

"Brain of the Earth's Body"

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Review: "Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity," by Donald Preziosi (2003); University of Minnesota Press

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Donald Preziosi's "Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity" (2003, University of Minnesota Press) is the published version of his 2001 Slade Lectures (an annual series of Art History Lectures at Oxford University). Somebody I know who went to these lectures told me that he found them fascinating but almost impossible to understand. I can see why. But at least in the book form you can read sentences several times (and untangle all the multiple partial parentheses of words). It's an effort worth making.

Preziosi makes an argument against a representational account of art that is similar to Gell's in *Art and Agency*. But where this goes is rather different, for Preziosi is principally concerned with art as a practice of the modern self – and with what follows from this, especially for how we understand the discipline of art history and the institution of the museum, especially the relationship between subjects and objects (which, he argues, is as often about denial as any kind of realisation). The journey is a wonderfully heady one that takes us, among other places, through the John Soane Museum (which we learn is, like many museums, an ostensification of principles of Freemasonry), via a photograph that Preziosi happened upon of his father (or possibly his twin brother) on the walls of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, via the Crystal Palace, the streets of Cairo, the Pitt-Rivers Museum, circumcision, Lacan, 'the irony of all exit signs'.... to, where? The final chapter rethinks the ubiquitous Index, Icon, Symbol distinction to add a fourth: 'artifice', based on a relation of 'adequation' which, Preziosi suggests, can offer an alternative to the 'ultimately unsatisfying attempts to apply a verbocentrist or linguistically based semiotic model or theory to art' (p.146). (Intriguingly, this is based on recollections of conversations about this with Roman Jakobson.)

But what, you may ask, is the 'brain of the earth's body'? The answer is 'Europe', though as this is a blog and I've run out of space, you'll have to read the book to decipher Preziosi's ruminations on why he can get away with what might otherwise seem an outrageously non-pc metaphor.