

Staging Paradox (Charlottesville, 16–17 Mar 23)

Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, Mar 16–17, 2023

Deadline: Jan 12, 2023

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STAGING PARADOX: Graduate Symposium of the Department of Art at the University of Virginia.

Trompe l'oeil, aporia, illusionism – art has many terms alluding to the ambiguities of representation. But paradox, the uncanny gesture self-consciously exploring contradictory propositions, is often less explicitly identified as a mode of intervention in the making, viewing, and research of material culture and architecture. The term paradox, combining the Greek prefix para (“contrary to”) and doxa (“opinion”) points to a statement, situation, or thing composed of opposing elements that appear incommensurate but are just as true or viable as accepted reality. The 2023 Graduate Symposium of the Department of Art at the University of Virginia seeks to explore paradox as praxis and a mode of critical intervention to consider its broader contribution within our fields.

Paradox entails a performative self-contradiction that simultaneously surprises and appeals to an audience’s understanding of its terms. Irrespective of tone, genre, or moment of intervention, paradox’s effectiveness hinges on the extent to which audiences are persuaded, surprised, or left speculating about meanings thought to be understood. Paradox plays with expectations and explores the limits of conventions, logic, and truth through subtle twists and turns of terms considered acceptable in isolation. Paradox, susceptible to the predictability and conventionality of any device, demands novel techniques and unexpected modes of enactment to sustain its tension between understanding and astonishment. For its turning on performance and skill, paradox is an apposite tool for interpreting the self-contradictory in making, interpreting, and experiencing art.

Keynote Speaker

FELIPE PEREDA, Professor of Spanish Art, Harvard University

Author of *Images of Discord. Poetics and Politics of the Sacred Image in 15th century Spain* (2007) and *Crime and Illusion: The Art of Truth in the Spanish Golden Age* (2018)

The 2023 Graduate Symposium of the Department of Art at the University of Virginia, taking place in Charlottesville March 16 and 17, 2023, seeks papers that consider or demonstrate how paradox operates within and throughout fields of art, archaeology, and architectural history, across periods and geographies, emphasizing paradox as a methodology, mode of making, and way of viewing and experiencing. We welcome research discussing or demonstrating the intersections of paradox and material culture either implicitly or explicitly.

Paradox as a mode of intervention, experience, and interpretation

As a mode of viewing and making, paradox interjects itself into the iconography and composition of a work of art. This device crafts ambiguity by intentionally playing with the expectations of the viewer. As illustrated in Rosalie Colie's 1966 book *Paradoxia Epidemica*, paradoxes such as praising the insignificant or unpraiseworthy take form by highlighting the magnificence of mundane objects depicted in still-life paintings. Paradox may also serve as a compositional technique such as polemically contradicting genres or expectations as seen in John Cage's 4:33 music performance that considers the experience of non-performance. For Colie and Cage, paradox becomes a critical interpretive or compositional device for accessing an artwork's intended meaning.

Other forms of paradoxical composition emerge as paradox extends into real space. The artistic practice of Robert Smithson exploring the relationship between a site and its representational non-sites offers a conceptual example of paradoxes in space. Design affordances, or the qualities and properties of an object or space defining its possible use, may generate paradoxical viewing or emotional experiences. The design choices of a religious temple, for instance, intentionally seek to reveal the divine as present/absent, accessible/inaccessible to a believer. This paradox is participatory and interactive, emerging as users experience a space. Similarly, dissonant adjacencies or juxtapositions in spaces can also become fertile grounds for paradox. This approach to paradox as a mode of spatial participation and adjacency complements the aforementioned mode of interpretation of the viewing and making of art.

An art historian may stage paradox by characterizing art, or truthful fictions, as evidence in the recounting of an event. As historian Carlo Ginzburg observes, constructing a truthful tapestry of the past may well involve piecing together variably accurate testimonies, including fakes and false narratives. In this vein, Felipe Pereda examines artists who make legible inconstant modes of illusion and disillusion, presence and absence to concede evidentiary authority to images that viewers authenticate as true – artworks utilized as probationary evidence of a crime that never occurred. Paradoxically, art as testimony or evidence can dispute past events and even claims to a statutory truth.

Other topics and questions for discussion include but are not limited to:

- How do artists represent or give form to paradox?
- How can replication, copies, or fakes complicate or enrich interpretation?
- How does modern and contemporary art criticism's epidemic of paradox facilitate globalized artistic practices?
- How can we study the audience's reception of paradox in pre-modern societies?
- How can an artwork or artifact become paradoxical with respect to its medium or context?
- Can paradox translate across cultures, geographies, media, and time?
- How might an object or architectural space's functional change create a material or spatial paradox?
- How do spatial paradoxes go beyond the logical to the affective and the psychological?
- What are the stakes of considering art as testimony or evidence in dispute or support of historical claims?
- How does paradox operate when collapsing social norms or fluctuating paradigms of knowledge alter conditions of interpretation?

We welcome submissions from current graduate students, recent graduates, and emerging scholars from all areas of study, including new media such as AR, VR, games, and cartoons.

Please submit an abstract of 250 words and current CV as a single PDF by Thursday, January 12, 2023, to the symposium committee at stagingparadox@virginia.edu.

Talks should be 20 minutes in length and will be followed by a panel Q&A session. Applicants will be notified of decisions on January 16, 2023.

Reference:

CFP: Staging Paradox (Charlottesville, 16-17 Mar 23). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 17, 2022 (accessed May 25, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/38184>>.