WARBURG LIBRARY COMMONS | SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

[https://commons.warburg.sas.ac.uk/downloads/mw22v5449]

O'Donnell, C. Oliver. *Revisiting David Summers' Real Spaces: a neo-pragmatist interpretation.*

2018

Article

To cite this version:

O'Donnell, C. O. (2018). Revisiting David Summers' Real Spaces: a neo-pragmatist interpretation. *World Art*, *8*(1), 21–38 p.

License: Creative Commons BY Attribution 4.0 International

Available at: https://commons.warburg.sas.ac.uk/concern/journal_articles/1g05fb60f

Date submitted: 2019-11-20

Copyright is retained by the author. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the User Deposit Agreement.

World Art

ISSN: 2150-0894 (Print) 2150-0908 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwor20

Revisiting David Summers' *Real Spaces*: a neo-pragmatist interpretation

C. Oliver O'Donnell

To cite this article: C. Oliver O'Donnell (2018) Revisiting David Summers' *Real Spaces*: a neo-pragmatist interpretation, World Art, 8:1, 21-38, DOI: 10.1080/21500894.2017.1292947

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2017.1292947

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 10 Apr 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1715

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rwor20

World Art, 2018
Vol. 8, No. 1, 21–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2017.1292947
Research Article

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
Check for updates

Revisiting David Summers' *Real Spaces*: a neo-pragmatist interpretation

C. Oliver O'Donnell*

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Italy

David Summers' *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* remains one the most ambitious and compelling attempts to develop a new analytic framework for art-historical analysis across geographic and temporal boundaries. Despite this accomplishment, since its publication nearly 15 years ago the book has continued to face the criticism of being a problematically Western project. But what are the philosophical ideas on which *Real Spaces* is based? And how is it that these general ideas are troublingly Western, rather than being more generally human or cross-cultural? A prominent reading by James Elkins of *Real Spaces* has positioned its claims in relation to the philosophical project of Martin Heidegger, as Summers' terminology does have Heideggerean overtones. Building on Elkins' reading, in this essay I argue that Summers' book is more accurately understood as a form of neo-Pragmatism. To substantiate this claim, I emphasize some known parallels between Heidegger's project and that of Pragmatism in general as well as a variety of similarities between *Real Spaces* and the vocabularies of Richard Rorty and Charles Sanders Peirce that Summers himself has noted. While such an argument may merely seem to replace one Western philosophical understanding of *Real Spaces* for another, doing so also allows the book to be understood in relation to some of neo-Pragmatism's most compelling moral or ethical claims and thereby to more adequately answer the criticism that Summers' alternative art history is just another precariously Western project.

Keywords: *Real Spaces*; David Summers; neo-pragmatism; Richard Rorty; world art methodology

In James Elkins' roundtable about the possibility of making art history a truly global discipline, David Summers, author of *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* and a prominent

*Email: oliver.odonnell@khi.fi.it

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

figure in contemporary debates about art history's global potential, noted that

> [a]n important implication of [my book *Real Spaces*] is what my old colleague Richard Rorty calls 'contingency'. It's a hard thing for people to acknowledge that what they believe most deeply and assuredly is contingent. But, to use another of Rorty's terms, we must all learn to maintain reserve of irony in our beliefs, such that there is room for the beliefs and practices of others. That to me would be the ideal circumstance. (Elkins 2007, 156–57)

Quite apart from the potential ambiguities embedded within this appeal by Summers to some of Richard Rorty's peculiar terminology (I explore Rorty's notions of 'contingency' and 'irony' below), this description of *Real Spaces* presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, it makes perfect sense that Summers would describe his project this way: he and Rorty were colleagues at the University of Virginia from 1982 to 1997, and not only were they good friends but they also had many conversations over the years that bore on the content of that project.[1] On the other hand, despite this connection, much of the criticism that has been brought against *Real Spaces* characterizes the book as putting forward precisely the type of monolithic approach to art history that the above quote by Summers explicitly rejects (Elkins 2007; Casid and D'Souza 2014). If such criticisms are correct, then it would seem that either Summers is inappropriately applying the ideas of his close friend and colleague to *Real Spaces* or he is misrepresenting his own project. If such criticisms are wrong, however, and – as I will argue in this paper – Summers' sketch of the Rortyean implications of *Real Spaces* is accurate, then the reception of Summers' book has largely missed one of its important features.

Pursuing this thesis requires laying a little groundwork, groundwork that is partially based on direct communication with Summers and one of his most persistent critics, Keith Moxey.[2] Most specifically and importantly, defending my thesis requires articulating exactly how Summers' remarks speak to Rorty's larger philosophical project, most specifically to his peculiar form of neo-Pragmatism. To do so I will first briefly engage with the complex thought of Richard Rorty and differentiate Rorty's Pragmatism from that of his predecessors. Unlike the many available treatments of Rorty's work, of course, my primary aim in doing so is to articulate how Rorty's larger project speaks to art-historical concerns, specifically by way of the commonalities and divergences between Rorty's Pragmatism and David Summers' *Real Spaces*. Second, with some connections between Rorty's and Summers' thought in place, I delve into two important philosophical concepts for Summers' project – Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the 'index' and Martin Heidegger's

notion of 'handedness' – and into an example of how Summers uses these concepts to frame his interpretation of a specific non-Western art object: the *Coatlicue* or 'Serpent Skirt' from the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (see Figure 1).[3] Though James Elkins long ago noted the importance of these concepts for Summers' project, he left the analytic connection between them – specifically Heidegger's affinity with the Pragmatist tradition of thought – out of his account (Elkins 2004).

In the second section of this essay I take up Heidegger's relation to Pragmatism and use it to argue that Summers' adaptation of Heideggerean terms to construct his interpretation of the *Coatlicue* is both furthered by his evocation of Peirce and adds important substance to his above-noted description of *Real Spaces* through Rorty's terms. Ultimately, I aim to show that the Pragmatist dimension of *Real Spaces* does not stop with Summers' Rortyean description of his book but in fact reaches to the very heart of that project – to the very alternate art-historical vocabulary that it puts forward – thereby revealing how Pragmatism can help us think through one of the most pressing issues facing art history today: namely, its global reach.

Figure 1. Coatlicue, late 15th century CE. Andesite, Height: 2.59m. Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City, 8Bd.001b. Image: F. Sierksma.

Rortyean Pragmatism and *Real Spaces*

Richard Rorty's version of Pragmatism is controversial and the notions of contingency and irony that Summers deploys in the above quote lie at its very heart (Saatkamp 1995). In fact, Rorty's Pragmatism is so controversial that critics have repeatedly denied that his ideas bear sufficient resemblance to those of the classical Pragmatists to share the same name. For instance, the intellectual historian James Kloppenberg has described Rorty's Pragmatism as an 'old name for some new ways of thinking', a playful description that inverts the subtitle of the book by William James that thrust Pragmatism upon the intellectual scene in the first place (James 1907; Kloppenberg 1996). The central distinction that Kloppenberg and others have pointed to in their efforts to qualify – if not outright deny – Rorty's Pragmatism is Rorty's effort to exorcize the fraught notion of experience from Pragmatist thinking and to replace it with a thoroughgoing linguistic approach to thought. Rorty himself has not attempted to hide this difference. In his essay 'Dewey between Hegel and Darwin', Rorty speaks of a 'hypothetical Dewey' rather than the actual historical personage, one that would 'have dropped the term experience rather than redefined it' and 'would have said, we can construe "thinking" as simply the use of sentences' (Rorty 1994, 46–68). Unsurprisingly, such a hypothetical Dewey fits perfectly with Rorty's more general understanding of Pragmatism itself, which he at least partially defines as the doctrine that 'there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones', as the belief that 'the only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that, as Peirce suggested, we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false' (Rorty 1982, 165).

This linguistic approach to truth is also what Rorty means by contingency, hence the association between it and his Pragmatism. Rorty makes this connection clear by noting that 'I call the "contingency of language" … the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling' (Rorty 1989, xvi). Needless to say, this belief is radical as it can be taken to disregard the constraints that the objective world is traditionally thought to have on inquiry and thereby positions itself close to the forms of scepticism and relativism that reigned supreme during that all too ill-defined postmodern moment. For art historians like Summers – and for all art historians traditionally conceived – the suspicion and the denial of the role of experience in inquiry is unsurprisingly troubling. The very notion of an art history without experience is contradictory, amounting to something akin to an art history without visual perception. Consequently, while Summers' description of his project within the confines of Rortyean contingency might make it seem that his project is

purely linguistic, *Real Spaces* quite clearly resists the full implications of Rorty's Pragmatism. The vocabulary that Summers develops in *Real Spaces*, for instance, is heavily based in what he has called 'the conditions of human presence' – conditions that are, for obvious reasons, unavoidably experiential – and Summers himself has stated that he 'spent many years trying to disentangle the history of art from what [he] came to call linguisticism' – a statement that is also evidently at odds with Rorty's more radical embrace of certain potential implications of the linguistic turn.[4] Given such divergence between Summers and Rorty, what are we to make of Summers' description of his project in Rorty's terms? Turning to the reception of *Real Spaces* and to the second term of Rorty's that Summers invokes – that of irony – adds clarity here.

As mentioned at the outset, in response to Summers' project, many critics, especially those of a postcolonial bent, have criticized what they perceive as the universalizing impulse of *Real Spaces*. The central and often repeated point behind this objection is that the alternative art-historical vocabulary that Summers puts forward in *Real Spaces* – a vocabulary that includes terms such as facture, place, image, planarity, virtuality, and space – is just as deeply imbued with the biases and values of Western thought as the vocabulary that it attempts to replace. While such an objection is familiar enough to be anticipated, Keith Moxey adds a dimension to this criticism that is especially interesting for our present purposes. Namely, Moxey not only questions the underlying Western values of Summers' project, but also uses such an observation to question the very affinity between Summers' and Rorty's projects. In Moxey's view:

> [Summers'] position echoes aspects of that of Richard Rorty, who argues that one's values cannot escape the context of the culture of which they are a part. Rorty, however, seems more prepared to grant the limitations and biases associated with identifying one's views as culturally specific than is Summers. Whereas Rorty sees the impossibility of escaping the values of one's circumstances as responsible for cultural conflict, Summers finds it a basis for reconciliation. (Elkins 2007, 208–09)

Moxey is right that Summers is less explicit in *Real Spaces* about admitting the values and biases embedded within his own vocabulary than Rorty was in his scholarship. The distinctive set of terms that Summers introduces in *Real Spaces* is clearly meant as a kind of general vocabulary for art-historical interpretation and because of this, Summers' effort can be and has been taken precisely as the type of metavocabulary that Rorty rejected. This being said, with his insistence that it is important for everyone to maintain a certain sense of irony in one's beliefs – by which Summers, following Rorty, meant that we should embrace the contingency of our most central beliefs and desires – Summers himself acknowledged that his project could never be a metavocabulary (Rorty 1989, xv, 1990). This

rather peculiar position – where Summers puts forward and defends a general vocabulary as general and then acknowledges that this general vocabulary is contingent – undoubtedly exposes a tension at the heart of Summers' project. It is a tension, however, that is present in Rorty's work as well. As Summers himself knew, one of Rorty's favourite jokes was to claim that at some point one had to be confident in one's own ethnocentrism.[5] The tongue-in-cheek quality of such a statement does much to make it digestible, does much to support Moxey's assertion that Rorty was willing to recognize cultural values as a source of cultural conflict; however, it does not make the assertion any less sincere.

While Rorty's frequent talk of his own ethnocentrism can, at first glance, seem merely self-critical, it in fact speaks to a fundamental and continuous aspect of his philosophy that parallels *Real Spaces*: a commitment to a conceptual sea change that followed from the Enlightenment. As Robert Brandom, Rorty's student, has noted, what was so important for Rorty about the Enlightenment was that

> we gave up the idea of the norms governing human conduct having their source in something non-human (their being something imposed on us by a divine will) and came to see that we ourselves need to take responsibility for those norms – that we need to deliberate with each other and decide what sort of beings we want to be, and so what we ought to do. (Brandom 2013, 23–24)

This notion that we are responsible for determining the norms that govern our conduct is continuous between Rorty's and Summers' projects. Their shared focus on constructing and defending their own interpretive vocabularies reflects their shared belief that the very terms we use within the *Geisteswissenschaften* not only shape our factual beliefs but also shape the norms that lie behind our intersubjective responsibilities to each other (Brandom 2000).[6] Summers' commitment to developing a new art-historical vocabulary in *Real Spaces* speaks directly to this position and in so doing fittingly parallels Rorty's notion of 'irony'. Indeed, Rorty partially defines 'ironists' as those whose 'unit of persuasion [is] a vocabulary rather than a proposition' (Rorty 1989, 78).

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that Summers himself makes the ethical motive of his project explicit throughout *Real Spaces* and that he does so through his appeal to his alternative art-historical vocabulary. For instance, in the introduction he states:

> This book might be described as an essay toward the negotiation, not only of differences between the modern West and other cultures, but between the modern West and its own foundational institutions, as well as its own historical consequences. However such accommodations might be achieved, a simple return to the premodern is not an option. The world in fact *is*

> smaller, literally for better or for worse, and return to a heterogeneous world of absolute regional differences can only be the prelude to repetition on a global scale of the incalculably vast twentieth-century tragedies of Western history. (Summers 2003, 25)

Within the larger context of *Real Spaces*, the foundational institutions that Summers speaks to in this quote are precisely the means, vocabularies, or concepts by which we have come to speak about and understand visual art from around the world. Most specifically, and as Summers makes explicit at the beginning of *Real Spaces*, the institutionalized vocabularies that Summers aims to replace are those of formalist art history. He even names his alternative approach to art history 'post-formalist' and suggests that art historians should start conceiving of their inquiry as concerning the spatial rather than the visual arts (Summers 2003, 15–28).

Summers' criticisms of art-historical formalism grew out of his earlier essays, for instance 'The "Visual Arts" and the Problem of Art Historical Description', wherein he advances criticisms of the concept of form in art-historical analysis – criticisms that are redeployed within the pages of *Real Spaces* (Summers 1982, 1989). In summary, these criticisms revolve around how the concept of form within Western thought is tightly tethered to Kant's so-called Copernican revolution and the widespread art-historical assumption that follows from it: most famously, that works of art are 'indirect' records of the visual perceptions and imaginations of their makers. If we take this Kantian view for granted, we end up treating art objects as if they are merely expressions of the perceptual forming activities of the historical imaginations that created them, a scholarly endeavour that leads to the reconstruction of historical psychologies and visualities by way of art objects. While we can and perhaps should imagine art history revising and working through the implications of this ubiquitous project (Davis 2015), the persistence of extended formal analyses within art history today undoubtedly ensures that Summers' critique still has purchase (e.g. Clark 2006).[7] For Summers, following Gombrich, the strong yet tacit proximity between formal analyses and pseudo-Kantian psychologies makes those analyses especially vulnerable to lapsing into the so-called physiognomic fallacy: namely, the belief that we can infer from the 'forms' that compose a work of art something about the artist's inner mind – or even more dangerously, something general about the collective mind, or Spirit, of his time (Gombrich 1963a, 1963b; Summers 1989, 380). The well-known potential consequences of such inferences – most famously, the connection identified by Karl Popper between them and totalitarian politics – are a large part of what motivates Summers' critique of formalism (Popper 2013 [1945]).[8] In this regard, unless Summers' critics are not dissuaded by formalism's problematic past or honestly prepared to completely abandon their use

of formal analysis within their own positive interpretations – a monumental task considering the foundational place of formal description in standard art-historical analyses even today[9] – they might reconsider the categorical nature of their criticisms. In so doing, Summers' critics could even deploy some of Summers' vocabulary themselves. Far from being the exact opposite of postcolonial arguments, *Real Spaces* is also grounded in a form of liberal thought. The book's alternative art-historical vocabulary is motivated by Summers' belief that art-historical concepts have consequences; they determine and limit what we can say, what we believe, and thus how we feel justified to act. Concepts are the building blocks not just of knowledge claims but of social practices, practices that include art history itself.

In making this recognition, however, we need to be careful not to conflate art-historical terms and art-historical concepts with each other. To state the obvious but necessary point, art-historical terms are specific words that exist in specific languages and have specific meanings at specific moments. Art-historical concepts are more general and abstract; though they are often embodied by or even reduced to specific terms, they are not limited to single words in single languages. The term 'form' in English can serve as an appropriate example. Though this term finds a close equivalent in the German *Gestalt* and a rough equivalent in the Chinese *xingshi* (形式), all three have slightly different valences. Despite these differences, however and importantly, there is enough common conceptual ground between the terms to allow for some amount of translation. Noting and heeding the incommensurabilities between terms such as these is, of course, essential to the discipline. But what is the goal of noting those differences unless it is part of a process of making the terms in question understood by way of more general and shared concepts, as part of a process of creating an art-historical conversation that is as inclusive as possible? In this regard, it is important to distinguish between linguistic relativism – the belief that languages shape thought – and the much more extreme doctrine of linguistic determinism – the belief that thoughts themselves are completely caused and limited by languages. The criticisms of *Real Spaces* have been largely grounded in the latter position and they have been so with little acknowledgment of its radical nature, let alone its ethical implications.

For instance, linguistic determinism can well be taken to champion cultural difference to such an extent that the very possibility of understanding a given culture's artistic production is effectively reserved for scholars or natives of that culture (Bagley 1998). Rorty observed the danger of connecting such strict cultural relativism back to his Pragmatism:

> [Th]e pragmatists tell us that the conversation which it is our moral duty to continue is *merely* our project, the European intellectual's form of life. It has

> not metaphysical nor epistemological guarantee of success. Further (and this is the crucial point) *we do not know what 'success' would mean except simply 'continuance'*. (Rorty 1982, 172)

While this quote specifically concerns Rorty's version of Pragmatism, it also speaks to Summers' project, as *Real Spaces* can be read as an effort to keep the Enlightenment project that is art history going. Indeed, despite the current growth of and interest in world art studies, the idea of a global art history is undoubtedly one of the discipline's founding projects, Franz Kugler's *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte* of 1842 being a notable example (Karlholm 2004; Elkins 2007, 17–18). Thus, even though Moxey and others are right in recognizing Summers' ethnocentrism and the Western biases within his art history – and we should note that in so doing they are contributing to the scholarly debates that Rorty champions and that are very much a part of the Western tradition of thought itself – we should be careful of the full implications of such criticisms. They can well do more to halt rather than to further what Summers' project is clearly attempting to continue and what is originary if not fundamental to art history as a discipline: what Rorty called 'the great conversation of mankind' (Rorty 1979, 389–94). At the risk of oversimplification, the point of such a conversation – and what we might even call the point of *Real Spaces* as well – is to try to move away from seeing non-Western art objects as the products of 'others' and to start to see them as products of 'ourselves'. If we are unsure that *Real Spaces*' alternative vocabulary is adequate to such a task, we should remember that it positions itself not as absolutely so but merely as 'contingently' so, as more adequate than the 'formalist' vocabularies that the book directly opposes and that it attempts to displace. This is why Summers very prominently labels his project 'post-formalist'; doing so acknowledges the place of the book within the history of art history and reaffirms the book's goal of attempting to research art objects from a more inclusive perspective. And in attempting to be more inclusive, the book continues the conversation that, from this Rortyean perspective, is our only hope.

Pragmatism and the vocabulary of *Real Spaces*

With this preliminary sketch of the Rortyean dimension of Summers' project articulated, in this second section I turn to an analysis of how Summers went about constructing the new art-historical vocabulary of *Real Spaces*, and I do so by focusing on how Summers adapts Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the index and Martin Heidegger's concept of handedness to art-historical purposes. While Summers does acknowledge his debt to both Heidegger and Peirce at the beginning of *Real Spaces*, his words are restrained, undoubtedly for a variety of reasons (Summers 2003, 19, 27). First, while Peirce's notion of the index is well known among art

historians, it is both heavily associated with a form of semiotic art history that Summers explicitly rejects and is part of a notoriously complicated and unwieldy classificatory system that Peirce never completed. Second, Heidegger's political association with National Socialism has long been tied to what many take to be his mystifying prose (e.g. Wind 1946) – an association that Summers would want to avoid for obvious reasons, not least because of *Real Spaces*' liberal and democratic ambitions. Moreover, Heidegger had a fraught relation to the discipline of art history itself. Not only did art historians like Meyer Schapiro criticize Heidegger's aesthetics on rigid art-historical grounds but Heidegger himself criticized the documentary or positivistic project of art history as missing art for what it really was (Heidegger 1971, 39; Schapiro 1994a, 1994b). Considering such conflicts, in excavating how Summers draws on Peirce's and Heidegger's terminologies in *Real Spaces*, it is important to note at the outset that Summers does not take on either thinker's project as a whole. Rather, he does so partially and primarily, in my view, in order to attempt to avoid or sidestep the problems that can accompany formalist art-historical description, especially the potential consequences of the physiognomic fallacy noted above. In relating Summers' adaptation of these philosophical terms back to his invocation of Rorty, we could label that adaptation part of Summers' 'ironism' – his belief that the appropriate unit of persuasion is a vocabulary rather than a proposition.

The import of these philosophical terms within *Real Spaces*, however, can be difficult to comprehend, a fact that has no doubt lead to much confusion. While Summers does make his post-formalist claim explicit – that works of art need to be understood not as mere reflections of the minds that created them, but as real objects produced within real social-historical contexts – such an insistence is hardly unique within art history. An emphasis on the relation between the material dimension of art objects and their historical context has been a mark of art-historical research at least since the early nineteenth century; Karl Friedrich von Rumohr, for instance, championed the power of analysing pigments and binding media as a means for delimiting individual painters' oeuvres (Rumohr 1827–1831, 1988). This fact can make the interpretations that Summers puts forward in *Real Spaces* seem less original than they are.

For example, Summers emphasizes that the massive *Coatlicue* or 'Serpent Skirt' that once stood in the central temple precinct of Tenochtitlan is made of stone. For one, that material makes the sculpture both one with the earth from which it emerged and one with the structures of its original built environment – a shared material quality that functions, in Summers' view, as a powerful metaphor for the cosmological might of the god that the sculpture depicts. Summers also emphasizes the physical weight of the stone sculpture and that, given the technology used by the Aztecs to quarry, transport, and carve it, stone would have signified

'the power to command and organize labour on behalf of the people and the gods' (Summers 2003, 45) (Figure 1). Building on this description, Summers then emphasizes the format of the massive sculpture, that it was cut from a square block, and that this format provides 'the conditions of the planar presentation of the image, and for its integration with the planar directional order of the sacred place in which it stood' (Summers 2003, 45). Here the sculpture's four sides are interpreted to show that the *Coatlicue* was but a part of a larger spatial order (he notes that Tenochtitlan was at the intersection of four roads along the cardinal directions and that its temple precinct was considered the centre of the universe) and that the *Coatlicue's* format would have allowed the sculpture to continuously face the sun, the celestial body whose movement across the sky Aztec religion did not take for granted. Together these real spatial qualities of the *Coatlicue*, in Summers' view, allow us to more appropriately understand the sculpture not as the result of some ancient Aztec artist's imagination but rather more satisfactorily as a piece of a complex cosmic and social order.

Because this interpretation of the *Coatlicue* builds towards the types of social-historical propositions that are familiar enough to all art historians, Summers' interpretation does not, at first glance, necessarily appear distinctive – let alone Heideggerean or Pragmatist. It is important to remember, however, that the distinctive nature of Summers' book does not lie at the level of such social-historical *propositions* but rather at the more fundamental level of the *vocabulary* that Summers uses to access or construct such interpretations in the first place. Heidegger changed the course of twentieth-century philosophy with a similar shift. Just as Heidegger's philosophy was an intervention in neo-Kantian debates about epistemology in general by way of what he took to be the more primordial modes of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), so too *Real Spaces* rejects the neo-Kantian assumptions behind art-historical epistemology in favour of a more fundamental ontological approach – that is, by framing art objects not as 'form' but as real entities that are enmeshed in worldly practices (Friedman 2000; Gordon 2010). Accordingly, Summers comes to his real spatial interpretation of the *Coatlicue* by way of what he terms the conditions of human embodiment, conditions that parallel Heidegger's existential ontology (Summers 2003, 36–41).[10] This emphasis is not only visible in Summers' description of the *Coatlicue* – his interpretation is sure to describe the felt bodily presence of the sculpture – but crops up repeatedly in the vocabulary that Summers develops in *Real Spaces*. For instance, Summers' concept of cardinality is defined in relation to the 'normative uprightness, symmetry … and facing' of the human body and he repeatedly describes objects through bodily metaphors such as 'facing' and 'standing' (Summers 2003, 37).

This general ontological and existential perspective allows Summers to approach the *Coatlicue* less as a culturally specific representation – that is, as a specific symbol within an entire cosmology – than as what Peirce called an index, a sign that signifies through an existential relation. As an index, the *Coatlicue* is evidence for all of the past actions that shaped it: the marks on its surface become signs of the carving tools that struck the stone and the sculpture's immense weight becomes a sign of the human labour that once moved the sculpture into place. Accordingly, facture, 'the indication in an artefact of its having been made', becomes an essential starting-point of Summers' project (Summers 2003, 74). Such an approach provides him with a point of view on artefacts like the *Coatlicue* that precedes the intractable questions of its meaning within Aztec language (Nahuatl) and that is therefore largely independent from the object's place in the culturally specific systems of representation of which it was a part. The ontological and existential bent of Summers' 'real spatial' vocabulary, in other words, provides an alternative to the first-order work of formal description that is so necessary and yet so problematic for art-historical scholarship.

Summers reinforces his existential approach by describing the real spatial qualities of the *Coatlicue* through metaphors of handedness, metaphors that are central and famously specific to the Heideggerean project (Brandom 1983). From early on in his writings, Heidegger developed the distinction between an entity being 'present-at-hand' (*Vorhandenheit*), which he associated with the distancing, observational, factual, and theoretical practices of the sciences, and something being 'ready-to-hand' (*Zuhandenheit*), which he associated with a more everyday, practical engagement with things that is primarily based in action. Though Summers himself does not adopt this specific distinction, he does rely on the Heideggerean notion of 'handedness' in general and frames his theoretical vocabulary through it. For instance, in *Real Spaces* Summers describes the general conditions of the presentation of art objects as always coming 'to hand' (Summers 2003, 39) and more specifically describes formats of artistic production in general – formats like the square cut block of the *Coatlicue* – as 'ready at hand' (Summers 2003, 53). Summers even relies on this Heideggerian turn of phrase to define what he calls the originating idea of his book, a 'real metaphor', which he uses to describe art objects as things 'at hand that [are] changed from one context to another in order to be treated as if [they] were something else' (Summers 2003, 53). Given such statements, it comes as no surprise when Summers justifies his entire project through the notion of handedness as well, stating that he has 'never been failed by the thesis that art records the many ways in which the world at hand has been acknowledged in being shaped by us human beings; the thesis has simply never been falsified' (Summers 2003, 19).

On a quite literal level, of course, Summers' preference for discussing art objects through metaphors and terminologies of the human hand is supported by the empirical record of world art: profile depictions of hands are some of the earliest and most widespread Palaeolithic images (Walker, Clinnick, and Pedersen 2016). Just as important for my purposes, however, is that the 'real spatial' vocabulary that follows from Summers' championing of art's 'handedness' describes human experiences that precede language acquisition and thus that engage with a dimension of the experience of art that is hypothetically free from the cultural complexities of language. In this sense, the position that Summers advances in *Real Spaces* is – like the positions advanced by Heidegger and the American Pragmatists – that the fundamental mode of engagement with the world is not based in culturally specific representations but rather is based in action. Just as the pragmatic maxim advances this view by reducing words to their effects, so too does Heidegger advance it by positioning our engagement with the world as being primarily based in actionable potential, his *Zuhandenheit* (Okrent 1989). In this view, while we can and often do experience works of art through culturally specific terms – through words like 'form' as twentieth-century Westerners, through words like '*commensurazione*' as fifteenth-century Italians, and through words like '*liqi*' as ancient Chinese – this mode of engagement is in an important sense always already secondary to the initial bodily and ontological encounter between us and the work of art. This initial bodily encounter is something that 'we all' can experience, and in this sense it is importantly democratic. *Real Spaces* builds on – indeed, the entire project departs from – this insight and attempts to develop a way of speaking about works of art that circumvents the difficulties of historically and culturally specific language through it. In doing so, it develops a vocabulary of its own – one that seeks to translate the practical, bodily, and action-based qualities of works of art into general concepts that can function as the building-blocks of rigorous interpretation.

If we return to Summers' interpretation of the *Coatlicue* as a 'real metaphor', we can now see more clearly both why this Pragmatist position is fundamental to *Real Spaces* and how it avoids the known problematics of formalist art-historical description. Through Heidegger's notion of 'handedness' and Peirce's notion of the index, the *Coatlicue* is no longer merely an 'art object', a thing that is by definition distant from us and the product of an artist's imagination, but rather becomes both a sign of past actions and a piece of equipment that is immediately 'to hand' and integral to the practices and actions for which it was made. Only from this foundational understanding does Summers then unpack the *Coatlicue's* terrifying imagery – its looming, monumental presence, its necklace of hands, hearts, and skulls, and the blood serpents that coil out of its decapitated body. By adopting his Pragmatist perspective, Summers is

able to clarify that the *Coatlicue* was not merely a visual representation of a god to be stared at but more importantly a cog within the very rituals in which it played a part and which were fundamental to Aztec culture: most famously, human sacrifice. This being said, considering the doubts that have been raised about the meaning of the iconography of the *Coatlicue*, we might even imagine Summers further developing the action-based dimension of his interpretation (Boone 2006). To do so, Summers could more fully embrace Heidegger's vocabulary and characterize the *Coatlicue* itself as a with-which (*das Womit*) that abets the 'in-order-to' (*das Umzu*) of the Aztec world (*die Welt*) (Heidegger 1962, 120). Along similar lines, the former title of Summers' project ('The Defect of Distance'), as well as Summers' earlier description of his approach as 'functionalist', may better capture the pragmatic dimension of *Real Spaces* than the published book (Summers 1989, 393, 2003, 11). And this is because distance – specifically the distance between subject and object and the epistemic qualities that follow from that relation – is both what Summers criticizes and what Heidegger undercut with his ontological categories of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*. Nevertheless, the accomplishment of *Real Spaces* is clear. Through it, we can begin to imagine being aware of 'art objects' like the *Coatlicue* without categorizing them as 'sculptures' but rather as indexical signs of historical practices. Such a mode of access and analysis is a powerful alternative to the 'formal' descriptions that are still often essential starting-points of art-historical interpretation.

In light of such a reading, it is important to note that Summers is closer to Peirce than to Heidegger in one especially important way. Whereas Summers' project is primarily empirical and directs its attention outward towards things in the world, Heidegger's is phenomenological and directs its attention inward towards the structures of human consciousness. Because of this we can say that Summers shares the embodied focus of Heideggerean phenomenology without its introspective method, qualities that he also shares with Peirce and the American Pragmatists. Just like Summers, the Pragmatists were empiricists, meaning that they directed their attention outward towards the world and were experimental in their focus, and yet in so doing, just like Heidegger, they accepted the bodily conditions of knowledge. Peirce named the empirical and experimental mode of inference that lay behind his Pragmatism abduction – a term that Summers himself considered deploying in *Real Spaces* – by which Peirce meant 'the process of forming explanatory hypotheses', 'all the operations by which theories and conceptions are engendered' (Peirce 1934, 172, 590).[11] It is in this spirit of *conceptual* discovery that we should understand *Real Spaces*; its ontological approach quite clearly builds on the lessons drawn from the 'linguisticism' of the 1980s and 1990s and attempts to move art history past the discipline's tacit but entrenched formalist foundation.

The obvious objection that has been repeatedly brought against the pragmatic base of Summers' project is that its Heideggerean – and I would say Pragmatist – footing is still problematically Western. While *Real Spaces* is undoubtedly Western in a historically narrow and literal sense – it is, after all, written in English – the Westernness of the book does not mean, as many seem to suggest in their criticisms of it, that Summers' project is hopelessly flawed. A more accurate characterization would be that *Real Spaces* is self-consciously Western. But what else would we want it to be? Its point of departure is the basic recognition that generalizing, first-order art-historical theories and the concepts they engender are simply not avoidable; though we can and certainly should try to correct such theories or develop new approaches, the so-called methods of art history are, for better or worse, the origin of basic art-historical concepts and thus essential to how art historians make their claims understandable to each other both within and across modern languages of scholarship. Though culturally specific *terms* like 'form' or 'space' can, no doubt, fail to capture the distinctive features of a given art object, to infer from this state of affairs that all general art-historical *concepts* are problematic goes too far. Said the other way, to problematize general art-historical concepts *tout court* is to deny that concepts by definition are, to a certain extent, general; but if they are not, then communication across languages by means of translation would simply not be possible. And since intercultural communication patently is possible – not to mention the fact that it is one of the fundamental tasks of most art-historical research – *Real Spaces* is not only defensible but based in a fundamental art-historical assumption, if not a fundamental truth about language and thought as such. Recognizing this fact, Summers boldly yet also commonsensically set out to develop new concepts that are more adequate and less problematic than those he inherited. In other words, far from being some hegemonic act of epistemic violence intent on re-colonializing the world's art in different terms, the sole goal of *Real Spaces* is to create an art-historical vocabulary that is better than the formalist vocabularies it attempts to replace. And insofar as Summers succeeds in this task – and I believe he does, however slightly – *Real Spaces* is a powerful reminder that we art historians both today and in the future *do not need* to make the same mistakes as earlier art history, that we *can* move beyond those mistakes and make our discipline's conversation more inclusive. So much is, in the simplest of terms, the purpose of *Real Spaces*: to take responsibility for the consequences or 'effects' of art history, to adapt art history to and, as Ayer (1968, 6) once said of Pragmatism in general, to 'help modify an ever-changing world'.

Notes

1. David Summers, in email exchange with the author, 7 and 9 November 2015.
2. My communication with Keith Moxey concerning this essay occurred on 30 and 31 December 2015. For my communication with Summers see notes 1, 5, and 6.
3. In a conversation with the author, Summers noted that his reading of Heidegger began early on in his career. *Being and Time* occupied much of his nighttime reading while researching his doctoral dissertation in Florence in 1966.
4. David Summers, in email exchange with the author, 7 November 2015. Richard Rorty's friendship with Summers bears mentioning here, as Rorty did much to popularize the phrase 'linguistic turn'.
5. Summers repeated this joke in an email exchange with the author on 11 November 2015.
6. In a telephone conversation of 20 November 2015 with the author, David Summers also agreed that such a position describes his project.
7. I point to Clark as an example here because of his (and his students') continuing influence and because Summers himself positioned his project as against Clark's earlier work. See Summers (1989, 388–93).
8. In a conversation with the author, Summers acknowledged Karl Popper's impact on his thinking.
9. To testify to the entrenched position of formal analysis in art history, one can point to formalism's place in modes of art-historical argument that are purportedly opposed to each other and to formalism itself. Not only is 'formal description' the first step of Erwin Panofsky's iconological method, but even the social historian of art T.J. Clark, who openly rejected one version of formalism, deployed a weak formalism of his own (see Summers 1989). More recently, art history's interest in 'materiality' can well be understood as a pseudo-Kantian formalism under a different name (see Jones 2013).
10. The place of embodiment within Heidegger's thought is a fraught and complex issue. While many of the most famous arguments of *Being and Time* follow from what Heidegger terms *Dasein*'s 'bodily nature', he also notes that this '"bodily nature" hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here' (Heidegger 1962, 143).
11. David Summers, in email exchange with the author, 13 January 2016.

Notes on contributor

C. Oliver O'Donnell is a post-doctoral fellow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut. He earned his PhD in the History of Art from the University of California, Berkeley in 2016.

References

Ayer, A. J. 1968. *The Origins of Pragmatism*. San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co.

Bagley, Robert. 1998. "Review of Wu, *Monumentality* in Early Chinese Art and Architecture." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 58: 221–256.

Boone, Elizabeth Hill. 2006. "The Defining Sample: How We Pursue the Pre-Columbian Past." In *A pre-Columbian World*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter, and Mary Miller, 21–53. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks.

Brandom, Robert. 1983. "Heidegger's Categories in 'Being and Time'." *The Monist* 66 (3): 387–409.

Brandom, Robert. 2000. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brandom, Robert. 2013. "An Arc of Thought: From Rorty's Eliminative Materialism to His Pragmatism." In *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy to Cultural Politics*, edited by Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman, and Mike Sandbothe, 23–30. London: Bloomsbury.

Casid, Jill, and Aruna D'Souza, eds. 2014. *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Clark, T. J. 2006. *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Davis, Whitney. 2013. "Radical Was: The Sense of History in World Art Studies." *World Art* 3 (2): 201–10.

Davis, Whitney. 2015. "Succession and Recursion in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73 (2): 157–64.

Elkins, James. 2004. "Review of David Summers's *Real Spaces*: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism." *The Art Bulletin* 86 (2): 373–381.

Elkins, James. 2007. *Is Art History Global?* New York: Routledge.

Friedman, Michael. 2000. *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, Heidegger*. Chicago: Open Court.

Gombrich, Ernst. 1963a. "Art and Scholarship." In *Meditations on a Hobby Horse: And Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, 106–19. London: Phaidon.

Gombrich, Ernst. 1963b. "On Physiognomic Perception." In *Meditations on a Hobby Horse: And Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, 45–55. London: Phaidon.

Gordon, Peter. 2010. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. "The Origin of the Work of Art." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Translated and edited by Albert Hofstadter, 17–86. New York: Harper Collins.

Hung, Wu. 1998. "Response to Robert Bagley's Review of My Book, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford University Press, 1995)." *Archives of Asian Art* 51: 92–102.

James, William. 1907. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans.

Jones, Amelia. 2013. "Notes from the Field: Materiality." *Art Bulletin* 95 (1): 17–18.

Karlholm, Dan. 2004. *Art of Illusion: The Representation of Art History in Nineteenth-Century Germany and Beyond*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Kloppenberg, James. 1996. "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?" *The Journal of American History* 83 (1): 100–138.

Okrent, Mark. 1989. *Heidegger's Pragmatism: Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1934. *Vol. 5 of Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Popper, Karl. 2013 [1945]. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Rorty, Richard, ed. 1967. *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Rorty, Richard. 1982. "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism." In *Consequences of Pragmatism: 1972–1980*, 160–175. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rorty, Richard. 1990. "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz." In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 203–10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rorty, Richard. 1994. "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin." In *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870–1930*, edited by Dorothy Ross, 46–68. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
Rumohr, Karl Friedrich. 1827–1831. *Italienische Forschung*, 3 vols. Berlin: Nicolai.
Rumohr, Karl Friedrich. 1988. "On Giotto." In *German Essays on Art History*, edited by Gert Schiff, 73–94. New York: Continuum.
Saatkamp, Herman1995. *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
Schapiro, Meyer. 1994a. "The Still Life as Personal Object: A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh." In *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, 135–42. New York: Braziller.
Schapiro, Meyer. 1994b. "Further Notes on Heidegger and Van Gogh." In *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, 143–51. New York: Braziller.
Summers, David. 1982. "The 'Visual Arts' and the Problem of Art Historical Description." *Art Journal* 42: 301–310.
Summers, David. 1989. ""Form," Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description." *Critical Inquiry* 15 (2): 372–406.
Summers, David. 2003. *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London: Phaidon.
Walker, James, David Clinnick, and Jan Pedersen. 2016. "Profiled Hands in Palaeolithic Art: The First Universally Recognized Symbol of the Human Form." *World Art* 7 (1): 1–19.
Wind, Edgar. 1946. "Jean-Paul Sartre: A French Heidegger." *Smith College Associated News* (5 March 1946): 1–4.