

Form, Style, Principles (Zurich, 18–20 Nov 24)

University of Zurich

Deadline: May 31, 2024

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Form, Style, Principles: Art Historical and Theoretical Reflections – A Conference of the Wölfflin Edition, University of Zurich

Scientific Organization: The team of the Wölfflin edition project, <https://www.woelfflin.uzh.ch/de.html>

Recent discussions in aesthetics and art history, literature, and visual studies have seen a renewed interest in questions of form and formalism. Whether in connection with algorithmic thinking, computer vision, and artificial intelligence, or with transcultural comparisons, revised narratives of modernism, re-conceptualisations of formlessness, and cognitive reflections on connoisseurship, form and formalism have regained currency in current discourses on a transhistorical and transdisciplinary level. It has become clear that an “archaeology of knowledge” about these crucial notions is indispensable in teasing out their critical potential and in productive application of what has also been termed “new formalism” or “post-formalism”.

Against this backdrop, the name Heinrich Wölfflin resurfaces in both historiographical and theoretical accounts. The newly published critical edition of his collected works, available both digitally and in print, invites us to take a fresh look at both longstanding and urgent concerns of art history, thinking about and beyond Wölfflin. His claims regarding the historicity of both form production and its perception are newly relevant not only concerning the burgeoning “age of technical reproduction” of artworks but also in light of broader media histories and changing media ecologies in the present. In-depth analyses of his drawing practice and his use of language resonate with reflections on the epistemic role of sketching in scientific production and on the performative aspects of scholarship and teaching. In times of post-digital image production and the proliferation of media platforms, Wölfflin’s insistence on the indispensable value of a visual education raises the question of the specific responsibility of art history and visual studies on a broader horizon, and their ability to reach a much wider audience, confronting issues such as human vs non-human image production, manipulation, and instrumentalization. From a historical perspective, reconstructions of the geneological circumstances of Wölfflin’s writings provide insight into the social networks, institutional infrastructures, museum landscapes, and transnational exchanges that contributed to shaping and repeatedly revising conceptual models.

Furthermore, the political and ethical implications of practicing art history as a science of form emerge ever more clearly from the history of formalism as a contested methodology, after decades of polemics against its alleged essentialist and apolitical nature. Its association with the

concept of norms and with various ideologies, but also with patterns of resistance, forms of social communication, and of individual existence are telling examples of the fundamental non-neutrality of both form and its study. Even quality judgments in art, the analysis of artistic techniques, the contemporary relevance of information design and coding may have far-reaching consequences.

What is the current understanding of Wölfflin's position within the history of formalism? Have recent debates affected the conservative traits usually associated with the author? In what ways can a close reading of a seemingly canonical author still suggest a productive estrangement and provoke new questions from today's perspective? Can a rethinking of the notions of form and formalism itself become a key to a more inclusive reflection on methodology in the light of contemporary challenges facing the humanities?

In this colloquium, speakers from various backgrounds will engage with these and related questions discussing historical, current and emerging issues in understanding form and formalism.

We invite presentations of about 20 minutes, followed by a discussion. Please send an abstract of max. 600 words and a short CV to woelfflin@khist.uzh.ch by May 31st. Feedback on participation will be provided by June 14.

Reference:

CFP: Form, Style, Principles (Zurich, 18-20 Nov 24). In: ArtHist.net, May 3, 2024 (accessed Dec 14, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41792>>.