

## The Arts and Measurement (Paris, 3-5 dec 08)

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### Call for Contributions

The Arts and Measurement: the Art of Measuring  
International Conference, December 3rd, 4th, and 5th 2008

Ecole Normale Supérieure, Department of Art History and Art Theory  
Département d'Histoire et de Théorie des Arts, 45 rue d'Ulm, Paris

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Despite the wide acceptance of databases as valid research tools in Art History, quantitative analyses are often neglected and marginalized. Contemporary art historians frequently lack sufficient time, energy and the precise methodology that would reveal the entire source of data encapsulated in these artistic databases. In general, young researchers who have employed a quantitative approach using databases often have to determine and define their methodologies individually, a difficult task to accomplish on one's own.

In the spirit of this endeavour, the Department of Art History and Theory of the Ecole Normale Supérieure invites a collective reflection, interdisciplinary and international in nature, on "The Arts and Measurement," on "The Art of Measuring." Art can be studied in a broad manner beyond traditional works such as fine arts (ie. paintings). Other forms of artistic creation such as literature, music, cinematography, theater, etc. can also be considered reflections of creativity. The purpose of this conference therefore will be, without neglecting the contemporary field of art, to blend the contributions of researchers and their different methodologies from various time periods in history in order to examine, using a metric approach, the specific questions

related to the history of creation.

The Planning Committee seeks to draw forth contributions that apply a metric analysis to a variety of domains within Art History: the overall career of the artist, their experiential trajectory, prices of their art work, as well as studies relating to their content, creation, reputation, and aesthetic value. This symposium is an extension of the work previously made by the seminar "Art and Measure" at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Contributing departments are as follows: Department of History, Department of Art History and Theory, and the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History. The conference will also be accompanied by a special review made by the periodical History and Measure on the question of art (call for contributions are available at the following web site: <http://histoiremesure.revues.org/>).

The symposium is open to all researchers and scholars who are interested in these questions according to the guidelines listed above. The themes to be discussed and analysed at the conference are as follows:

I. Sources, Quantitative Approaches and the Metric Analysis in Art History: appraisal, tools, and the development and application of quantitative frameworks.

II. Measuring what is measurable: actors, collections, markets and geographical analysis.

III. How is the subjective a challenge to the metric approach?

I. Sources, Quantitative Approaches and the Metric Analysis in Art History

The purpose of the first part of the conference, to collect a wide variety of databases that art historians can access, represents three-fold initiative. First, these contributions will enable various scholars from the Art History community to meet one another and exchange ideas and projects. Second, they will provide an opportunity for scholars to avoid replicating research, thus preventing scholars from wasting time and energy by embarking on studies that have already been initiated. Third, the social aspect of the conference has the potential to promote collaborative-based studies in the future, in which scholars can combine their gifts to create dynamic projects.

#### a. Appraisal

Appraisal analysis and its subsequent contributions on the available databases and information in art history, literature, criticism (of all fields), poetry and music will be welcomed. These analyses will help scholars and researchers to answer the following questions related to

access and information: Can these databases be placed on the Internet? Can they be accessed free of charge to the Art History community? Is it possible to access this information and receive it in a timely fashion, as well as propose more complex searches and research inquiries?

Furthermore, contributions concerning scholarly work and research that can be performed using available databases on-line are also welcome. Some well known initiatives are as follows: Getty Provenance Index, base Joconde, and base Arcade. Quantitative projects conducted on databases that are typically less known will also be

#### b. Tools of Research and Analysis

Additionally, the potential use of computerized directories related to the history of creation is often unavailable for consultation on the Internet. Is the cause of this deficit due to a lack of means? Would the installation of practical programs and technological interfaces aimed at increasing access to this information remedy these deficiencies? It is difficult to determine at what point a database is "complete." With these questions in mind then, how does one determine when a computer directory is in fact finished?

From this perspective, what is envisioned is the construction of a multidimensional toolbox containing an array of research devices designed to formulate a thorough artistic database. The purpose of this workshop is thus to offer "useful and practical methods," particularly for young researchers.

#### c. Unite, Consolidate and Merge: An Impossible Ambition?

In order to avoid the poor organization of previously completed databases, but also prevent the useless duplication of future ones, multiple interdisciplinary projects occurring both within and outside Art History can enable the art world to reflect on the way in which these databases are organized, and perhaps envision a more efficient way to organize them. What are the challenges, as well as the solutions that the compiling of various databases present? Can this initiative offer a protocol and a schedule, or even a systematic blueprint for future organization?

The purpose of this session is to take into account not only the technical ways to unite several projects, studies and databases, (some of which may appear to have little commonality when observed as a whole) but also to take into serious consideration the human and social risks of collective initiatives and projects. How does one regulate the intellectual ownership of these foundations? Who has the "right of printing" for projects in which multiple individuals have made

contributions? How can doctoral students become a part of this dynamic research process, both as participants and as long-term contributors?

## II. Measuring what is Measurable

The second day of the conference will be dedicated to emphasizing an array of tangible results produced by metric analyses in Art History. No source or method of treatment will be excluded, nor will any theme concerning art, literature, poetry, music, film or dance be omitted. Several themes therefore will be grouped together for various sessions in order to draw forth and discern unique commonalities.

### a. Actors (careers, networks, trajectories)

In Art History, the application of a quantitative analysis is indispensable for studying both the professional and sociological elements of art. The most dynamic approaches are therefore invited to reconstitute networks and analyze career paths within the framework of an accessible trajectory. This multidimensional perspective will help to generate a robust diachronic dimension, a content analysis, as well as take into account the historical logic concerning the purpose of these studies.

### b. Collections

Furthermore, this session will also address the outstanding collections that characterize the vast sources of artistic catalogues – collections of art works, books, and smaller art pieces from diverse time periods and cultural milieus, both personal as well as those on display in museums.

### c. Markets

Despite the fact that an analysis of the market in Art History can be approached mathematically, it is not an easy task. The archives of art merchants are often inaccessible due to the effects of aging. Those archives that are still intact cannot be easily converted into a database due to the massive technological changes that have taken place since the production date of these archives. In terms of prices, these numbers are rarely constant and often fluctuate, changing over both short and long periods of time.

In light of this complex reality, contributions to the history of the market value of art are particularly welcomed. Proposals and projects that can furnish the reconstitution of merchant networks, both national and international, are also invited. Studies such as the history of the purchases of paintings, sculptures, books, musical partitions, and the physical property of concerts and theaters are of particular interest

for this component of the conference.

#### d. Geography

The quantitative analysis of supplies and fluctuation in the type (and number) of artwork can offer a diverse array of geographical information, thus complementing the study of the art market. Studies that document the history of travels taken by the artist, synthesize the movement of their work from one exhibition to the next, as well as projects that detail the geographical expansion of musical, theatrical and lyrical repertoires are also welcomed. Additionally, the dissemination of artwork, museums and styles can also be the subject of contributing research projects.

#### e. Politics

In both France and countries abroad, the market, the State as well as other institutions intervene substantially to support the various dimensions of the art world. This involvement not only assists in the creation of art, but also provides for its patronage, the financial maintenance of museums, the organization of exhibitions, and the promotion of theatrical productions, opera and film. However, there is a large temptation to compare these political policies in order to determine the most efficient methods to be used, thus establishing comparable transnational indicators. These economic indicators are more often employed in a variety of disciplines such as in academics (classification of Shanghai), sports (medals) and the classification and study of books, etc. But what do these comparisons really measure? Is this temptation therefore a reason to abandon the idea of comparing governmental policies concerning the creation of art?

### III. How is the Subjective a Challenge to the Metric Approach?

The third and final day of the symposium will tackle the sensitive questions concerning the quantitative approach in Art History. In effect, how does one quantify the inquantifiable? Subjectivity remains an integral part of artistic creation, its evaluation, and the history of artistic appreciation. Nevertheless, subjectivity cannot escape the framework of objective analyses, such as the existence of fashion and imitation, social trends, or public opinion. One will therefore raise the question whether or not the provision of a rational, quantitative approach will allow a synoptic access to a collective logic, on subjects already considered difficult to examine with an objective lens. Several topics to be approached are as follows:

#### a. Is Creativity Quantifiable?

Is it possible to measure more or less periods of great creativity produced by an artist or a culture? What indicators should one adopt to pursue this task? This initiative, already started by David W. Galenson, provides a point of departure for a methodological discussion. Additionally other proposals that directly confront the question of creativity are also welcome that display the results of both methodology and scholarly reflection.

#### b. Fashion, Imitations and Influences

The quantitative research performed by the economist Gerald Reitlinger on the "economy of taste" has helped to identify the influence of economics in the art world, on the appearance of fashion and new tastes. Can these economic analyses be replicated and employed by scholars of Art History? Contributions therefore that treat the quantitative history of fashion, imitations and influences are also greatly welcomed.

#### c. The Metric Approach, the History of Reception and the Measure of Reputation

Quantitative approaches of art reception are also welcomed. Is taste measurable? In the art world, the community of museums can study public audiences using concrete databases. Taste and popularity can also be studied while analyzing catalogue collections quantitatively. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to capture and identify what stimulates the choices and opinions of amateurs in the art world. The same problem holds true when one analyzes public opinion in relation to theatrical performances, opera, and artistic expressions in film and in ballet. Even if scholars can successfully locate the inner motivations of the amateur and pinpoint the unique reasons why a piece of art attracts that individual, to do so on a wider social/cultural scale is even more of an arduous task. What sources can be implemented to make this study broader and more historical? Historians do not have opinion polls to study collective tastes and fashions of the Renaissance. What tools can the quantitative approach employ in order to analyze the history of social reception, taste and opinion towards a specific artistic genre or work?

Questions concerning the measure of reputation closely highlight these issues and topics. In relation to contemporary art, criteria of reputation serve as references to the market (ie. Kunstkompass). The task of measuring literary reputation is also problematic, as one wonders if Balzac and Flaubert are still commonly read and/or discussed. Can the implementation therefore of these types of measurements help elucidate political decisions and artistic trends? For example, when a museum curator wants to buy art work that would reflect the collective taste of a contemporary audience, is a hierarchy of reputation among potential selections, based on a quantitative analysis, helpful in

determining which pieces of art one should purchase? Furthermore, what are the effects of quantifying reputation, especially when it is done for economic as opposed to artistic reasons?

#### d. In front of Works of Art

Finally, the symposium cannot neglect the central issue of art work and writings. Can quantitative methods be applied to analyze various types of artistic creation (paintings, music, writings)? The study of titles has a place in Art History, and their quantitative analysis can reveal fashion trends, references to other works, artists, as well as the rejection of artistic traditions and artists considered to have produced ground breaking accomplishments. In addition, what can one conclude when titles no longer exist, especially for an important (albeit abstract or not) component of pictorial creation after World War I?

On the other hand, by considering artwork – especially paintings – as material objects, quantitative approaches can be directed towards the analysis of art defined by a given quantity of colors, pigments and other materials. This approach can be useful for the study of the art produced during the Middle Ages, when the artist was first and foremost an artisan, and his work was defined by a contract where the buyer specified how much gold and blue was to be used. Is this application also helpful for studying more contemporary works of art? If not, does this mean that the metric approach towards art work as an object, as realistic and formal material, must stop at the borders of modernity?

The quantitative approach is no longer excluded from literary history or music. Textual analysis of literary creations and poetry as the internal analysis of musical partitions will thus be able to inspire and encourage authors to display and share their contributions, particularly if they adopt a historical approach.

Finally, a serial approach is not to undermine the study of forms and design, for this perspective is at the origin of Art History. By grouping works of similar styles in order to draw comparisons among various artistic techniques and styles through various historical periods, one is able to construct a history of form and design. The fundamental contribution made by Alois Riegl illustrates this important concept. Nevertheless, if the primary question that Art History seeks to answer is one of beauty, where must the quantitative analysis end? Can one measure beauty quantitatively, putting it into a fixed category? Can talent and aesthetic value also be measured objectively? Researchers must not shy from engaging studies and projects that seek to examine these difficult questions. This symposium therefore has to be a place of both discussion and teamwork in order to tackle these multidimensional topics.

Proposals for contributions must be sent before May 1st, 2008 to [beatrice.joyeux-prunel@ens.fr](mailto:beatrice.joyeux-prunel@ens.fr) in the following format: an abstract (20 lines maximum), in French or in English, of the proposed project or study accompanied by its title, and the precise category of the theme to be presented. Applicants are warmly invited to also submit a short curriculum vitae documenting their most recent publications if they so choose.

All applicants will receive a response regarding their admittance to the conference no later than June 1st, 2008. Selected participants will be invited to provide the final abstract and the exact title of their project before October 1st.

By November 1st, all participants will have to provide their study in its complete form (maximum of 40,000 words). If the completed paper is not received by this date, the participant forfeits their acceptance to the conference. The projects presented at the symposium will be collectively published as soon as possible.

#### Important Conference Deadlines:

- May 1st, 2008: resume/abstract (20 lines maximum) and preliminary title of project.
  - June 1st: Decisions from the Conference Committee are sent to all applicants.
  - October 1st: Exact title of project and resume/abstract (5 lines maximum) to be submitted to the Conference Committee
  - November 1st: Submission of completed text (40,000 words maximum)
    - participants have the option of modifying their final paper if necessary
- (deadline : February 1st, 2009).
- December 3rd, 4th and 5th: Art History Symposium at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

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Web Site : <http://www.ens.fr/passerelle/>.

#### Reference:

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