Introduction

“Visual culture” does double service: it is both a partial description of a social world mediated by commodity images and visual technologies, and an academic rubric for interdisciplinary convergences among art history, film theory, media analysis, and cultural studies. Some respondents to our questionnaire focus on the first apparition, the general economy of visual culture, while others concentrate on the second, the discursive relation of visual culture to other disciplines. Of course, the academic discourse may respond to the social phenomenon, but it also has its own imperatives, both theoretical and institutional, which some of the essays work to disclose. Whether one welcomes the notion or dismisses it, visual culture is likely to remain, and this issue of October offers an initial account of its uses and abuses—its premonitions in art history, its affinities with anthropological discourse, its resonances in contemporary art and criticism, and its ramifications for various institutions.

The urgency of the questions raised by visual culture can be gauged by the conflict between theoretical and historical accounts of the phenomenon: the first assumes that this restructuring arises internally as a result of disciplinary and institutional critiques; the second argues that this regrouping is forced—a helpless (or, worse, opportunistic) result of changes in the wider field of political economy. Evidence for the second position arrived in the mail just as this issue was going to press: an announcement from the Guggenheim Museum that its financially threatened SoHo branch was to reopen in June with a “new focus on technology and the arts.” The subhead reads: “Deutsche Telekom to Provide Major Support; ZKM Will Collaborate on Programming.” ZKM is the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, and it is “devoted to the development and application of electronic and media technologies in a cultural context.” Deutsche Telekom is the largest telecommunications company in Europe; also involved in mobile radio and cable television, “it leads the world in the introduction of integrated service digital networks.” For its contributions to the museum, four galleries will be named after Deutsche Telekom and dedicated primarily to multimedia projects.
That cultural institutions, always pressed for money, should seek support from corporate sources is nothing new. But normally such aid is sought for programming set by the institution and deemed a service to its own cultural community—here artists, scholars, and the public interested in art. That the Guggenheim should allow the telecommunications industry to set its agenda, necessarily redefining the nature of art object and public alike as it does so, is yet another example of a restructuring in the interests of an economic imperative into which the efforts of the “avant-garde” might have no choice but to flow. As Deep Throat said to the Watergate reporters: “Follow the money.”

This example of a corporately driven shift toward cybernetic imaging, which a museum will now make in the name of the “avant-garde,” leads October’s editors to consider its own continuing relation to and theorization of the issue of avant-garde practice. For in the very introduction of October to its readership, the original board of editors pondered the fate of the avant-garde, comparing the embattled moment of the mid-seventies to the far more utopian one of the mid-twenties, a utopian promise even then compromised by the forced censorship of parts of Eisenstein’s October. Twenty years later, this editorial is written in the midst of yet another mutation in the avant-garde: a strange crossover between the worlds of artistic production and exhibition and of academic teaching and publishing. Clusters of the professoriat now proclaim themselves an avant-garde, one located, however, within the academy, and indeed many artists and critics, art schools and museums now look to this world for inspiration, theorization, and justification. If visual culture is one fruit of this new “avant-garde,” it becomes an issue highly relevant to our readers, located as they are on both sides of this oddly imbricated divide.

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