

Beyond Kunstwollen (Beijing, 8 Apr 2017)

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Jas' Elsner Seminar One

Beyond Kunstwollen

Co-organized by OCAT Institute & The University of Chicago Center in Beijing

Jas' Elsner Seminar Series

Jas' Elsner Seminar Series, a three-part seminar series curated and organized by OCAT Institute, forms an integral part of OCAT Institute's 2017 Annual Programs and anticipates the 2017 OCAT Annual Lectures to be delivered by Jas' Elsner in Beijing in September 2017. The Seminar Series is offered in the form of three historiographic workshops. These three workshops contemplate what the French theorist and historian Michel de Certeau calls "historiographical operation" within art history, by looking at three critical aspects of its practice—a disciplinary moment (the Vienna School), a rhetorical practice (description, or ekphrasis), and a critical modality (comparativism). As such, these three aspects or cross-sections in art historiography correspond to three inter-linked stages of thought process in Jas' Elsner's vision of art history as a discipline—from past, present, to future—which the participants are encouraged to follow through as a logical sequence.

The first seminar, whose firm focus is on the discipline's past, aims at an exercise in rigorous historicization wherein methodological debates are localized into episodes of early literature in the discipline and illuminated against wider cultural, political, and ideological backgrounds. Historicization has as one of its purposes the liberation from, and the caution against, facile or wholesale acceptance of any single set of methods. The second seminar, then, moves beyond the historically rooted methodological rifts to draw on a common denominator present in all art historical practices, i.e. the rhetorical makeup of its descriptive act. The third seminar takes the relativizing stance of the first two seminars one step further to explore the possibility of a "robust comparativism" within art history. How might a pluralistic platform of dialogue be created whose language and structure is no longer held sway by a single dominant cultural model? How might artistic practices originated from disparate cultural and linguistic systems interrogate one another through a productive mode of cross-questioning and mutual illumination? The future of the discipline might precisely lie in the self-conscious attempts at a multi-lateral, critical narrative of comparative art history.

Seminar One: Beyond Kunstwollen

The several generations of art historians from the Vienna School of Art History, initiated from the

end of 19th century through the postwar period, gradually transformed Alois Riegl's formal analysis into the method of *Strukturanalyse* that sought to excavate the structure of intellectual and social experience encapsulated within the visual and formal structure of artifacts. Postwar attack on the second generation of Vienna School, however, specifically targeted the hints of nationalist ideology either inherent in or later imposed onto the writing of style art history, notably in the case of the Nazi art historian Hans Sedlmayr.

The complexity of Riegl's method not only resides in his relativistic attack on preconceived hierarchies of western and non-western tradition, fine arts and crafts, stylistic progression and decline, which allows him to construct a sweeping history of world art and ornament. It could also be discerned through the variegated strands of reception that Riegl's scholarship enjoyed among the pioneering practitioners of humanities and critical theory at the beginning of the century: from the appraisal and resonance with Soviet literary formalism to the positive reception and reflection on Riegl by several key sociologists and political thinkers of the Frankfurt School. The Viennese discourse on formalist aesthetics and visual psychology soon inspired parallel discussions on contemporary social and intellectual crisis and on the very condition of cultural modernity itself.

After the ideological faction of the postwar period, the divergence from and the problematization of iconology in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with trails of centenary commemorations, bringing a reinvigorated thinking on Vienna School to the forefront of art historiography. These revivals also resonated with forceful challenges posed by structuralism and post-structuralism to the discipline. *Kunstwollen* enabled Riegl to grasp simultaneously the particular forms and structures of artistic creation and the mental picture of a specific era or culture (*Weltanschauung*). The possibility the concept offered for broad historical and cultural grounding in the interpretation of specific artifacts would become a key basis for the entire discipline of modern art history. Riegl was among the first scholars to explore, in an intellectually sustained manner, the psychological and phenomenological relationship between the beholder and works of art. Riegl was also a pioneer in his advocacy of a philological imperative in art historical research, evinced both in the last chapter of *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* and in his late annotated translation of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's biography by Filippo Baldinucci. His inquiry into historical texts on art theory would later become a key model for Julius von Schlosser's magisterial and still indispensable *Kunstliteratur* as well as inspire Panofsky's iconological method which gave central importance to the use of literary documents in the interpretation of images.

This seminar starts with the theoretical background of the 19th century in which Riegl's idea took shape, and gradually moves on to the reflections and critiques on the Rieglian model by scholars both within and beyond the discipline of art history proper. As an attempt at "rigorous historicization", the seminar zeroes in on concrete historiographic cases, with the first section devoted to the examination of several key Rieglian concepts and the second section and keynote speech to the discussion of two key members of the New Vienna School (Hans Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt). Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of Hans Sedlmayr and Walter Benjamin in the second section seeks to move beyond facile ideological denigration and critically rethink Vienna School's postwar "fall from grace". The cases of Sedlmayr and Benjamin, presented here, allow us to peer through the complex landscape of two divergent politics of scholarship and methods, which, before the emergence of ideological and methodological divide, partially met on a dangerous common ground.

“Beyond” in the title of the seminar has two possible connotations. Firstly, “beyond” refers to the interpretive efforts by German art historians of the early 20th century to recast Riegl’s elusive *Kunstwollen* as a practicable model and method for art historical research. It signals the theoretical elaboration and transformation of *Kunstwollen* into several parallel strands of methodology and concept in modern art history, two of which would become dominant throughout the first half of the twentieth century—the centrality of meaning (Sinn) in Warburgian and later Panofskian iconology and the preoccupation with formal and structural principles (Struktur) in the New Vienna School.

Secondly, the seminar aims to go beyond the predominance of *Kunstwollen* in recent revisits of Riegl. Not until now, scholarly attention is gradually embracing other theoretical foci: an object-based mode of inquiry in 19th-century practice of material culture and anthropology, Riegl’s acute insight and critique of visual modernity, the impact of phenomenology on formalist visual psychology. *Beyond Kunstwollen* holds a steady focus on the theoretical contribution of the Vienna School of art history, where close readings of Alois Riegl and other members is joined with discussions on the convergence and collision between formalist art history, *Kulturwissenschaft*, cultural modernity, critical theory, and philosophy. It seeks to retrace the complex facets of Riegl’s art history through the manifold history of its reception, in the hope of excavating the relevance of the pioneering art historian for contemporary art history.

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PROGRAM

Auditorium, The University of Chicago Center in Beijing
(This seminar is delivered in Chinese)

Morning Session

10:00-10:15

Welcome and Introduction

Wenyi Qian, OCAT Institute

10:15-10:45

A Phenomenology of Gaze: Alois Riegl’s Modern History of Art

Dr. Liu Yi, Nanjing University

10:45-11:15

The Universal and the Particular in Alois Riegl’s “Historical Grammar”

Dr. Mao Qiuyue, Zhejiang University

11:15-11:45 Discussion

11:45-13:00 Lunch

Afternoon Session

13:00-13:30

From the Positivism of *Kunstwollen* to the Negativism of the Modern Subject: Revisiting and Transforming Riegl’s Legacy in the New Vienna School

Dr. Wang Yanhua, Guangxi University of Nationalities

13:30-14:00

The Critical Logic of Walter Benjamin and the Rieglian Problem of Late Period Style: On the Use of an Art-Historical Notion in Intellectual History

Dr. Yao Yunfan, Shanghai Normal University

14:00-14:30 Discussion

14:30-15:30

Keynote Speech

The Origins of the Northern Renaissance and the Modernity of Early Netherlandish Painting: between Pächt's "stilling of the eye" and Panofsky's "disguised symbolism"

Prof. Zhang Jian, China Academy of Art

15:30-15:45 Coffee Break

15:45-17:00 Roundtable Discussion

Moderator: Prof. Zhang Jian

Discussants: Dr. Liu Yi, Dr. Mao Qiuyue, Dr. Wang Yanhua, Dr. Yao Yunfan

Reference:

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<<https://arthist.net/archive/15168>>.