

Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies

Williamstown, May 4–05, 2001

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"Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies", Conference in Williamstown, MA,
4-5 May 2001

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When I arrived in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on 3 May 2001, I phoned an old acquaintance who is a curator at a local art museum. "I'm in town for the Visual Studies conference," I told her. "The what?" she asked. "The Visual Studies conference," I repeated, "at the Clark Art Institute." "Oh!" she exclaimed in recognition, "You must be talking about the Aesthetics conference!" Readers of this article may well refer to this same conference as the "Art History conference" – the two days of papers and discussions were collectively entitled, "Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies." A primary underlying issue of the conference was, in fact, how these three "fields" interact with each other. Conference organizer Michael Ann Holly asked another key question to sum up the conference: how do ideas intersect with the objects of our studies? I came to think about this latter question in other ways as well: how do our objects of study give us information about their contexts? Or, chiasmatically, in what ways are artistic forms actually "en-formed" by their situations?

Three Trees?

The overall organization of the conference was thought-provoking in itself. Over the two days, there were three major sessions: "In Time," "Out of Time," and "With Time." The categories roughly corresponded to papers that dealt with historiographic issues, theoretical issues, and issues of "visual studies" in the contemporary academy, respectively. The final afternoon of the conference was completely devoted to discussion – a rare treat. There were no concurrent sessions, participants could engage in the final discussion having heard the same set of papers.

Michael Ann Holly welcomed participants with a witty slide lecture on the thought process behind the conference theme. She mused about various possibilities for how Art History, Aesthetics, and Visual Studies could interrelate by showing images that had been contenders for the conference brochure. The winner, a suitably genteel and non-anthropomorphic etching by

Rembrandt ("The Three Trees" – see <http://www.arthist.net/WForumPx.html#Rembrandt>), emerged because the trees intertwined in their roots and branches. The three trunks, representing the three fields, retained individual strength and integrity without any one tree becoming dominant. Thus we could assume a common ground of shared objects of study, and perhaps we could use the conference to grow toward some common goals or ideals.

The metaphors connected to this image multiplied, in ways that could be seen as a blueprint for issues that arose at the conference. Taken upside down, one could see the face of the artist emerging in the negative space around one of the trees; this reminded us, as Griselda Pollock mentioned during the final discussion period, not to overlook the makers of the visual objects we were discussing. One participant asked the group to examine the background of the etching instead of focusing exclusively on the three trees; the people, animals, and weather patterns could stand for the contextual considerations that enrich any scholarly inquiry.

Wrestling with Ghosts

In a sense, these observations were asking us to look at the ghosts in the image – the aspects of the etching that had remained invisible or which we had neglected. Ghosts became a theme of the conference on the second day, after Nicholas Mirzoeff's paper. In "Ghostwriting: Working Out Visual Culture," Mirzoeff suggested that we create ghosts when we – as critics and artists – repress images of specific categories of bodies (for instance, Jews). Two examples included Walter Benjamin, whose body is remarkably absent from his Arcades Project, and Anne Frank, whose image looks "at home" when it appears in photomontages of New York City streetcorners, simply because it always already exists in New York as a ghost of her existence in the cultural consciousness. In a paper whose wide-ranging vision seemed spiritual itself, Mirzoeff compared these specific ghostly presences to spirit photographs and television in general. In a sense, Mirzoeff was implying, all acts of seeing are haunted, and Visual Studies aims to face, or at least bring into circulation, the ghosts that influence all experiences of vision.

I came to see the entire conference, in fact, as a series of wrestling matches with ghosts. Several papers took on eighteenth-century aestheticians – for example, Karen Lang suggested "style" as a rubric to replace Immanuel Kant's "form". Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann examined "National Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Aesthetic Judgments in the Historiography of Art" – notably with reference to the writings of Kant and Ernst Gombrich – though it was noted that scholars in the 70s and 80s had also criticized these ghosts for overlooking race and other sociopolitical concerns. Still, Kaufmann proposed further that Kant's feelings of beauty or sublimity might

be influenced by factors besides race, such as climate or chance. Other papers challenged the ghosts of prominent art historians who were working within a nineteenth-century positivistic tradition. Jonathan Gilmore, for instance, argued that the early twentieth-century emphasis on apolitical formalism, made fashionable by Clement Greenberg, could actually be seen as a politically strategic response to censorious attack: when artworks are denounced for their politically risky content, their defenders can point to the art's superior formal qualities. Gilmore cited examples from the Renaissance to Robert Mapplethorpe to prove that "formalism" can save (and often has saved) works of art from political persecution. During the discussion session at the end of the conference, Michael Kelly reminded the group that the historical figures we discuss, at the conference and elsewhere, are actually quite fictionalized versions. We exaggerate the importance of the aesthetic distance to the eighteenth-century thinkers, he insisted; we discuss an Enlightenment rationality or Cartesian separations as abstractions instead of accurately representing these thinkers' own ideas. We polarize their views in order to make our own points as a contrast.

In addition to creating historical ghosts to suit our own agendas, we create contemporary ghosts that haunt our lives – they are the beings and forces that remain "unseen." Mirzoeff's paper addressed this dynamic, as did Griselda Pollock's contributions. She discussed the repression of femininity in theory and art history in general, and in discussions she repeatedly asked us to examine the near-invisibility of the last three decades of feminist studies (plus racial politics and identity theory) at the conference itself. Her paper, "The Aesthetics of Difference," posited a matrixial model for the formation of subjectivity as a challenge to Jacques Lacan's phallic model.

The papers discussed so far seemed marked by an oppositional struggle. There was an underlying tone of a contestatory dialectic. Or, to invoke a concept from Hal Foster's paper, "The Dialectics of Seeing," these papers all followed a process of "reification and reanimation" – the speaker first established a solid position that someone else occupied (as if it were a static or stultified entity), and then went on to challenge (and thereby revivify) that position. I started to wonder how else we could wrestle with our ghosts – instead of imagining a grim academic struggle, could we consider that our ghosts are actually ourselves?

How Do I Look?

The first and last papers of the conference offered alternative models for how to grapple with our topics of study. At the end of the conference, W.J.T. Mitchell shared his classroom activity of "Showing Seeing" – a college-level version of "show and tell" – as a way to inquire into how

"looking" works. When students narrate to each other how to "see" things they have chosen from their daily lives, he recounted, they uncover their own unarticulated, and even unconscious, ways of seeing. He suggested asking students to describe their visual experiences as if they were talking to beings who had never seen anything before; the students therefore also began to appreciate the properties of sight by imagining the experience of blindness. This proposal seemed very much in the spirit of Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*, in that it asked students to examine what they were doing in their lives just as Readings challenged people within the university to interrogate their own roles and practices [\[1\]](#).

Another alternative to the contestatory dialectic came out of Irene Winter's paper, "Defining 'Aesthetics' for Non-Western Studies: The Case of the Ancient Near East," in which she challenged scholars to redefine "aesthetics" so that it no longer required the stereotypical eighteenth-century bracketing off of an object from its social fabric [\[2\]](#). Aesthetic objects could be judged in terms of how "fit" they are for their intended purposes, one of which is to become an object of cathection. Winter showed ritual objects from ancient Mesopotamian cultures to illustrate her points, and it was clear even from the slides that these objects were inextricably intertwined with intense use and spiritual significance. An animalistic figurine exuded the aura of having been held; the eyes of the votive statues contained a strong yearning of spiritual seeking. I thought that this could be the key to Winter's new approach to aesthetics: could we consider any art object in terms of its function? This is not to say that all objects have a utilitarian function, but rather that each object lives within a context of culture, social expectation, individual imagination. Even Kant's vase on its pedestal, holding no flowers, performs a ritualistic function within our conventional way of talking about aesthetics, for instance.

So we, and the objects we study, are always already within the matrix of a/our situation; we can begin our inquiry with any detail and key into an entire fabric of information. In fact, we could say that our senses of the objects we study are en-formed by all of this information; text and context are inextricably intertwined. If it is true, however, that the object can lead to the artist, the society, or anything else we might want to know, then how should we talk about that context in which an object comes into being? What epistemological model can let us articulate relationships between art and ideas, or between forms and the in/en-formation that affects them?

Several papers at the conference offered possibilities that transcended the Enlightenment dualism of mind and matter (as represented in the dialectical papers already discussed above). Kobena Mercer, in his study of "Romare Bearden: African-American Modernism at Mid-Century," presented a model of

hyphenation: he discussed Bearden's collages, artistic process, and identity as examples of elaborate juxtapositions of ideas and forms.

Bearden's personal situation as an

African-American-artist-in-a-white-modernist-world, Mercer observed, is hyphenated like his medium: "Montage creates a hyphenated interval between painting and photography." By examining multiple sociopolitical concerns alongside Bearden's artworks, Mercer's paper became an illuminating series of mutually informing juxtapositions, with a New Historicist slant. Two other papers, taken together, represented a phenomenological perspective, and considered how our perceptions (both psychological and sensual) of art objects arise in specific contexts. Philip Fisher, in "Darkness and the Demand for Time in Art," considered the environmental factors that slow us down when we look at artwork. Dark areas of a painting – which "slow down seeing" by forcing the pupil to adjust – were only one of his examples; he was also interested in how museums display artworks in terms of the flow of foot traffic and the architectural setting of each piece. Many contemporary museums, Fisher said, discourage a sense of "engulfment" or contemplation of artworks [3], though some artists challenge this trend by using techniques that work like darkness to create pause in the viewer. Fisher offered the examples of Bill Viola, whose video works require entire rooms and therefore cannot be breezed through so easily, and Jasper Johns, whose use of words in "Land's End" asks the viewer to reread – the harmony of the whole painting is resisted and we must take time to puzzle it through.

While Fisher looked at how and where artworks appear externally, Ivan Gaskell inquired into how we come to them internally, or psychologically. In "Thanks for the Memories: Recollections of Rembrandt's Jeremiah," Gaskell recounted personal stories that a handful of experts in seventeenth-century Dutch painting associate with this famous image. We cannot view the same painting twice, he exhorted us to remember; memory, coalescing with knowledge, creates one's sense of a painting. This "coalescing" (or perhaps bringing the ghosts of our minds back into the picture, so to speak) takes place over many years – Gaskell reminded us "to pay a special kind of attention to art objects over time." He expressed this reminder with a gesture that recalled Fisher's discussion of the contemplative gaze: the single image of Rembrandt's Jeremiah stayed on the screen for a very long time before Gaskell began to speak.

If I were to tell you what it was like to sit in the darkened auditorium, to look at that slide amidst those people and under the structural expectations set up by the conference, I would be engaging in the kind of narration of ordinary visual/haptic experience that W.J.T. Mitchell advocated in the final presentation of the conference. Mitchell decided to switch his topic, from a talk about "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction" to a synthetic discussion of Visual Studies (as a field) and the study of visual culture (as a pursuit)[4]. His stories about using his "Showing

"Seeing" exercise in class grew into a series of refreshingly open-ended musings on new paradigms for talking about the vernacular experience of vision. For instance, could we reconsider Descartes' idea that vision is a form of touch? Could we think about vision as "a cat's cradle of intersubjectivity," in which "'objects' stare back, and vision happens in-between 'subjects'"? (Are objects alive?) Though we have come to accept that our assumptions about what we see are conditioned by culture, to what extent could we imagine that vision is not learned, acculturated, or like a language? (Is vision in any way natural?)

Looking Ahead

If we are always within our multidimensional situations, an attempt to "show seeing" forces us to speak about that matrix, to narrate it from wherever we find ourselves. Mitchell suggested that this complexity could be a defining richness of Visual Studies as a field; Visual Studies could function as Derrida's "dangerous supplement" to more established disciplines such as Art History and Aesthetics. The conference presentations ended, then, with Mitchell's discussion of Visual Studies as it has been figured in the institution. He distributed a handout that contained "Ten Myths about Visual Culture" and "Eight Counter-Theses on Visual Culture [5]." Two of his theses seemed to sum up the conference themes for me:

4. There are no visual media. All media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types.

7. Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision.

The study of art, or of visual experience, must include more than the strictly visual. In some ways this assertion is hardly new; both Art History and Aesthetics have become more politically aware and socially accountable as fields. But Mitchell's theses go further, by suggesting that the model we have adopted so far still holds social and extra-visual considerations separate from the objects at hand. Instead, he suggests, the situation or matrix in which forms arise already has many dimensions, one of which is the social fabric in which our senses and perceptions operate. Our objects also help to in/en-form our ways of thinking and relating to the world in general; we and our objects of contemplation are interdependently in/en-forming.

What are the implications of conceptualizing Visual Studies in this way? Indeed, what are the implications of any of the models for talking about the context in which our objects of study are en-formed? Whether we think and talk about art using a dialectic of contestation, a series of hyphenated juxtapositions, a phenomenological account of sensual experience, or an everyday narration of the vernacular hapsis of living, how we think about

looking influences how and what we see. This, in turn, could ultimately help to structure our classrooms and our institutions. Our models of study determine how we talk to our students and what we talk to them about. They also color the priorities that we pass on when we talk about our visual impressions with our children. In the case of the university, our models can dictate the structures we build to house our fields of study.

This conference asked in particular about the interaction of the three fields of Art History, Aesthetics, and Visual Studies. Is Visual Studies asking Art History and Aesthetics to redefine their methodologies or goals, from within those established disciplines? Or is Visual Studies positioning itself as a reified and stable outside agitator – a grand claim, considering that five years ago, attacks in October were threatening its basic right to exist? Is Visual Studies perhaps asserting itself as a third field with no particular challenge to pose? To answer these questions, I would suggest that we pay attention to how we conceptualize what we're seeing, and then listen closely to how we talk about it. Our methods will reveal the "ghosts" of our assumptions, which already haunt the futures of our fields. I started believing in the power of these conceptual ghosts while watching all the wrestling in Williamstown.

Notes:

[1] Readings' work figured prominently into his colleague Stephen Melville's paper, "Theory, Discipline, and Institution," in which Melville sketched several configurations for "Visual Studies" in relation to other disciplines within typical university structures. In the process, Melville also proposed a useful definition for interdisciplinarity: if a disciplinary approach "cuts" an object out of the context of everything, then in that cutting lies the seeds of the object's connection to other disciplines. We can "shake the walls" of our disciplines by attending to how our objects of study demand, as Mitchell later commented, that we "take a walk across campus" to find out from someone in another department how we can further understand something that supposedly belongs within our own discipline.

[2] Winter proposed to define aesthetics as a field that is "concerned with properties of, investment of, and responses to works of human agency for which skill is required, standards have been applied, and which is done at least in part to elicit visual and emotional affectiveness." Participants scrambled to write it down.

[3] It is interesting to note here that "contemplation" comes from roots "con" (together) and "temp" (time), implying that a contemplative process is simply a matter of spending time together with the object of study.

[4] Mitchell noted that his planned presentation would have been the only paper of the conference accompanied by the latest visual technologies of computerized images and streaming video. Instead, he observed, the most advanced technology was "the nineteenth-century invention of the lantern

slide" – we had even skipped over the early-twentieth-century medium of film.

[5] "Visual Studies," Mitchell noted, is simply a field of study, while "Visual Culture" could describe either a field or the subject matter that the field addressed. The higher level of ambiguity in the second term made it more appealing and richly suggestive, like a word that could function as a noun or a verb.

Recommended Citation:

Karen L. Schiff: [Conference Report of:] Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies (Williamstown, May 4–05, 2001). In: ArtHist.net, May 31, 2001 (accessed Apr 12, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/24500>>.

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