point; I graduated in 1970. My focus there had been on literature as a dimension, not on art, although one of the few art courses that I took there as an undergraduate had a lasting effect on me, and I'll mention that shortly. I came to Columbia with a Master's in Art History from Hunter; I had earned the degree by going to school part-time at night for several years while holding a full-time job at a computer center. And I kept that job while I was here at Columbia taking a full course load. I was also at that time writing regularly for several magazines here in the city. I think it was in my second year here that *The New York Times* called and asked if I wanted to write for them on a regular basis. At that point, between work and school and life, I was totally crazed. So I said, "Sure!" And that's how my career there started.

But I had come to Columbia for a very specific reason: I wanted to study South Asian art—specifically Indian Buddhist art—and Vidya Dehejia, who is a hero of mine now, as she was then, was teaching it. So I knew I was in good hands. My interest in Asia went back a long way, however, to childhood. I grew up in Boston, in a museum-going family. Our regular museum was the Museum of Fine Arts, which my parents were inclined to use as a day care center. Beginning when I was quite young—nine or ten years old—they

would leave me there on Saturday afternoons in the winter to wander around while they went out to do their city business. But museums were different places then than they are now: it was a very quiet place, not too many people, but I was basically in the protective custody of the guards, who all knew me. And, because I was a bookish, fairly self-confident, self-reliant kid, they let me wander around freely through the museum, which I did. I went everywhere, and I got to know the collection very well, very early. Egyptian sculpture; John Singleton Copley portraits; Goya landscapes; Netherlandish altarpieces; and, the stone and bronze images of Buddhist and Hindu divinities in a South Asian collection that had been assembled by Ananda Coomaraswamy, among other people. I was particularly drawn to the Japanese galleries at the MFA, I think because their large carved wood temple Buddhas were so captivatingly installed in a kind of walk-in temple environment that was very atmospheric, very theatrical; it's still there. The most important aspect of those experiences, I see now, however, was that I was being exposed not to just one kind of art—any one kind of art—but to different kinds of art throughout the museum. That was very important. Just by being there, I was getting a sense of the simultaneous existence of myriad world cultures, and, most important of all, a sense of the equivalence in value of those cultures.

I'll mention one other youthful experience that ended up shaping my thinking about art and that prepared me to find in Esther Pasztory's work a source of confirmation and revelation. In 1966 I entered college as a freshman, an English major. But, more or less by accident, the first course I took was an art course. At that time, freshmen—and this may still be true, I don't know—were required to take a science credit, which terrified me. So I scoured the listings in search of a doable option, and I found one: an anthropology survey course called "Primitive Art". (It was 1966—we were still saying "Primitive Art".) The course was absurdly capacious. It covered a spectrum from early dynastic art of China, to Pre-Columbian art, to what was presumably the perpetually primitive art of Africa, Oceania, and native North America. Unsurprisingly, the class met, not in an art museum, but in a museum of ethnology—the Peabody Museum—which had, among other things, an old collection of West and Central African masks and sculptures. I had no idea what I was walking into when I registered for the course, but I ended up being swept away. As it happened, the graduate student who was leading my section of this lecture course was particularly interested in Africa. He taught the assigned curriculum, but he spent a lot of class time showing us rough-cut films of masquerades that he had shot in West Africa the previous two summers. We would watch the films—and we were basically a guinea pig

audience, which was wonderful—and he had audio taped everything, so we were listening as well. Then we would go out into the gallery and we would try to track down some of the masks that we had seen in the masquerades. As you can imagine, this was a fantastic way to learn. I became fully aware for the first time that art did something: it moved, it healed, it kept life in order, it also provoked questions, demanded responses, made judgments, made jokes, elicited moral thinking, and offered ways to look at the world in a more complicated way than we would have otherwise. Art was functional, proactive, alive, not just for passive viewing. This experience made me receptive to the idea that many of the Egyptian, European, and South Asian objects I had been attracted to at the MFA were alive and instrumental in comparable ways. As, I would come to think later, were the contemporary art forms that I began to write about: Conceptual Art, Performance Art, Sound Art, Installation…all of it. Without knowing it, I was already getting a sense of the utilitarian dynamic that Esther Pasztory would unforgettably call "Thinking with Things".

After college I did a lot of non-art-related work: I worked in hospitals or in banks, a bunch of things. Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was in New York, I got into a relationship with an artist, and ended up living with a bunch of artists, and, inevitably, started writing about art. I mostly wrote gallery reviews for various magazines, and gradually built up freelance beats. My start-up beat was the East Village, where I was living at the time, and which was just then becoming the city's hot art neighborhood. I wrote about new art solidly for two years, and then I started to slow down. I was finding that what I was looking at was becoming less and less interesting, in part because artists were having second shows. So the artist I'd seen two years before I was now seeing again, and not that much had been developed because careers were being kind of pushed to the middle too quickly for that, and artists were becoming younger and younger and younger. This was not a satisfying situation for me. I was pretty sure that writing about art was the way I wanted to go in the future, but I felt I needed to get involved in it in a larger way, a different way. I wanted to get back to the art I had looked at when I was a kid at the MFA and that I'd learned about in college. In the early 1980s I saw a show called "The Great Age of Japanese Buddhist Sculpture, A.D. 600–1300" at the Japan Society in New York City, and the sculptures were so charismatic and so clearly shaped by stimulating ideas that I just wanted to go to where they were made. So I got a plane ticket and flew to Japan and stayed for a while. I went to museums there in the cities, but I spent most of my time looking at images at temples and monasteries in the countryside and just wandered around. I didn't speak Japanese and almost no one on the island spoke English, so it was a

very silent time. But that was wonderful. It was just me and art and that was it, that was the communication, and it was a wonderful experience.

When I got back to New York, I really wanted to write about this stuff, but I couldn't. I didn't know how. I didn't have the knowledge or the language. I didn't know how to go about it. So at that point all I knew about art in general was how much I didn't know, and I realized I needed to go back to school, so that's when I signed up at Hunter, where I could go at night. And I had wonderful teachers. I took absolutely everything on the menu, which I could do because I wasn't in any rush. I was taking one course—at most two courses—a semester. I didn't really think in terms of getting a degree. I wanted to do just one course at a time, if possible, and just *be* in that course. You know, like, think "Baroque" for three months. And I was able to do it, so it was wonderful. I only finally got the degree because somebody in the department said, "You know, Holland, you've got all these credits, do you want to do anything with them?" So, I ended up doing a Master's paper on American Modernism for Rosalind Krauss. But my interests were extremely broad, and getting broader all the time. And a course in Islamic art that was taught by Ulku Bates just stopped me in my tracks. I just wanted to stay there, with that material; I didn't want to go any place else…maybe bring everything else into it, but I definitely wanted to be with it. So I arranged with Ulku to do an independent study, and we cooked up a topic in Mughal garden architecture, Dravidian architecture, which sent me to Kashmir. So I flew over to Kashmir, and I camped out there and did research. That was in the mid-1980s, when you could still do that there, and from Kashmir I went to Nepal, and when I got to Nepal suddenly all my previous interest in Buddhism came flooding back to me, and that took me to India to track down some early Buddhist sites there. Which in turn took me here to Columbia, where Vidya Dehejia was. It also, most serendipitously, brought me to Esther Pasztory.

Because I was new in the program, I was required to take the Proseminar, and, by enormous good fortune, I was assigned to the Proseminar that Esther was teaching. I think there were six students in that class. One of them, Ellen, was already firmly committed to the subject of Gothic church architecture. Another, James, had his sights set on early Netherlandish painting. So they were on a track already for themselves. The other three students—all guys—were floating, but they were floating entirely within Western parameters. I was non-Western. I was there for Indian, so I knew what I was doing. And right off the bat, Esther told us what our main task in the course would be: to try to figure out what this thing called "art history" *was*, with "art" in scare quotes and

"history" in scare quotes. We would also ponder that question in the context of two other scare quote terms, "Western" and "non-Western". The semester's readings were very stimulating—a good mix—we got Gombrich, we also got George Kubler, Michael Baxandall, but also Guaman Poma, and we got Baxandall's interest in technologies of visualization in the Italian Renaissance in the same conversation as we had discussions about visualizations in the Hindu sculptural tradition. So all these dovetailings were going on, and they weren't artificial, they really were extremely provocative and stimulating.

For our first assignment, we were to write two short papers on two objects, both from the Met's collection. The choice of objects was up to us. The only stipulation was that one of them had to be "non-Western". I was thrilled, of course. This was exactly what I was at Columbia for, and I loved the interplay. I had done a lot of Western before, now I was doing non-Western…this was heaven to me. I chose for my pair a 12th-century French Virgin and Child from the Cloisters and an 11th century Chola Somaskanda that was sort of on view at the Met downtown, but in this little hallway situation with a badly lighted display case. There were no Indian galleries at the Met at that time; there was a balcony around the main hall. So, those were my two. I remember the more specific and complicated set of instructions that Esther gave for the second paper. For this one we were told to write about how we thought our objects were meant to be understood in relation to their originating contexts. There was more: we were told to write about Western art as though we were outsiders to it, not insiders. And, given that Western art is just one tradition among many, we were asked to think about what, if anything, made it distinctive and interesting. How would we write about that as outsiders? And finally, if we had indeed come to accept the reality of the existence of multiple world cultures, all of equal value, did we still think that any one objective point of view of art was possible?

If you're old enough now to remember back to 1988, you will know that culturally challenging questions like these were not being routinely asked of students, or, for that matter, considered by faculty members. These were, however, exactly the questions I needed to hear, and to try to answer. The two European art courses I was taking that semester turned out to be very ho-hum. Hunter had spoiled me. But the Proseminar made up for that. What Esther was doing, I think, was trying to make us self-conscious. A lot of people don't like to be self-conscious, they associate it with being un-self-confident, which it of course doesn't have to mean. What she was trying to do, I think, was to get us off balance, to get us confused. For some reason, I'm fine with confusion. I really like it, actually; I find it a very stimulating state of being.

Now, that was the only course I took with her. But the following summer I worked for her as an assistant and got to read the original, in progress version of a long study that is now called *Thinking with Things*, but was then titled, *Towards a Natural History of Art*. And reading it back then was fantastic for a number of reasons. One had to do with the matter of writing. I entered the Columbia graduate program with no ambitions to be a teacher, or a curator, or pursue any of the professional options that we were being trained to pick up on when we got out of there. The only curatorial experience I ever had was as a volunteer docent at the Asia Society, and I did that for a very specific reason: to install a show. And the show that summer was the Rockefeller South Asian collection. My reason for wanting to do it was that I wanted to pick up the bronzes and feel the surface of the sandstone sculptures. And they said, "Sure, come on in." So I went there one afternoon and I felt those Chola bronzes, and it was wonderful. I've never done it again, but that one time was crucial because it changed my relationship to art.

So I entered Columbia's graduate program with no ambitions to be any of those things. I came as a committed writer—that's what I was going to do—and, implicitly, as a generalist. I wanted to know and needed to know a lot about a lot of things. Language was my thing. What I was here for was to gain specialized information on one or more particular subjects. My conflict was this, however: was it possible to write about the art history I was interested in, which had a significant archaeological component and a highly specialized vocabulary of references, and still be an accessible, writerly writer. And here was my answer in *Thinking with Things*: it was possible. Because Esther writes beautifully, personably. Reading the manuscript that summer and talking with her, I found other questions being answered and doubts being resolved. Through her example, she was teaching me that it was possible for a scholar to embrace truly panoramic cultural terrain, to be a specialist *and* a generalist. A quick flip through the pages of that extended essay yields references to Jürgen Habermas and Seydou Keïta; to Cecelia Klein and Ibn Khaldun; to Herodotus and Marcel Duchamp; to world capitalism and washing machines; to Michelangelo, Mohenjo-daro, and Mount Rushmore, all in a few pages, and logically in every case—perfectly placed references. I learned from her example that it was possible to be deeply conversant with theory without being territorial or proscriptive. I learned it was possible to combine scholarship and autobiography; to be distanced yet speak in the first person; to combine home, and the world, and scholarship; to be at home in the world, meaning in multiple worlds. I learned that it was possible to be brilliant *and* to be not arrogant. I learned that it was possible to fold, spindle, and mutilate

conventional definitions of art and still be an art historian. I learned that it was possible—indeed, advisable—to be rethinking all cultural givens all the time, in other words, to be willing to be—indeed, to be committed to being—confused.

I've had to do a lot of rethinking over the years, and to be confused over the years, most recently on a trip to Africa I made a little over a year ago. I was high on confusion from the moment I landed. I went pretty much straight from the airport in Bamako, Mali, to a music club to hear some *kora* players. Halfway through that long night a vocalist appeared on the little stage and, backed by a sensational drum orchestra, she poured out what sounded to me like a set of impassioned, torchy love songs. I whispered to a friend at the table something about how much I love West African pop music. He said, "This isn't pop music, exactly." What she was singing were classic Wolof praise songs of the kind performed by *griots*, West Africa's poet-historians. Songs that celebrate the lives of revered individuals in the community, people who were notably brave, wise, accomplished, generous, and just plain good. My misreading turned out to be an accurate preview of my experience of Africa over the next several weeks. Few assumptions I arrived with—and I arrived with many—proved to be on target. Many were simply wrong. I prefer to imagine myself as someone with at least a working awareness of the perils of valuating binary thinking: Western vs. non-Western, high vs. low, traditional vs. contemporary, authentic vs. fake. But I find myself having to work through these values time and time again.

I heard another drum orchestra a week later, in Dogon country to the north of Bamako. This one was accompanying a village masquerade. I recognized the dance; I'd seen it in one of the films in the Primitive Art class in college. You could not mistake those Dogon masks with their plank uprights in the form of what looked like a figure leaping, arms open in surprise. And here I was, seeing these masks being danced on their own turf under open sky all these years later. But, the masquerade was being performed as a tourist attraction. I hadn't considered that possibility earlier. Performances are arranged by appointment: you book one ahead, through a hotel usually; you pay up front; you hire a driver to ferry you out over these cratered roads to a village; and there, with the help of guides, you make your way up a cliff side to a shelf-like clearing. At a scheduled time two-dozen or so men, some on stilts, all costumed as spirits and animals, suddenly emerge from behind rocks. They circle the clearing processionally, then, one after another, execute brief, tightly choreographed solos to the rhythms of a drum band that is overseen by older men who act as combination ballet masters and conductors. The speed and

intricacy of movement increases competitively as the musicians urge the dancers on. I'm a dance fan—Balanchine, *kathakali*, breaking—I'm into it. The training and skill here was plain, most obvious in the way the performers swung their heads down so the masks just grazed the ground, never missing, never hitting too hard, always raising a little cloud of dust. Then, in under an hour, it's over. The performers linger to pose for pictures—that's part of the deal—their faces continuing to be under the masks (which they don't take off), and then they vanish just as quietly as they arrived.

I knew a few things. This performance was a radically condensed version of a funeral masquerade that is still performed in Dogon villages, as much to cement community identity as to urge the dead onto the afterlife. I also knew that a full-scale performance could last for several days and that it is a very costly undertaking; costs go down only if several villages combine resources. Life is hard for the Dogon men, agriculturalists who are said to have gone to a big area centuries ago to avoid conversion to Islam, but who have since adopted Islam and Christianity while retaining their own belief systems. Now climate shifts are causing frequent drought, farming is a constant struggle, the young men have to go to the cities to find work. In these circumstances, tourism has been a godsend. The commissioned performances bring in cash and give young men a reason to return home. By packaging and selling their culture, the Dogon are keeping it intact. Or, at least that's the way I initially viewed it. I'd viewed the performance I'd seen as a form of tourist art, which of course is colored with all kinds of questions of authenticity—negative implications. Later I learned, however, that the Dogon don't see it that way, don't approach the masquerades as "real" or "fake". What I witnessed was simply a dance conceived for a particular occasion and purpose, the way a funeral dance is. Within the context of Dogon performances, the type I'd seen has its own status, its own rules, and its own forms. For one thing, it's danced outside the village because it's not meant to involve the community as participants. For another, certain masks considered intensely spiritual aren't included in these truncated performances. Like all "traditional" forms, this one is fluid, changeable, adaptable to circumstances, it's even expected to change, the way masks are expected to be repainted after use, with certain types going out of fashion periodically and disappearing and new types being brought in, in a process of rethinking old ideas and new forms. And again, because the dance I saw was a paid performance, it functioned to keep the culture alive. Authenticity, I was learning, isn't a question of aesthetic right or wrong—a lesson that *Thinking with Things* just drives home so strongly—authenticity is, often, what works to keep things alive. Change itself is a tradition; maybe it's the only

universal one. If I'd been able to talk to some of the dancers or musicians, I might have been able to think all this through right there. But at least I was thinking interrogatively, which is what Esther had taught me to do. And I kept thinking that way—it gets addictive after a while.

A few weeks later I was in Côte d'Ivoire, several hours north of Abidjan, driving through the countryside. It's Baule country there, and all along the roadsides I was spotting improvised-looking looms tied to upright poles and trees. Looms like these had been used in northwest Africa for centuries. Classic textiles have come off of them, classic designs in the making are still coming off of them. The weavers I saw were mostly young men, trained since childhood. When I was there, many of them were university students who'd had to leave school during the country's 2011 civil war, which was only a few months over at that time. During that crisis, the campuses of universities were turned into battlegrounds and they remained uninhabitable, so there was no school going on. Students returned home to their villages and picked up the professions they knew as children. Mostly the men were recreating traditional Baule patterns, which are in demand on the international market. But they also sometimes just go freestyle: pumping the treadles and throwing the shuttles to the beat of pop radio songs, they incorporated up-to-date urban motifs from branded advertising to video games, and all of that got woven into the old designs. So you had these mash-ups of old and new, and the results that they end up selling will become the new traditional.

A metal-workers' village further up the highway had once been a bustling place, but now, when I was there, was half abandoned. During the civil war it had been caught in a crossfire between rebel and government forces and isolated for months, losing touch with regular buyers and traders. Worse, the soldiers had walked off with a supply of copper used to make the miniature Baule masks for which this particular village was renowned. Left with only a scant supply of scrap metal, including melted down plumbing fixtures, the workers had to restrict themselves to making their decorative beads in an antique style. Beads are minor things. But for anyone who values all art as historical evidence, as I do, they're of considerable interest. Cast in a traditional technique from non-traditional material, they're both real, old-style Baule things and reflections of contemporary reality. They're contemporary art, basically, that uses Baule influences. They're what you'll find in museum gift shops—you're not going to find them in art galleries in Abidjan, you're certainly not going to find them in art galleries in New York City, but, in fact, they are contemporary art in my view.

For years I had wanted to visit the Great Mosque at Djenne, in Mali. I had a picture of it taped to the wall over my desk I had been looking at for many years. I'm not a religious person, but I have a pilgrim's temperament, and, along with the rock-cut churches in Lalibela, Djenne is at the top of my list of places to go. The mosque is one of sub-Saharan Africa's most revered religious monuments, constructed almost entirely from sun-dried mud bricks coated with clay, it's the largest surviving example of a distinctive style of African architecture. In tribute to its status, it has been designated, together with its surrounding neighborhood of low-rise adobe houses, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Yet for Western viewers, like me, the UNESCO seal of approval may raise expectations that the building doesn't quite meet. Heritage implies great age, and the mosque as it now exists is not old. The original building, dating from the 13th or 14th century, was a ruin by the time a French explorer reported seeing it in 1828. It was later demolished. It was only in 1907, by which time Djenne had become a French colonial outpost, that the mosque we see today was constructed on the site of the first one. The architect, who was the city's chief mason and a Muslim, used traditional materials, including palm trunk inserts that bristle from the façade. But, as historians have noted, the design itself adheres to a neo-Sudanese style that was being cooked up at the time by the French, who wanted to give a uniform look to all their properties. But even if you accept the 1907 mosque as a new original, authentic, heritage-worthy building in its own way (like Notre Dame in Paris, much of which dates to the 19th century), problems arise because the building is still in the process of change.

The climate in Mali—long, hot, dry stretches broken by torrential rains—is murder on mud brick architecture. Fissures and leaks develop quickly and grow. Every year since it was built, the Great Mosque has been given a restorative replastering with mud, a task undertaken by the Djenne citizens as a kind of festival. These replasterings have preserved the structure, but also, over time, have subtly remodeled it, rounding and softening its contours, giving it a molten, biomorphic look: the visual equivalent, some say, of Malian Islam—insistently powerful, but ugly and harsh. This is the building in the picture over my desk, a kind of giant sculpture with organic curves and melting pot-like volumes, a bit like Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. But that was not the building that I was looking at in Djenne. I wasn't seeing organic curves, I was seeing more-or-less straight lines squared off like angles. The building had recently undergone a major conservation program, begun in 2008 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which is based in Geneva, Switzerland, and has a mandate to conserve urban architecture internationally. When one

of the mosque's minarets collapsed seven years ago, the Aga Khan Trust was called in to diagnose the problem. They determined the annual replasterings that the Djenne citizens were doing had contributed to weakening the building's structure by trapping corrosive moisture. The Aga Khan people decreed that the replastering had to stop—and they had a lot of clout, because this is UNESCO—at least for the duration of the conservation effort, and then it could be negotiated. Then the foundation went to work, sure enough stripping the exterior and changing the building's appearance yet again. Now the curves and irregularities became crisp, Modernist angles and clean, straight lines.

The lingering question was whether, once the conservation work was complete, the annual replastering would resume. In terms of architectural stability, it probably made sense to stop it. But, in terms of social stability, that could have been devastating on many levels. For the citizens of Djenne, the annual resurfacing had not only served as a binding community event—everybody joined in, kids, everybody—it also drew in a significant international tourist audience, which brought badly needed revenue to a fairly remote location in one of the poorest countries in Africa, which meant one of the poorest countries in the world. Stopping the replastering also deprived the city of a degree of spiritual earning power, in repairing the mosque by hand—which is how it's done—the citizens received infusions of blessings. So, here's this building, one of the world's great buildings in my opinion, composed of layers of conflicting expectations. I bring to it expectations based on a cherished photograph, taken at some unknown point in the past and clipped from a book, and I need it to be this building—organic looking, a material embodiment of a faith that I'm trying to understand. The Aga Khan Foundation is bringing to it a vision of an "original" architectural form, imagined to have existed before. They see the conversion as a restoration job well done, although there's no basis to think this is an accurate restoration at all. The citizens of Djenne, who use the building daily, are bringing to it expectations and needs based on fundamental use-value, a use-value that's spiritual and practical, if you can make a distinction between those two things, which I increasingly cannot do. So, the reality depends on where you stand, and on what you think you need, and on how much thinking around all that you have either done or are willing to do.

This was of course precisely the lesson—or one of the many—that Esther Pasztory was trying to teach in those Proseminar assignments twenty-five years ago, when she asked us to try looking at ourselves and looking at things that we call art from both inside and outside various cultural containers. This was also what she urges readers of *Thinking with*

Things to do. In that long, searching, funny, beautifully written, questioning essay she pays homage to some of her own teachers, some of whom she knew personally, some of whom she knew through their work. At one point she writes, “Art history taught me to see art, but Roland Barthes taught me to see everything.” Esther Pasztory taught me to see art, *and* she taught me to see everything.