Hans Dieter Huber. *Paolo Veronese: Kunst als soziales System*.
Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005. 602 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. €152. ISBN: 3–7705–3842–0.

The self-referentiality of art has been a hot topic for a good while now, and so it was only a matter of time until somebody picked up the system theory of the late German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. According to Luhmann, modern society consists of any given number of closed processes of communication, each of which must be considered autopoietic in so far as it constantly refers to the rules of operation that it produces for itself. In *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995), Luhmann argued that with the birth of the art market in the seventeenth century, art became such an autonomous, self-referential system in which subsystems like patronage and religion had increasingly less influence.

This theory is hardly innovative with regard to modern art, which may account for Luhmann's limited impact. Yet, as Luhmann acknowledged, it is even less relevant to medieval and early modern art precisely because in those periods art still strongly depended on patronage, religion, and symbolic meaning. Therefore, Hans Dieter Huber's explicit reference to Luhmann in his study of Paolo Veronese is surprising. Huber simply ignores Luhmann's reservations and almost completely marginalizes issues of patronage and meaning. Instead he discusses the sixteenth-century painter as a quasi-modern, autonomous artist *avant la lettre*, unaffected by any social systems outside of what constitutes for Huber the self-referential aesthetic system of painting. This approach leads Huber to what is ultimately a traditional investigation of Veronese's workshop organization, style, and concern with art theory, Huber's methodological pretensions notwithstanding.

One of Huber's most significant contributions is a detailed analysis of the individual styles of the painters working in Veronese's studio, providing an important tool for more precise attributions in a *bottega* that produced more than 1,400 pictures. Huber characterizes Veronese as a skillful manager who delegated tasks like the depiction of architecture or fresco paintings to specifically trained experts, controlling the outcome of his collaborators, providing them with designs for individual figures or compositions, retouching certain areas of their pictures, and making sure that the commissions kept coming in. Huber fittingly describes Veronese's production process as teamwork and in a brilliant chapter points to the central function of drawings that were used and reused for various paintings by him and his coworkers even after the master's death in 1588. This comprehensive analysis of Veronese's workshop organization is extremely valuable, especially since a similarly thorough investigation is not available for any of the large *bottegas* in sixteenth-century Venice.

Similarly systematic is Huber's description of Veronese's style, which he also discusses with regard to the reception of the pictures. Thus, he considers the impact of scale on the possibility of identifing with the represented scene, and the different structural functions of absorbed figures versus those creating eye contact with spectators. He further demonstrates how contrasts constitute one of Veronese's most powerful stylistic means. They can be found in his frequent

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juxtaposition of fore- and background scenes, bright and dark colors, old and young people, thereby producing a tension that enhances the effect of each of these individual elements.

Huber relates such observations to contemporary art theory, often with convincing arguments. Yet ultimately he comes close to reiterating the old conception of Veronese as a mannerist in pursuit of a "stylish style," which is a far too limited point of view precisely because it does not take into account the interplay of art with anything other than its self-referentiality. According to Huber, Veronese was not only uninterested in meaning, but he did not have to consider the religious, political, or personal concerns of his patrons. In the book's single serious discussion of patronage, Huber summarizes the humanistic and religious background of Ercole Gonzaga and asserts that Veronese's *Temptation of St. Anthony* aimed at developing a new altarpiece format for Gonzaga in San Pietro in Mantua reflecting the spirit of the Catholic reform movement. Yet even in these passages, Huber limits the analysis to Veronese's stylistic emulation of Michelangelo. He therefore ignores the controversial discussion about temptation, sin, and penitence within the spiritual reform movement and neglects the relationship of Veronese's painting to the simultaneously commissioned altarpieces in San Pietro, most of which display martyrs and penitents.

Huber's discussion of Veronese's style similarly suffers from his reluctance to acknowledge broader social issues. Huber treats Veronese's visual language as a monolithic block that always kept the same characteristics and which did not evolve with time or according to circumstances. He ignores the considerable change toward the end of Veronese's career, when the colors turned darker, the contrasts grew dramatic, and the settings became more intimate. That this new spiritual intensity of paintings such as the *Crucifixion* for San Nicolò dei Frari (now in the Accademia, Venice) or the *Miracle of St. Pantalon* for the old high altar of San Pantalon may relate to the altered situation after the Council of Trent (1563) does not figure in Huber's conception of Veronese's self-referential *l'art pour l'art*. Such neglect is all the more problematic since the new style coexisted with paintings in the traditional manner. Veronese thus used different styles in different contexts, which raises questions concerning the interaction with the interests of the patrons who commissioned the pictures as well as larger issues regarding a semiotics of style.

Huber's sidelining of the subsystems of patronage and meaning, which even Luhmann acknowledged for the early modern period, is therefore highly ahistorical. It surprises even more in relation to an artist whose pictures in the Ducal Palace elaborated the so-called "Myth of Venice," who painted the enigmatic frescoes in the Villa Maser, faced an Inquisition trial, and frequently worked for the reform movement of the Cassinese Congregation. Instead, Huber only revives the traditional image of Veronese the gifted decorator that for much too long inhibited the discussion of this complex and still understudied artist. Yet despite

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these reservations, Huber offers what must be considered a significant and innovative study of the collaborative production processes in a large *bottega*, thus effectively revising traditional notions of authorship and authenticity.

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