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“Art in crisis”

by Roger Kimball

Reflections on Hans Sedlmayr’s remarkable—and largely forgotten—work.

[Today] we find a pursuit of illusions of artistic progress, of personal peculiarity, of “the new style,” of “unsuspected possibilities,” theoretical babble, pretentious fashionable artists, weight-lifters with cardboard dumb-bells. . . . What do we possess to-day as “art”? A faked music, filled with artificial noisiness of massed instruments; a failed painting, full of idiotic, exotic and showcard effects, that every ten years or so concocts out of the form-wealth of millennia some new “style” which is in fact no style at all since everyone does as he pleases. . . . We cease to be able to date anything within centuries, let alone decades, by the language of its ornamentation. So it has been in the Last Act of all Cultures.

—Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

Beauty is the battlefield where God and the devil war for the soul of man.

—Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Among the more remarkable books I first encountered in graduate school was a blistering polemic called (in English) *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*. It is by Hans Sedlmayr, an Austrian art and architectural historian whose primary field of expertise was Baroque architecture. Sedlmayr (1896–1984) was a founding member of the “New Vienna School” of art historians, a group that flourished in the late 1920s and 1930s and included Fritz Novotny and Otto Pächt (whose book *The Practice of Art History* is a neglected classic). Their chief intellectual inspiration was another Austrian, Alois Riegl (1858–1905), whose idea of *Kunst-wollen* — “art will” or “art impulse” — was one of those omnivorous explanatory concepts that set susceptible academic hearts beating faster for two or three generations. Riegl believed that there was an intrinsic evolutionary logic to the development of artistic styles, one whose career (or careers) he and his successors proposed to trace and ruminate about.

It was a fertile idea—fertile, anyway, in the production of papers and books. Sedlmayr edited a collection of Riegl’s essays in 1929 and, in 1931, published an essay called “Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft” — “Toward a Rigorous Study of Art” — which distinguished between two approaches to the study of art. The first, empirical approach focused on such pedestrian issues as

provenance, chronology, influence, and patronage. The second, more exciting approach endeavored to ride the wave of the *Kunstwollen*, to intuit the “inner organization” of the work of art. Both approaches, Sedlmayr said, were necessary to the discipline of art history, but the second (surprise, surprise) was “more ‘essential’ and more ‘valuable’ than the first.”

Many art historians wondered how “rigorous” Sedlmayr’s new approach really was. For example, in “The New Viennese School” (1936), Meyer Schapiro acknowledged the “intensity and intelligence” that Sedlmayr and his colleagues brought to the table, but he also complained about Sedlmayr’s use of “spiritualistic conceptions and . . . allusions to qualities or causes that we have no means of verifying.” Moreover, Schapiro objected, Sedlmayr unfairly deprecated the usual procedures of art history: “Anyone who has investigated with real scruple a problem of art history knows how difficult it often is to establish even a simple fact beyond question.”

Schapiro scored some palpable hits, above all, perhaps, in his observation that the new Viennese sometimes tended to substitute their discovered “principles” or “structures” for the “work itself.” (An objection to which many art historians, Schapiro included, might profitably attend.)

I knew nothing of Sedlmayr’s other work when reading *Art in Crisis*—his highly regarded book on Francesco Borromini’s churches, for example. Nor did I know that Sedlmayr had joined the fledgling Nazi party in Austria as early as 1932, a moment when the party was still outlawed. Sedlmayr was not a committed Nazi. But he did not behave honorably. He kept and flourished in his job during Hitler’s rise and throughout the war while Jewish colleagues, including his friend Pächt, lost their positions and (those that were lucky) had to flee the country. Still, Sedlmayr was never a party ideologue in the sense, for example, that Martin Heidegger was. His association with the toxin of Nazism was close enough that he lost his academic position after the war, not close enough to be prosecuted by the OSS. Christopher Wood, the editor of *The Vienna School Reader* (2003), exhibits a marked distaste for Sedlmayr and what he calls his “bombastic, hectoring, even devious” tone. But Wood acknowledges that Sedlmayr was inspired not by political animus—he was, Wood says, “no revolutionary”—but by “bourgeois and Catholic nostalgia for the Old Europe, the Hapsburg *Mitteleuropa*, that he had known as a child.”

Art in Crisis was published in Germany in 1948 under the title *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*: “Loss of the Center: the Fine Arts of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries as Symptom and Symbol of the Times.” The German title is better, or at any rate is a more accurate guide to the book’s real subject than “Art in Crisis.”

Sedlmayr certainly did believe that modern art was in crisis. But in his view the artistic crisis was only a coefficient or manifestation of a much deeper cultural and religious disintegration. In an important sense, *Verlust der Mitte* is not an exercise in art history at all. It *uses* art, not to make an aesthetic case but in order to illustrate a moral diagnosis. His epigraph—from Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming”—presages the book’s governing mood: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold . . .”

In the decade between its original publication and its appearance in English in 1957, *Verlust der Mitte* sold 100,000 copies in Germany and Austria alone. In America, it bombed utterly. In 1996, Stephen J. Tonsor spoke at an event honoring Henry Regnery, who published *Art in Crisis*. Tonsor estimated that the book, which he described as “one of the post-war’s most important art-historical discussions and criticisms of artistic modernism,” sold “about 250 copies in the United States.” Tonsor may be off by a few hundred: no matter, the book in English encountered some hostility but mostly neglect.

No doubt Sedlmayr’s connection with the Nazis was part of the reason. For example, in a tart, contemptuous review in *Commentary*, Alfred Werner charged that Sedlmayr’s diction was “more reminiscent of Streicher’s newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, than serious art history.” I do not believe Werner’s characterization was fair. If it were, then the rhetoric of moral disapprobation would be forever out of bounds in discussing art. The Nazis mounted a show of modernist art and called it “Degenerate Art.” They were wrong about the art, but does that mean we are henceforth forbidden from describing any art as “degenerate”? Consider the photographs in Robert Mapplethorpe’s notorious “x Portfolio”: would “degenerate” be out of place in describing them? Sedlmayr does not, I believe, use the infamous term “*entartete*,” but he freely employs terms from the same lexicon, speaking throughout his book of breakdown, chaos, negation, decline. (A typical section is titled “The Chaos of Total Decay.”)

In any event, Sedlmayr’s discreditable political history was not, I think, the main reason for failure of *Art in Crisis*. The more important reason was his attack on modernism, indeed on modernity itself. Christopher Wood speaks of Sedlmayr’s “antimodernist tirade,” dismissing *Art in Crisis* as “a neo-Spenglerian, pessimistic, anti-intellectual assault on modern art.” The idea that an incisive, encyclopedic mind such as Sedlmayr’s is “anti-intellectual” is the sort of preposterous thought that could only occur to a certain type of intellectual. But Wood is right about the neo-Spenglerian cast of *Art in Crisis*. Spengler’s lowering two-volume masterpiece *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, “The Decline of the West,” had mesmerized the post-World War I intelligentsia. (The first volume appeared in 1918, the second in 1922.) Sedlmayr quotes Spengler incessantly. The narrative he presents in *Art in Crisis* assumes rather than argues for Spengler’s view of cultural development as a centuries-spanning organic process of youth-maturity-senescence. Sedlmayr also accepts much (though by no means all) of Spengler’s seductive interpretations of cultural significances, in particular his understanding of nineteenth-century eclecticism as a symptom of decay. Indeed, the whole realm of medicalized rhetoric—“symptom,” “diagnosis,” “disease,” “prognosis”—is a Spenglerian trope that Sedlmayr adopts wholesale. (It is from Spengler, not the Nazis, that he takes his vocabulary of decline.)

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Where Sedlmayr departs from Spengler most importantly is on the issue of inevitability. For Spengler, the “organic” cultural developments he chronicles are *necessary* processes. The “phases” of civilization he describes are the products not of human ingenuity but of the operation of “Destiny,” “Fate,” or some other ineluctable, upper-case inevitability: a force that is as irresistible as it is impersonal and supra-human. Sedlmayr, too, is fond of “phases.” But he softens Spengler’s analysis by admitting a place for human initiative. A late chapter carries an epigraph from Christian Morgenstern: “We are at the end . . .” But Sedlmayr embraces that ellipsis as an opportunity, not a declaration. “It may be a somewhat questionable proceeding to designate one’s own age as the turning-point in history,” he admits,

nevertheless it is difficult to shake off the feeling that since 1900 a kind of limit has been reached and that we are faced by something wholly without precedent. Beyond this limit it is difficult to imagine anything except one of two things—total catastrophe or the beginnings of regeneration.

The possibility of humanly directed “regeneration” sounds a distinctly un- (even anti-) Spenglerian note. It is what ultimately rescues Sedlmayr’s astringent analysis from Wood’s charge of Spenglerian pessimism.

Not, I hasten to add, that the picture Sedlmayr paints is cheerful. *Art in Crisis* is primarily a contribution to the library of conservative reaction to the intoxications of the Enlightenment, especially in its French—which is to say, in its extreme, egalitarian, revolutionary—modality. The Enlightenment came bearing the promise of universal emancipation. The promise turned rancid. In the second volume of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler observed that “Every ‘Age of Enlightenment’ proceeds from an unlimited optimism of the reason . . . to an equally unqualified skepticism.” Sedlmayr doesn’t quote that passage, but in the final pages of *Art in Crisis* he cites Nietzsche to similar effect: “Enlightenment is always followed by a darkening of men’s souls and a pessimistic coloring of life. Towards 1770 (!) you can already note a lessening of joy.” Sedlmayr interpolates an exclamation point to underscore the historical marker. He opens *Art in Crisis* by observing that in the years before 1789, “there began a revolution the extent of which was vast, perhaps more vast than we can imagine.” The revolution in question was not the political revolution wrought by Robespierre and his colleagues but the “huge inner catastrophe” of which the political detonations were merely a part. “There can be no doubt,” Sedlmayr writes with typical portentousness, “that many people really feel that this our age is sick.” It is part of his task to show how many disturbing features of our culture that we think of as distinctively modern actually have roots in the nineteenth and even eighteenth centuries.

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At bottom, we might best describe *Art in Crisis* as an exercise in cultural or spiritual epidemiology. Sedlmayr's goal is "to interpret," to draw a fever chart of the

modern age "through the language of art." But he regards art in this book less as an aesthetic reality than as an exfoliation of spiritual aspiration. This makes *Art in Crisis* a difficult book to classify. It is not really art criticism, though it frequently passes judgment on various works. Nor is it art history, though it draws freely on that discipline. Indeed, Sedlmayr insists *Art in Crisis* is not "in any sense . . . concerned with the history of art as such." He describes it rather as a "'critique' of the spirit and an attempt to diagnose the age both in its greatness and its wretchedness, as that age is revealed to us in its art." Sedlmayr occasionally dilates on some achievement of modernity, but it is the "wretchedness" that sets his pen moving. Nor is this surprising. It is partly due to the fact that bad news generally makes the most piquant copy. But there is also the contention that failure is more indicative of cultural drift than success. Sedlmayr agrees with the architectural historian Auguste Choisy that "Ce sont les abus qui caractérisent le mieux les tendances": "It is the abuses that are the best indicators of trends."

In some ways, *Art in Crisis* is a book that was written too early. He focuses more attention on painting than sculpture because, he says, "A meaningless form in sculpture is always in danger of being merely ridiculous." Well, yes, but will it be *seen* as ridiculous? What, one wonders, would Sedlmayr have to say about the work of Carl Andre and his tile-like squares of metal? It is true that much of the absurdity that we see in the art world today is but a tired rehash of absurdities that surfaced in Surrealism, Futurism, and Dada. Whatever else can be said about them, artists like Duchamp and Dalí really did achieve a limit that cannot be surpassed, merely recapitulated along a spectrum that starts in naïveté and ends in irony, parody, and camp. Dalí defined Surrealism as "the systematization of confusion." Louis Aragon said it was "the child of raving and darkness"—he meant that as praise—and noted that, far from being merely an art movement, it aspired to be "all-embracing" and sought "transformation of the whole of life." Really, Sedlmayr wrote, Surrealism should be called "sous-realism," since it deals chiefly not with elements that transcend expression but which precede it in the inarticulate basement of life. Surrealism is important not because of its aesthetic achievements but because it is "a movement that unites a number of the basic tendencies of modern art—the love of the illogical, the receptivity for the chaotic, faithfulness in representation together with an icy coldness of finish." With Surrealism, as the art historian Wilhelm Pinder pointed out, "art finally reaches the stage where it is concerned not with that which is beyond the power of language to express but with that which is inexpressible because it is so far below it." What, one wonders, would writers like Sedlmayr and Pinder say about contemporary artists like Gilbert and George, the Chapman brothers, Matthew Barney?

Sedlmayr admits that his approach is “somewhat sweeping.” But he argues that behind the seemingly chaotic multiplicity of modern artistic expression may be discerned “mighty trends.” *Art in Crisis* is an effort to catalogue and assess the meaning of those trends. Sedlmayr pauses now and again to note (as he puts it in his introduction) “the limitations of the thesis.” It would, he admits, be mistaken to consider works of art “*exclusively* as symptoms of mental disorder.” He insists, however, that it would also be mistaken to consider works of art “*exclusively* as examples and transitory points in the development of a style, as the criticism of art on purely stylistic grounds.”

Consider, for example, Claude Nicolas Ledoux’s idea of building a house in the shape of a huge sphere. In 1770, Ledoux designed such an edifice (probably then unbuildable) for a bailiff. “Most people,” Sedlmayr writes, “have treated this notion as nothing more than a bad joke or a very ordinary piece of lunacy, while the more charitable have looked upon it as an ‘experiment with form.’ The thing is certainly insane enough, but if it were no more than that, we should hardly be justified in wasting much time over it.”

According to Sedlmayr, however, Ledoux’s plan is not simply a bold aesthetic jeu d’esprit. It “is a symptom of a profound crisis both in architecture and in the whole life of the human spirit.” Why? Because, Sedlmayr says, Ledoux’s fantasy is part of a larger effort to deny the traditional rootedness of architecture (and of man): it is a rewriting of architecture in the abstract language of geometry. A sphere, resting upon the ground at but a single point, lacks a foundation; top and bottom are interchangeable, or rather are obliterated; its measure is not the needs and limitations of the human body—the traditional measure of architecture—but the fancy of the unfettered imagination. It is in this sense that “a nonsensical idea”—a house in the shape of a sphere—“need by no means be wholly without significance.” Sedlmayr reads off—sometimes he reads into—the extravagances of modern artistic expression the spiritual itinerary of the age.

Sedlmayr offers a similar interpretation of the advent and spread of the English landscape garden, one of the several new “master problems” that defined the artistic activity of the eighteenth century. Beginning in about 1720, he points out, the English garden, a “conscious protest against the architectural gardens of France,” swept through Europe in a fit of what one nobleman, who had twice ruined himself in an effort to transform his property into a nature preserve, called “Parkomania.” What—if anything—should we make of this phenomenon? According to Sedlmayr, it betokened “something much more than a new kind of garden. It implied a revolt against the hegemony of architecture. It implied a wholly new relationship between man and nature and a new conception of art in general.” “Romanticism” is the usual shorthand for that novelty, but what Sedlmayr stresses is the pantheistic revolution in religious sentiment that this form of Romantic nature worship implies. “The word ‘nature’ itself now gained a religious coloring. . . . Nature is raised to the rank of an all-pervading spiritual power. She no longer stands confronting man as an alien thing, man is ‘sympathetically’ woven into her being.”

In part, what Sedlmayr presents in *Art in Crisis* is a chronology of the birth of “the aesthetic” as an independent enterprise, one consciously emancipated from its traditional roots in religion. The term “aesthetic” was born at this time—it was first used in its modern sense by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten around 1750. The landscape garden; the architectural monument; the art museum as a dedicated building type; the exhibition as a showcase for technological and engineering prowess—these and other outlets for artistic energy testified to a new relationship not only between man and his handiwork but also between man and the forces that transcend him. The phenomenon of the art museum is a conspicuous case in point.

Regarded as a temple, the museum is not the temple of any particular God but a Pantheon of Art in which the creations of the most varied epochs and peoples are ranged next to one another with equal claims to our attention. For this to be possible, however, it was first necessary for Heracles and Christ to become brothers and for their divinity to be regarded as a thing of the past, so that they could both be seen in the temple of art, as manifestations of a deity which had swallowed all the others.

It is this aestheticizing impulse that Sedlmayr is everywhere at pains to exhibit and anatomize, showing how it implies, first, the ambition to forge a new autonomy of art and, second, a new autonomy of man. “Man deifies his inventive power,” Sedlmayr writes, “with which he hopes both to master Nature and to supersede her.”

Sedlmayr is often a perceptive critic. The essential aim of Cézanne—whose work, Sedlmayr says, is a “key to understanding modern painting as a whole”—is

to represent what ‘pure’ vision can discover in the visible world, vision, that is to say, that has been cleansed of all intellectual and emotional adulteration. ... The magic that pertains to this way of looking at things is that even the most ordinary scene acquires a strange and original freshness, and above all that color released from its task of indicating and identifying objects, gains an intensity that it never previously possessed.

This seems to me to be right. Yet Sedlmayr puts a minus sign next to Cézanne precisely because in his work “mere paint enjoys a quite peculiar supremacy”: “In Cézanne an apple has the same physiognomic value as a face.”

Sedlmayr takes a similar approach to Goya. The more we study the work of Goya, he says, especially his series called “Dreams” and “Madness”—subjects, Sedlmayr says, that are the “the most essential thing in modern art”—“the more intense grows our conviction that, like Kant in philosophy and Ledoux’s architecture, he is one of the great pulverizing destructive forces that bring a new age into being.”

The problem is that Goya’s art, like Cézanne’s, exists not just as a metaphor of the Zeitgeist, but also as an aesthetic object that has its own internal logic. Apart from everything else, Goya produced objects that commandeer attention, that are deeply interesting to look at.

Sedlmayr knows this. But, having surveyed modern art from the perspective of a spiritual diagnostician, he finds it wanting. At the center of *Art in Crisis* is the insight that, in art as in life, the pursuit of unqualified autonomy is in the end a prescription for disaster, aesthetic as well as existential. Sedlmayr writes as an Augustinian Catholic. For him, the underlying motive for the pursuit of autonomy is pride. The “lost center” of his original title is God. Autonomy, for finite, mortal creatures, is a dangerous illusion. “Autonomous man,” he writes, “does not and cannot exist—any more than can autonomous art, architecture, painting and so on. It is of the essence of man that he should be both natural and supernatural. . . . Man is fully human only in so far as he is a repository of the divine spirit.”

One need not, I think, share Sedlmayr’s theological convictions in order to appreciate the power of his strictures about the search for autonomy. “The fact is,” he argues, “that art cannot be assessed by a measure that is purely artistic and nothing else. Indeed, such a purely artistic measure, which ignored the human element, the element which alone gives art its justification, would actually not be an artistic measure at all. It would merely be an aesthetic, and actually the application of purely aesthetic standards is one of the peculiarly inhuman features of the age, for it proclaims by implication the autonomy of the work of art, an autonomy that has no regard to men—the principle of *l’art pour l’art*.” Art has its own aesthetic canons of legitimacy and achievement; but those canons are themselves nugatory unless grounded in a measure beyond art. That is the ultimate, indispensable, lesson of *Art in Crisis*.

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