

## Towards a Self-Aware Description (Beijing, 26 Jun 17)

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Wenyi Qian

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Jaś Elsner Seminar Two

Towards a Self-Aware Description

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

Jaś Elsner Seminar Series

Jaś 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 Jaś 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 Jaś 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 Two: Towards a Self-Aware Description

Description is a fundamental act of verbal enunciation. The description of works of visual arts also constitutes a basic practice of art (historical) writing itself as well as its historical origin. As description occurs at every instance of verbal practice and visual cognition, and in light of the entangled interactions between the describing subject and the described object within the descriptive procedure, it is exceedingly difficult for verbal practitioners (art historians included) to distance themselves from their descriptions in order to open up a space of concrete reflection. We often indulge ourselves in the pleasure of description; it flows naturally out of our fountainheads, as if instinct-driven. But the automatism of description also hints at tacit assumptions and unwritten rules that undergird most descriptive languages, and points towards the cognitive and conceptual models with which each discipline equips its describers. This seminar would like to propose the following: to recognize the fundamental difficulty of the descriptive act is the first step towards a self-aware description. Only when description is stripped of its seeming common sense and naturalism, would the descriptive mechanism offer itself for reflection and overcoming—this is perhaps where efforts need to be directed in current art history.

Within the domain of art history, description also represents a key historiographic lineage. The more restrictedly modern notion of ekphrasis is derived from rhetorical concepts of ancient Greek and Roman literary theories. Originally designating a rhetorical and literary technique (*ars/techne*) that endows, through description, a scene, an event, an object—real or imagined—with a sense of vivid presence and visibility, it is gradually transformed into a highly self-reflexive enterprise in modern literature, that is, a descriptive genre in which works of visual arts are rendered into words. As such, ekphrasis in its modern incarnations embodies the autonomies, both shared and in constant rivalry and opposition, of verbal and visual creations, and hence a particularly modern conception of both literature and art. The changing notions of ekphrasis from ancient rhetoric to modern literature and the tension between these competing interpretations compel us to reflect on the role of description in disciplinary histories.

Description also implies a perpetual present tense: that is, at each particular moment, the description of works of visual arts must be examined as a practice in action and a method in application—pointing perhaps to a salutary presentism within the discipline. The methodological proposal of “art history as ekphrasis” made by Jás Elsner aims precisely to urge for more self-conscious examination of how such translation from visual to verbal takes place and the inevitable entanglement of subjectivity within the descriptive act.

This seminar seeks to trace the multiple trajectories of ekphrastic/descriptive acts. The morning session introduces the twin concept of “verbal” and “visual” ekphrasis through an exposition of the ancient rhetorical and literary practice of ekphrasis and a discussion of *tableau vivants* as a distinct genre that extends from Romanticism to contemporary art. The two moments within the history of Western artistic and literary theory—ancient Greek and Roman, Romanticism and modernity—witnessed distinctly contentious relations between word and image, visual and verbal cultures, rhetoric and theatrical practices. Meanwhile, such discourses alongside the multifarious visual products inspired by them also form an important prism through which to scrutinize different notions of image throughout history. The afternoon session moves on to examine three cases of descriptive practice in modern art history, considered here as concrete samples collected from three specific contexts in which art-historical knowledge is produced. These are: the writing of descriptive entries in iconographic catalogue of Han pictorial carvings, Daniel Arasse’s writings

(at times dubbed by himself as “descriptions”, thus invoking an age-old tradition) that bridge academic and public understandings of art, and the historical narrative and descriptive language employed in curatorial practices of Chinese contemporary art. By examining the three cases, we could hopefully arrive at a self-reflexive understanding of the academic and social “regimes of descriptions”, of the distinctive agency that descriptive texts and describing subjects possess in the active shaping of knowledge and visual experience, and lastly, of the resistance and pressure posed upon language by the sensuous autonomy and material presence of objects themselves.

In the mean time, the pictorial/iconic turn of the last few decades also cautions us against the long-grained primacy of language and textual sources over visibility in iconology; nor could the categories of text and image, in our proposed discussion on description, be held any longer as a pair of totalising and binaristic concepts within art history. This seminar wishes to move beyond the unilateral translation from visual to verbal, and to define description as translational acts that move between artistic media, with all the frictions, resistances, and material transformations that take place in between. How could line drawings and illustrations based on observation and interpretation of actual objects be understood as “visual descriptions/ekphrasis”? How do visual documentations activate the rewriting of artistic practices or events in history? How are virtual spaces in paintings transformed into the real spaces of three-dimensional models and bodily performance?

If enargeia (understood in ancient rhetoric as a technique of making past or absent persons, objects, and events vividly present in words) and the sensuous pleasure engendered by it have always drawn ancient verbal practitioners and readers into the rich texture of ekphrastic description and textual experience, then we should, standing in the present, insist on the possibility for art-historical descriptions and writings to actively shape knowledge productions, aesthetic experiences, and historical narratives. Ultimately, what we hope to tease out of the methodological proposal of “art history as ekphrasis” is precisely the possibility to open up a path towards self-aware descriptions.

For more information, please contact Wenyi Qian: [qianwenyi@ocatinstitute.org.cn](mailto:qianwenyi@ocatinstitute.org.cn)

#### PROGRAM

Auditorium, The University of Chicago Center in Beijing

(This seminar is delivered in Chinese)

#### Morning Session

10:00-10:15

Welcome and Introduction

Prof. Guo Weiqi (Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts) & Wenyi Qian (OCAT Institute)

10:15-10:45

Ekphrasis in Ancient Literary and Rhetorical Tradition

Xian Ruobing, Associate Researcher at Fudan University

10:45-11:15

Tableaux Vivants: On the Translation of Image Through Body

Kang Chong (Doctoral Candidate), Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

11:15-11:45 Discussion

11:45-13:30 Lunch

Afternoon Session

13:30-14:00

Iconographic Description in Catalogue of Han Pictorial Stones: Problems and Solutions

Xu Zhijun, Lecturer at Nantong University

14:00-14:30

How to Strike a Balance between Public Understanding and Art-Historical Description?: The Case of Daniel Arasse

He Qian (Doctoral Candidate), Sciences Po

14:30-15:00

Rupture, Subversion, Descent: Rhetoric Between Individuals and Histories

Su Wei, Curator at Inside-Out Museum

15:00-15:30 Discussion

15:30-15:45 Coffee Break

15:45-17:00 Roundtable Discussion

Moderator: Prof. Guo Weiqi, Wenyi Qian

Discussants: Xian Ruobing, Kang Chong, Xu Zhijun, He Qian, Su Wei

Reference:

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