1. It has been suggested that the interdisciplinary project of “visual culture” is no longer organized on the model of history (as were the disciplines of art history, architectural history, film history, etc.) but on the model of anthropology. Hence, it is argued by some that visual culture is in an eccentric (even, at times, antagonistic) position with regard to the “new art history” with its social-historical and semiotic imperatives and models of “context” and “text.”

2. It has been suggested that visual culture embraces the same breadth of practice that powered the thinking of an early generation of art historians—such as Riegl and Warburg—and that to return the various medium-based historical disciplines, such as art, architecture, and cinema histories, to this earlier intellectual possibility is vital to their renewal.

3. It has been suggested that the precondition for visual studies as an interdisciplinary rubric is a newly wrought conception of the visual as disembodied image, re-created in the virtual spaces of sign-exchange and phantasmatic projection. Further, if this new paradigm of the image originally developed in the intersection between psychoanalytic and media discourses, it has now assumed a role independent of specific media. As a corollary the suggestion is that visual studies is helping, in its own modest, academic way, to produce subjects for the next stage of globalized capital.

4. It has been suggested that pressure within the academy to shift toward the interdisciplinarity of visual culture, especially in its anthropological dimension, parallels shifts of a similar nature within art, architectural, and film practices.

* This questionnaire was sent to a range of art and architecture historians, film theorists, literary critics, and artists in the winter of 1996. The responses follow.
SVETLANA ALPERS

When, some years back, I put it that I was not studying the history of Dutch painting, but painting as part of Dutch visual culture, I intended something specific. It was to focus on notions about vision (the mechanism of the eye), on image-making devices (the microscope, the camera obscura), and on visual skills (map-making, but also experimenting) as cultural resources related to the practice of painting. This had the additional benefit of granting painters a seriousness that was appropriately visual in nature—treating them as skillful observers and representers instead of as moral preachers.

The term “visual culture” I owed to Michael Baxandall. But my use of the notion was different from his because of the nature of the case. The difference image/text was basic, in both historical and in critical terms, to the enterprise. But I was dealing with a culture in which images, as distinguished from texts, were central to the representation (in the sense of the formulation of knowledge) of the world. I was not only attending to those visual skills particular to Dutch culture, but claiming that in that place and at that time these skills were definitive.

On such an account, visual culture is distinguished from a verbal or textual one. It is a discriminating notion, not an encompassing one. Disciplinary boundaries, like differences between artistic mediums, are a subject of investigation, not of denial.

History of Art, UC Berkeley

EMILY APTER

Jean Baudrillard’s vision of America as a country of lonely screens flickering in a holographic landscape projects consciousness as thoroughly abstracted from its corporal envelope: it is a dream of absolute simulation, depleted sociality, and image disembodiment set in the context of a suburban mirage. The arrival of virtual images and cyber-optics on the scene of disciplinary debates over visual culture seems to be the inevitable extension of this Baudrillardian nightmare.

Though cyber-culture may as yet have no distinctly recognizable form or singular visual style, it does seem to stock its images from the dark side of corporate, computer technoculture, and to have conferred favor on spectral poststructural identities. Mobilizing ghostly, de-realized selves within a dirty realist, sleaze, or pulp tradition (a tradition drawing visually on sci-fi, cartoons, comics, graffiti, porn, fanzines, slash and snuff movies, film noir, flight simulation, surveillance cameras, and technical imaging), cyber operates through a combination of ontological projection and ethical subjection. In this anamorphic picture, boundaries betweenspectatorial ego and image collapse: being and image, depending on the angle or optical investment, morph into each other. Intersubjectivity is replaced by interactivity, and virtue (governed by the delirious ethics of the alibi) is located in the virtual.

New media and the evolving
aesthetics of cybervision call for alternate art-historical formations based on different modes of visual interpretation. Formalist approaches to painting, thematic considerations of typologies and topologies of art, iconology, the social history of art and the history of material artifacts, seem on the surface to have little relevance to visual futurism, whereas discourses in psychoanalysis, gender, race, technology, and global economics seem obviously, if divergently, pertinent.

An obvious question thus emerges: will the oneiric, anamorphic, junk-tech aesthetic of cyber-visuality find a place in the discipline of art history (the field that has historically storehoused, interpreted, and pedigreed visual culture), or will it remain in the academic clearinghouse of cultural studies? For the moment, cultural studies seems to be the site of cyber's web. That said, issues of appraisal, inventory, patronage, provenance, reproduction, authentication, appropriation, copyright, insurance, and censorship—crucial to the practice of art history as it relates to the global art market since time immemorial—may give art history a central role and a different life in cyberspace.

French and Comparative Literature,
UCLA

CAROL ARMSTRONG

One of the things that seems to go with the shift from old disciplinary structures like art history to new interdisciplinary models such as that of visual culture is a predilection for the disembodied image, and with it a distrust of the material dimension of cultural objects, such that to consider, to value, or to pleasure in the materiality of a made object is to exercise the fetishism of the old art history and thereby to submit to the forces of the market, to the policing of the canon, and to the structures of social and sexual domination that go with them. Within this model, paintings and such are to be viewed not as particularized things made for particular historical uses, but as exchanges circulating in some great, boundless, and often curiously ahistorical economy of images, subjects, and other representations.

That within the increasingly cyberspace model of visual studies, "text" is the mother-model for utterances, performances, fashionings, and sign collocations of all kinds is not unrelated to this disembodiment of the cultural object. I sometimes wonder if this is not simply a new face put on the old contempt for material crafting, the surface and the superficial, as well as the old privileging of the verbal register that went with traditional humanist notions of idea or ut pictura poesis, or with the iconographics of the old art history. Certainly it speaks to an indifference to questions of difference—an indifference, even a
hostility, to thinking that there might be any foundational differences between media, kinds of production, or modes of sign, or that those differences might matter to either the producer or the consumer of a given object. A prime example of that would be the notion that the difference between a literary text and a painting is a non-problem: that both are equally representations; that the distinction between verbal signs on a page, produced and taken in a particular temporal fashion, and marks on a thickened material surface, produced and taken in a different fashion, is not worth making, and has no implications of any significance.

While there is much that I take to be advantageous about the model of visual culture, especially if what one wants to give an account of is culture at large rather than particular cultural objects, I find the above propositions to be unfortu- nate on a number of counts. Indeed, in all instances, I think the contrary of what is proposed is true. First, the material dimension of the object is, in my view, at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable. It is, again at least potentially, a pocket of occlusion within the smooth functioning of systems of domination, including the market, hierarchical thought-structures, and subject-positionalities: a glitch in the great worldwide web of images and representations. Second, to subsume material objects within the model of “text” is to discredit and misunder- stand the particular intelligence involved in material facture. And last, I would propose that the differences between kinds of production, be they literary or pictorial, painterly, sculptural, photographic, filmic, or what have you, matter absolutely, that they are the source of whatever particular interest a given object holds and the locus of whatever philosophical work it does, and that to ignore those differences is to submit utterly to the system of exchange and circulation in which any cultural object undeniably participates.

Art History, Graduate Center, CUNY
SUSAN BUCK-MORSS

The production of a discourse of visual culture entails the liquidation of art as we have known it. There is no way within such a discourse for art to sustain a separate existence, not as a practice, not as a phenomenon, not as an experience, not as a discipline. Museums would then need to become double encasings, preserving art objects, and preserving the art-idea. Art history departments would be moved in with archaeology. And what of "artists"? In the recently expired socialist societies, they printed up calling cards with their profession listed confidently after their name and phone number. In recently restructured capitalist societies, they became caught in a dialectical cul-de-sac, attempting to rescue the autonomy of art as a reflective, critical practice by attacking the museum, the very institution that sustains the illusion that art exists. Artists as a social class demand sponsors: the state, private patrons, corporations. Their products enter the market through a dealer-critic system that manipulates value and is mediated by galleries, museums, and private collections. Tomorrow's artists may opt to go underground, much like freemasons of the eighteenth century. They may choose to do their work esoterically, while employed as producers of visual culture.

Their work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience. Our work as critics is to recognize it. Can this be done best, or done at all, within a new interdisciplinary field of visual studies? What would be the episteme, or theoretical frame, of such a field? Twice at Cornell over the past decade we have had meetings to discuss the creation of a visual studies program. Both times, it was painfully clear that institutionalization cannot by itself produce such a frame, and the discussions—among a disparate group of art historians, anthropologists, computer designers, social historians, and scholars of cinema, literature, and architecture—did not coalesce into a program. Still, visual culture has become a presence on campus. It has worked its way into many of the traditional disciplines and lives there in suspended isolation, encapsulated within theoretical bubbles. The psychoanalytic bubble is the biggest, but there are others. One could list a common set of readings, a canon of texts by Barthes, Benjamin, Foucault, Lacan, as well as a precanon of texts by a long list of contemporary writers. Certain themes are standard: the reproduction of the image, the society of the spectacle, envisioning the Other, scopic regimes, the simulacrum, the fetish, the (male) gaze, the machine eye. Today the phrase "visual studies" calls up 202 entries in a keyword search at the Cornell University Libraries. There is a media library, a cinema program, an art museum, a theater arts center, two slide libraries, and a half dozen possessively guarded, department-owned videocassette players. If the theoretical bubbles burst, there remains this infrastructure of technological reproduction. Visual culture, once a foreigner to the academy,
has gotten its green card and is here to stay.

Silent movies at the beginning of the century initiated the utopian idea of a universal language of images, one that could glide over political and ethnic borders, and set to right the Tower of Babel. Action films and MTV at the end of the century have realized this idea in secularized, instrumentalized form, producing subjects for the next stage of global capitalism. In this way, visual culture becomes the concern of the social sciences. “Images in the mind motivate the will,” wrote Benjamin, alluding to the political power of images claimed by Surrealism. But his words could provide the motto as well for the advertising industry, product sponsoring, and political campaigning, whereas today the freedom of expression of artists is defended on formal grounds that stress the virtuality of the representation. The images of art, it is argued, have no effect in the realm of deeds.

A critical analysis of the image as a social object is needed more urgently than a program that legitimates its “culture.” We need to be able to read images emblematically and symptomatically, in terms of the most fundamental questions of social life. This means that critical theories are needed, theories that are themselves visual, that show rather than argue. Such conceptual constellations convince by their power to illuminate the world, bringing to consciousness what was before only dimly perceived, so that it becomes available for critical reflection. I do not understand the description of “anthropological” models and “socio-historical” models as antithetical poles of this theoretical project. Any interpretation worth its salt demands both. It needs to provide a socio-historical and biographical story of origins that estranges the object from us and shows us that its truth is not immediately accessible (the object’s prehistory), and a story of deferred action (its afterhistory) that comes to terms with the potency of the object within our own horizon of concerns.

While the Internet is the topic and the medium for new courses in digital culture, it is striking to anyone who has visited the Internet how visually impoverished a home-page can be. Cyberdigits reproduce the moving image haltingly, and the static image unimpressively. The possibility of computer screens replacing television screens may mean a great deal to stockholders of telephone companies, but it will not shake the world of the visual image. Aesthetic experience (sensory experience) is not reducible to information. Is it old-fashioned to say so? Perhaps the era of images that are more than information is already behind us. Perhaps discussions about visual culture as a field have come too late. It is with nostalgia that we boycott the videostore and insist upon seeing movies on the big screen.

The producers of the visual culture of tomorrow are the camerawomen, video/film editors, city planners, set designers for rock stars, tourism packagers, marketing consultants, political consultants, television
producers, commodity designers, layout persons, and cosmetic surgeons. They are the students who sit in our classes today. What is it they need to know? What will be gained, and by whom, in offering them a program in visual studies?

Government, Cornell University

TOM CONLEY

What you have assembled is cause for both laughter and alarm. I shall try to explain why by moving from point three to points two, one, and four, respectively.

Alarm. The notion that visual culture is based on disembodied images is fraudulent. Images are by definition riddled and stippled with language. Images cannot be disembodied, even if they deny the presence of the languages inhering in them. Without those languages they would fail to be images. Everything we know about dialogue and dialogism, concepts vital to communication, psychogenesis, subjectivity, literature, poetry, and the apprehension of expression in general, depends on the immiscible qualities of image and language. The two are different and exclusive but constitutive of one another. To say, then, that visual studies is producing "subjects for the next stage of globalized capital" is ludicrous. By adhering to the miscibility of image and language we tend to fracture the unity of meaning—a result of the valorization of the one to the detriment the other—that ideology purveys. When we see that language is the welcome other in visual culture, we have at our behest a modest but effective, tactical means of challenging strategies aimed at the globalization of capital.

If, then, we build visual culture on the models of the generation of Riegl and Warburg, we must realize that the return is fraught with a logic
of displacement: what is entailed with the return? a return to law and order? a return to illusions of philological bedrock? to big daddies whose images need to be revered and hated? a recidivism of nostalgia and a love of discipline of yesteryear? The return can be used to displace the past into the present. In other words, the Oedipal model implied by the authority of these figures can be redirected along transverse itineraries. One feels a sense of alarm over the somewhat narrow definitions of culture that accompany the work of these historians, but one takes pleasure in using them as needed, like intellectual socket wrenches, in our critical toolboxes.

*Laughter.* If visual culture is (O black day) abandoning art history, architectural history, political history, film history, literary history, cultural history, universal history, etc., we need only remember how much history constitutes a system of mendacity. We produce fictions of the past in order to deal with what we “would prefer not to” say, meaning that something must remain camouflaged in the present. When in doubt (a) use the subjunctive or (b) historicize! Recourse to anthropology is no panacea, since it remains a discipline built over the nightmares of history: it redeems “man” in view of violence enacted by man. The anthropologist is generally the necrophile tending over cadavers of history. If anthropology is the domain of visual culture, then we can proudly say that it is a discipline.

One of the pleasures that we gain from study of the growth of visual culture within the academy, then, is obtained when we discover that it cannot find a disciplinary place. For that reason its production of analysis constitutes a space, always in process, in a condition of reinvention, that cannot be localized. The attempt to track a pattern (as suggested in point 4) through “art, architectural, and film practices” betrays the mobility of visual culture insofar as it engages motion, the creation of discourse and space, to the detriment of the delimitation of place, the strategy that defines a discipline. Space and movement come with invention, and visual culture is a practice of *wit,* that is, the joy of invention.

Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University
JONATHAN CRARY

Admittedly the words “vision” or “visual” appear in the titles of certain texts I have written and courses I have taught. However, with increasing frequency they are terms that trouble me when I hear them deployed within the expanding visuality industry of conferences, publications, and academic offerings. One of the things I have tried to do in my work is to insist that historical problems about vision are distinct from a history of representational artifacts. No matter how often the two may seem to overlap, they are fundamentally dissimilar projects. Therefore I don’t have much interest in a visual studies if it is simply an enlarging or updating of traditional categories of imagery, if it is a staking out of some new cafeteria of contemporary media products and mass-cultural objects as a field of inquiry. I don’t know if this in fact is being done anywhere, but it is certainly easy to imagine it happening. A persistent temptation is to maintain the fiction of a continuous historical space in which all images are assumed to have some primary visual values. This in turn allows the (sometimes covert) preservation of a detached and contemplative observer and the conducting of business as usual.

Perhaps more importantly, I would be skeptical of any undertakings that set up vision in such a way that it became an autonomous or self-justifying problem. Like some others responding to these questions, I have tried to show how vision is never separable from larger historical questions about the construction of subjectivity. Especially within twentieth-century modernity, vision is only one layer of a body that can be shaped or managed by a range of external institutions and techniques, and it is also only one part of a body capable of inventing new forms, intensities, and strategies of living. Thus any critical enterprise or new academic precinct (regardless of its label) that privileges the category of visuality is misguided unless it is relentlessly critical of the very processes of specialization, separation, and abstraction that have allowed the notion of visuality to become the intellectually available concept that it is today. So much of what seems to constitute a domain of the visual is an effect of other kinds of forces and relations of power.

If there has been a recent emergence of visual studies, it is, in part, because of the collapse of certain enduring assumptions about the status of a spectator. Like so many subareas of the human sciences, a discipline built around the idea of the gaze takes on a practical existence at the moment of the disintegration and dispersal of its purported object. This turn is something neither to lament nor celebrate, but it is nonetheless crucial to understand the conditions that have brought about such a shift. To the disappointment of some (and to the bafflement of those bored with typographic culture), the analysis of those conditions would not
THOMAS CROW

One can find a concrete analogy to the prospect before us by going into a mass-market bookstore and seeking out what typically passes for a philosophy section. While there might be the odd paperback of Plato's dialogues on the shelf, the bulk of the section will be occupied by books on New Age healing of soul and body, mystical prophecy, and past-lives experiences. Large numbers of people, with no access to the rigorous modes of academic philosophy, resort to these books in order to grapple with the same fundamental questions of existence broached in the forlorn volume of Plato. On the analogy with visual culture, this array would represent the new curriculum in the philosophy department—perhaps renamed Psychic Studies or Mental Culture.

The bookseller's category of convenience makes sense from a certain point of view, but no committed philosopher would entertain it for a moment, seeing in it the death of a discipline of thought. To surrender that discipline to a misguided populist impulse would universally be regarded as the abrogation of a fundamental responsibility.

This comparison between philosophy and art history is not meant to cast art in an exclusively abstract and recondite mold; philosophy after all has its own unpredictably literary, sensual, and anarchic characteristics—hence the great, if contested, prestige of Nietzsche, Derrida, and
Deleuze. Those qualities do not, however, undermine that discipline's confidence in its core concerns, while art history currently finds its integrity as a field of inquiry under siege.

The difference between the conditions of the two disciplines stems in part from the fact that practitioners of philosophy largely concern themselves with other philosophers. The attention of art historians, by contrast, is fundamentally divided between their fellow researchers and the artists who create the knowledge waiting to be unlocked. Complaints about a restrictive canon in the discipline would be stronger if they did not invariably dwell upon the noncognitive investments of scholars, critics, and museum curators as fashioners of taste. In so doing, they denigrate the vital cognitive interests shown by artists in works that came before them. The practical history of art is in large part a history of selection and relative valuation within a remarkably persistent professional tradition, as succeeding artistic communities choose, discard, and transform the components of an inherited repertoire. Like Fermat's last theorem to a mathematician of the 1990s, some of these compelling precedents can remain dormant but alive for centuries, only to find some resolution through means unknown at the time of their original formulation.

The complex, evolving criteria generated by this activity have come to constitute the self-conscious discipline of fine art in the West, which has been and remains in a category apart from the wider realm of visual communication in all of its manifold forms. One of the most consistent among these criteria has been a mistrust of visual experience as providing an adequate basis for art. Advanced art has always been mapped along a number of cognitive axes, its affinities and differences with other images being just one of these—and not necessarily the strongest. Commonalities with rhetoric, poetics, theology, or the abstractions of natural science could as readily be essential to a satisfactory artistic statement—for these disciplines could not be reduced to a linguistic medium any more than art could be reduced to an optical one.

As a postmodern blueprint for the emancipation of art history, the new rubric of visual culture contains a large and unexamined paradox: it accepts without question the view that art is to be defined by its working exclusively through the optical faculties. This was of course the most cherished assumption of high modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, which constructed its canon around the notion of opticality: as art progressively refined itself, the value of a work more and more lay in the coherence of the fiction offered to the eye alone. Terms like visual culture and visual studies offer a vast vertical integration of study, extending from the esoteric products of fine-art traditions to handbills and horror videos, but they perpetuate the horizontal narrowness entailed in modernism's fetish of visuality. Their corollary in the substitution of a "history of images" for a "history of
"art" likewise perpetuates the modernist obsession with the abstract state of illusion, with virtual effects at the expense of literal facts.1

Preoccupation with the optical entails a failure to recognize that painting in particular achieved its high degree of self-consciousness in Western culture by virtue of antagonism toward its own visuality. On this point Conceptual artists have been more acute diagnosticians than were the modernist critics—and a visual-culture approach will in turn yield little or no understanding of Conceptualism. To surrender a history of art to a history of images will indeed mean a de-skilling of interpretation, an inevitable misrecognition and misrepresentation of one realm of profound human endeavor.

This is not to say that a curriculum in art history should cease to embrace regions and periods untouched by these particular codes of practice and value. Some, like China, possess alternative traditions of aesthetic self-reflection more ancient in their refinement than anything available from Europe. (I might add, in a self-interested note, that the Sussex curriculum in history of art is now built around the comparative study of East and West.) Close attention to another tradition of fine or high art, examination of its affinities and tensions with the broadest range of symbolic objects produced alongside it, may be the most powerful means to expose the contingent character of parallel arrangements closer to home. Even where such clear parallels are absent, a panicky, hastily considered substitution of image history for art history can only have the effect of ironing out differences and pulling all the objects of the world into a muddle of Western devising.

Art History,
Yale University

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TOM GUNNING

A major concern of this series of questions revolves around the place a new field of visual studies might have within the academy. It is unclear whether this focus derives from a concern about pedagogy, possible careers, or a critique of the institutional motivations behind apparently spontaneous intellectual currents. As a historian, I believe the last concern is always vital, and as an academic I acknowledge that the first two are inevitable and hard to distinguish from each other. However, I also feel they are of limited interest. Clearly academic policies derive from a variety of motives—from the disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense to the marking off of turfs known as academic disciplines. I can only say that as someone who makes his living in the academy, I approach both with suspicion and with the (possibly self-deluding) belief that I can uncover those gaps in the system which elude the announced purposes of reproducing established relations of power or that spice up academic offerings with the appearance of novelty.

There is no question that any paradigm of a field of study can serve the needs of “the next stage of globalized capital.” However, the belief that a paradigm such as visual studies can simply turn out obedient subjects returns us to the most dubious models of all-powerful ideological apparatuses within which the only possibility available to subjects is remaining in helpless thrall to a fully conscious and conspiratorial system of subjection. In film studies particularly, the embarrassment and discomfort exhibited by film theorists in the 1970s about the visual fascination of the medium led to a model in which a panoply of visual means could only serve purposes of deception, illusion, and phantasmatic satisfaction. While this model provided great insights into one possible metapsychology of the spectator, it also eliminated from the encounter with visual culture the play of history, gender, race, as well as the purely ludic play of visual pleasure (other than as a snare to further enthrallment). What a historical approach to cinema’s place within visual culture has enabled a new generation of scholars to discover is not necessarily a beneficent realm of visual delight, but a varied playing field in which contests for power involve a variety of interests whose dangers, tyrannies, and threats interact with liberations, utopian possibilities, and adventures of perception. In other words, a historical and political approach to visual studies (at least from the perspective of film studies) departs from identifying oppression in terms of specific media or even broad practices (such as visual narratives in film, television, or photography), and pursues oppression and liberation within actual practices and situations in which these media or practices are deployed, including the transformative potentials of an active spectator reception.

I therefore feel that visual studies/culture cannot depart from the specific narratives of contesting
powers and transformation that a historical approach allows. Nor do I think it can jettison the concepts of text and context, except insofar as these have become ossified concepts implying clichéd practices and methods. If the text is understood as the site of contest, understood in terms of the institutions that produce and contain it, and the acts of reception that interpret and use it, then it remains the area in which the richest unfolding of the complexity of visual culture can take place. Although anthropological methods and concepts of culture that erode barriers between everyday structures of experience and aesthetic domains can be extremely useful in this opening of the text, I remain as suspicious of the power relations and reifications possible in the concept of ethnographical research as I would be of the master narratives of traditional historical methods. These suspicions are, of course, central to many current rethinkings of anthropology, so the relation of visual studies to anthropology would need to be clarified in terms of what anthropological models are being invoked. However, I do not feel that visual studies needs to disavow a relation to historical and text-based investigations.

While suspicion about any innovations within the academy is always necessary (who benefits from such innovations within established power structures?), I do believe that this new paradigm carries the possibility of renewal and transformation. I believe its vital possibilities primarily lie in opening up a range of phenomena for investigation that have previously fallen in the cracks between disciplines. While I believe that visual studies as a field probably has relevance to a range of historical periods, my own work on the late nineteenth and the twentieth century has revealed to me its crucial role in understanding transformations in politics, aesthetics, and daily life over the past two centuries. This period involves interactions between new forms of nonverbal (or, rather, not primarily verbal) rhetoric that have gained prominence in the modern era, especially through the conjunctions of mechanical reproduction, technologically aided perception and communication, and the expansion of a base of consumers that mark mass culture.

Visual studies, therefore, should become more than an interdisciplinary intersection. Assumptions about the separation of the methods of aesthetics and social and political analysis, high art and popular culture, and the borders between media are strongly challenged by an investigation of the range of modes and techniques of visual address that we can find in the last two centuries. While I am not claiming a series of unified epistememes that can be discovered underlying an extensive range of media and contexts, I do think that visual studies will allow us to trace relations previously obscure or ignored. For instance, tracing the use of color around the turn of the last century as it became part of a larger consumer culture through
advertising, early films, book illustrations, the tinting of still photographs, comic strips, consumer packaging, fashion, styles and technology of lighting, as well as traditional arts of architecture, design, and painting, would reveal a great deal about the marshaling of sensual experience for a variety of purposes in that period.

Finally, I am concerned that the greatest limitation visual studies might occasion would be reifying a division of the senses. Although the claim is frequently made that the modern era exists under the hegemony of the visual, I feel this has rarely been interrogated historically. In the late modern period the role of the technological recording and amplification of sound has not only played an enormous role in transforming experience, but has often preceded and even modeled visual experience (for instance, Edison’s first caveat for the invention of the motion picture announced he was working on an invention that would do for the eye what his previous invention, the phonograph, had done for the ear). If the renewal offered by visual studies derives from the possibility of breaking down artificial academic barriers, one must guard against erecting new ones. A field based on broad cultural and historical description of the transformation of experience could renew discussion of aesthetics, politics, and theory beyond the simple shuffling of titles and personnel (and funding!) within academic institutions.

Radio, Television, and Film, Northwestern University

MICHAEL ANN HOLLY

A reading is a rhetorical act within a huge cultural debate; it is a matter of taking sides.

Lentricchia and McLaughlin, Critical Terms for Literary Study

The eleventh-century sculpted tympanum at the pilgrimage church of Conques confidently divides the world into halves. Beneath the austere icon of Christ enthroned inside a mandorla haloed by clouds (a convention suggesting his removal from both mortal time and geographic place), the kingdom-to-come splits diagrammatically into heaven and hell. Raising his right hand in blessing over the chubby, predominantly male saints who nestle cozily two-by-two under the orderly arches of heaven (looking both a little bored and considerably more self-assured), the judging Christ simultaneously lowers his left hand to gesture toward the terrible fate of the unredeemed. In a tumultuous cacophony of torment, figures of both sexes and all walks of life are beaten and eaten alive by rapacious monsters, plunged upside down into the flames of hell, and strung up by demons so fantastic that they all end up being much more engaging to dwell upon than their complacent counterparts on the other side of the divide.

This parable might be less apocalyptically appropriated to picture the division between the terms “art history” and “visual culture” as they stake out their semantic territory under the
auratic work of art at the end of this millennium. Of course this is an unfor-
givable exaggeration of the state of affairs; it is not simply a matter of
choosing trendy cultural criticism over sound art-historical scholarship. If it
were not for empirical investigations into iconography, style, provenance,
and all the other standard art-historical research protocols, the kinds of inter-
pretive exercises generated by a variety of critical perspectives (the
litany is as familiar as the catechism: gender studies, Marxism, semiotics,
deconstruction, new historicism, and so on) might possess little secure his-
torical information with which to go to work. But it is the manifest certitude
of those anointed fellows in heaven that unsettles, which is another way of
saying that the division between the two is as much the result of a differ-
ence in intellectual attitude as it is a contested field of study. Their commu-
nal quietude seems to suggest that once something is accomplished (a
dating, a monograph written, a lost master assigned, an iconographic
conundrum unraveled), the work of visual analysis has achieved a kind of
professional apotheosis. And to prove it “they” (granted, a hyperbolic
abstraction) need only themselves gestu-
ture toward the alternative across the
way. The disorder and fragmentation
of contemporary approaches (call it
the “new” art history, critical theory,
styles in visual culture, or whatever)
is something those saintly souls can
afford to fault.

The claim that closing down
meaning merits more sanctification
than opening it up to disarray is
something I would like to argue
against here. Ironically, I do not even
think that those canonized “giants” of
the field in whom the beatified locate
their epistemological ancestry—
Panofsky, Riegl, Warburg, Dvorak,
Wölflin, among so many others—
necessarily thought so either. And we
could certainly find many of their
overtly theoretical essays to confirm
it (and, I admit, also many words to
prove the opposite), but that is pre-
cisely where the energy of art history
as a broad field of intellectual inquiry
in its early days came from. To a per-
son, all those Kunstwissenschaft thinkers
were involved with principles of inter-
pretation to one degree or another,
and never regarded theorizing as
something extrinsic to the study of art
as art. It was never enough just to
find things out; taking that historical
material and putting it into some
interpretive, critical framework is
what made the discipline once-upon-
a-time so alluring to thinkers from a
wide variety of fields.

Until recently, all art historians
would have to acknowledge, visual
theory tended to be generated more
often than not by outsiders. Nothing
really resides in a name, of course, but
calling this fractious poststructuralist
attention to visual representation a
study in visual culture rather than
sedating it under the rubric of art his-
tory at least has the potential to
restore the images to that lively episte-
omological locale where the debates
began at the turn of the last century.

What does visual culture study? Not objects, but subjects—subjects
captured in congeries of cultural mean-
ings. In an ideal world, the route through this tumult should be overtly acknowledged by the critic: what does he or she want to know and why? Like the lacertine pattern on the carpet page from a medieval gospel book, lines of investigation crisscross and double back on one another. Hypotheses are ventured, conclusions are never anything but tentative. Any totalizing metanarrative that manages to account for all the evidence is held in deep suspicion, primarily for the reason that it has been articulated from a particular (that is to say, inevitably ideological) point of view. And the “work of art” itself (of course the range of what counts here has been enormously expanded into any visual representation) has as much a role to play in the production of the circulation of meanings as does the critic or historian who tries to get it to speak.

What I am saying is that there is a way to make “still” art (not just a nineteenth-century photograph, or a twentieth-century found object, for example, but also a Baroque painting, say, or an Egyptian tomb sculpture) still matter by engaging it in ever-new questions about its motives, its creators, its intended audience, its complicit role in power structures, and so on. To display it in a museum as a masterpiece, to locate it historically, or to seal its meaning shut by figuring out its iconography, is not to encourage it to continue to make meaning—or for us as critics to challenge that meaning—in the present. In short, what we need to do is preserve the chaos of contemporary theory, as Jonathan Culler has put it, if we aim to produce new knowledge rather than just to engage in the reproduction of the old—the transmission of a certain hegemonic cultural heritage.1

As Michel Serres has pointed out, history writing is not history; it is neither the whole nor everything that remains of the past. The notion of “culture” on the other hand—even as it was employed in the nineteenth century by Burckhardt, Hegel, and others—offers conceptual room for mapping conflict, struggle, disarray. Art history writing has traditionally constrained us to think in terms of linear time, because time, like the arches of heaven, appears to offer us the reassurance of a regularized and harmonic aesthetic. Representing times past instead through the chaos of overlapping and contested spaces provides the opportunity for undermining that confidence.2

What those of us who study visual representations need right now—if we are going to continue to produce new and unsettling questions rather than just tacitly reproduce canonized knowledge—is the disorderliness of spaces in conflict, the mayhem of the unknown, even if the resulting intellectual fricas sometimes feels like hell.

Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies,
Art and Art History,
University of Rochester

Visual Culture and Its Vicissitudes

MARTIN JAY

Culture, as Raymond Williams pointed out in *Keywords*, is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” It has become one of the most contested, as the metastatic expansion of “cultural studies” in the past decade or so has overwhelmed one field of the humanities and social sciences after another. Although residues of its once elitist connotations—conventionally identified as “Arnoldian,” although evident as early as the eighteenth-century German defense of *Kultur* against French and English *Zivilisation*—can still occasionally be discerned, it is the more anthropological usage of “culture” as a “whole way of life” that informs the new frenzy. Along with “subculture” and “multicultural,” “culture” has become one of the most talismanic terms of our day, filling the gap left behind when “theory” came into increasingly bad odor in the 1980s.

It was only a matter of time before the disciplines associated with visual experience were caught up in the excitement, and art history, film studies, architectural history, the history of photography, even the incipient study of virtual reality came to be subsumed under the umbrella rubric “visual culture.” Going beyond the “rhetoric of images” that W. J. T. Mitchell dubbed “iconology” only a few years ago, the proponents of visual culture have extended its range to include all manifestations of optical experience, all variants of visual practice.

From a certain point of view, that of the guardians of traditional notions of visual literacy and the purity of the aesthetic, the change is fraught with danger. Interlopers with no sustained training in how to analyze and interpret images have become empowered to pronounce on the workings of the “gaze,” the “spectacle,” “surveillance,” “scopic regimes,” and the like. Gleefully embracing the anthropological premise that cultural meaning can reside anywhere, they have collapsed hierarchical distinctions, promoted a visual version of promiscuous intertextuality, and ridiculed the assertions of value that had informed “culture” when it was primarily an elitist term. Following Foucault, Bourdieu, and the new historicists, they have sought to uncover the complicity between power and images, or conversely probed the ways in which visual experience can resist, transgress, and contest the status quo.

Anything that can imprint itself on the retina has seemed fair game for the new paradigm, which prides itself on its democratic inclusivity. Even the nonretinal “optical unconscious” is now available for investigation. With the added availability of what has been called “cultural materialism” to legitimate the investigation of the technologies and institutions of image production, dissemination, and consumption, whatever cachet once attached to the interpretation and appreciation of a certain privileged canon of images has been almost entirely exhausted. Or if it is retained, it is often in a context of parodic
recontextualization which mocks traditional notions of “high” and “low.” In film studies, the same dynamic saw the “filmic fact,” to borrow Gilbert Cohen-Seat’s terminology for what occurs on the screen, subsumed under the “cinematic fact,” which includes the entire ideological “apparatus” surrounding it.

It is not surprising that so sweeping an onslaught has been met with resistance, at least on the part of those whose credentials are now apparently less valuable than before. A comparable reaction had taken place in textually based disciplines when cultural studies roared into prominence there. The argument was often heard that the linguistic specificity of different literatures was in danger of being forgotten as a paradoxically universal method of cultural analysis—say structuralism, semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or deconstruction—was employed no matter the context or the period. “Literature in translation” was the dubious model of how to increase enrollments by offering general culture courses, rather than ones dealing with original texts of a certain pedigree alone. Similarly, in musicology, those beholden to a structural analysis of the immanent workings of music as an autonomous art have sought to keep at bay its increasing incorporation into a much wider context, defined in ethnomusicological or popular musical terms and requiring little or no musical training. The battle over supertitles at the opera mobilizes some of the same anxieties.

In art history, the older warnings of scholars like Gombrich against an allegedly “Hegelian” faith in a coherent Zeitgeist faithfully reflected by images have been revived by those wary of the dissolution of their field into cultural studies. The ways in which images, especially those deliberately fashioned in the service of an aesthetic ideal, convey meaning cannot so easily be reduced, they argue, to the ways in which texts or other cultural practices signify. What is irreducibly “visual” about visual culture, whose ultimate source may be as much somatic and perceptual as cultural, threatens to be effaced, as does the specificity of the aesthetic itself. An anthropological culture concept, it is also feared, brings with it an indifference to historical change, preferring to discern the same cluster of signifying mechanisms no matter the context, in the way that structuralism during its heyday sought universal patterns across many different divides. As in other disciplines, such as history, where a renewed cry for “bringing the state back in” urges a return to the foregrounding of politics rather than culture, resistance to the imperialism of the culture concept is now in the air in visual studies as well.

As one of the admitted interlopers who has strayed into this new territory and finds himself in the unexpected position of being asked to have opinions about visual phenomena on which he should modestly remain silent, I can recognize the force of both positions. Although I would not have been asked to contribute to this symposium if the expansion of visual studies had
not allowed the inclusion of intellectual historians interested in discourses about visuality, I have long resisted the pseudopopulist leveling of all cultural values, which in my own discipline threatened to replace the history of ideas with the history of meaning broadly understood. There is something troubling about a movement that purports to respect cultural differences and yet operates to de-differentiate all of them within a specific culture when they entail hierarchies of value. There is also something unconvincing about the assumption that cultures can be isolated and studied as if they were watertight entities, entirely immanent, with no overlap with other cultures or internal contradictions of their own. One need not be a card-carrying systems theorist to recognize that cultural systems, like all others, contain their own moments of blindness, their own internal transcendences, which break through their borders and disturb their self-sufficiency. Whether we call them “society,” “nature,” “the body,” “the psyche,” or some other opposing term, any concept of culture needs its negations to make it meaningful. Acknowledging this necessity prevents us from assuming it can ever be “culture all the way down.”

And yet, there is one final consideration that makes it impossible to return to the status quo before the rise of cultural studies. It is no longer possible to cling defensively to a belief in the irreducible specificity of the visual art that art history traditionally studied in isolation from its larger context. For within what has called itself art in the twentieth century has come the imperative to question its essentiality and efface its putative boundaries. The widely remarked crisis of the institution of art, affecting everything from art objects to museums to the politics of the art market, has meant that the pressure to dissolve art history into visual culture has been as much internal as external, arising from changes within “art” itself and not merely resulting from the importation of cultural models from other disciplines. Simply put, there can be no going back to the earlier differentiation between visual object and context, because it has ceased to define and demarcate the object of inquiry in the history of art itself. Those who feel the temptation to reach for their revolver when they hear the term “visual culture” will discover as a result that it can only shoot blanks. However imprecise and inadequate the anthropological concept of visual culture may itself be, it is clearly here to stay.

History,

UC Berkeley
THOMAS DACOSTA KAUFMANN

While “visual culture” obviously has other antecedents, I would trace the origins of the concept to the work of Michael Baxandall and, more precisely, to 1972. In that year Baxandall published his influential *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. At the time, he was teaching at the Warburg Institute, so that the connection to Warburg suggested in the questionnaire is pertinent. A reminder: In the 1970s, over forty years after Warburg’s death, his institute for *Kulturwissenschaft* was still functioning as a place for study and instruction in cultural history. These tasks necessarily involved an approach that is now called interdisciplinary.

The interdisciplinary aspect of his approach is obvious in Baxandall’s book, for *Painting and Experience* addresses itself to social history, but suggests it will not be “vacuous” for art history. Moreover, in that Baxandall introduces the concept of “the period eye,” and relates it to broader aspects of culture, he seems to be making certain suggestions about synchronicity as well as history. This too is in accord with the far-reaching approach of Warburg, who also brought to bear on various questions all sorts of contemporaneous materials from the cultures he was studying.

In addition, 1972 is the year in which Svetlana Alpers, who is also involved in the dissemination of the notion of visual culture, first (I believe) used the words the “new art history” in print. Alpers’s work inter-twines with Baxandall’s in many ways (most simply, they have written a book on Tiepolo together). While Baxandall does not use the words “visual culture” in *Painting and Experience* (as far as I can find), he does establish some of the bases for its use in the new art history and new historicism developed at the University of California, Berkeley, to which Baxandall and Alpers (as well as Stephen Greenblatt, her co-editor of *Representations* and author of new historicism fame) have long been connected.

Baxandall called his book on Italy a “pot-boiler.” While one may take this statement as characteristically self-deprecating and diffident, or just in line with the at times involuted character of his writing, it is also linked to a subsequent work, Baxandall’s highly regarded *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), a book he was preparing while writing *Painting and Experience*. I think Baxandall would consider *Limewood Sculptors* a major accomplishment; certainly it includes his most complete apparatus that announces itself as a contribution to art history. While “period eye” is the sort of term Baxandall uses, certain locutions, such as his choice of the word “demotic,” suggest his approximation to visual culture.

Baxandall’s books provide some of the immediate context for Alpers’s own *The Art of Describing* (1983). In this book Alpers specifically acknowledges that she has taken the term “visual culture” from Baxandall. Alpers also acknowledges the Warburg Institute as a home away from home, and the importance for her of E. H.
Gombrich, its former director. Her vision of Dutch visual culture also depends, she says, on Riegl, so that name, invoked by *October*, is relevant here as well. Regardless of its relation to other works and thinkers, *The Art of Describing* is essential for the discussion of visual culture in art history, for it is in this book that Alpers specifically employs and develops the term.

Although the concept of visual culture is nowhere explicitly defined in their work, it has, perhaps also for that reason, had an immense impact. The influence of Baxandall’s and Alpers’s formulation of “northern visual culture” is found most obviously in the work of her former pupils, such as Walter Melion, Celeste Brusati, and in a more complicated manner, Joseph Leo Koerner. But the idea has become widely current; many other writings can be related to the same source of inspiration. Visual culture seems to have been taken up even by writers (like W. J. T. Mitchell) who have not been entirely aware of its origins, and put to productive use. The notion has provided a way of talking about visual phenomena that has proved appealing both to art historians interested in relating objects more broadly to society and culture, and to critics and historians in other fields.

While the notion of visual culture has undoubtedly proved stimulating, there are several issues that deserve further consideration, and even critique. While such ideas are often trumpeted as new, progressive, or advanced in comparison with “traditional art history,” there are specific aspects of their supposed innovation that may be questioned. The work of such earlier scholars as Warburg or Riegl not only produced new ways of looking at art, and new methods of thinking, but reclaimed areas of the past for scholarship and for the public. Unlike other recent approaches, such as those informed by feminism, much of the established canon, and established interpretations, have not been touched by these particular discussions of visual culture. (This observation applies both to Dutch art—Alpers herself has subsequently written about Rembrandt, and in *The Art of Describing* recalls the eighteenth-century critic Reynolds—and to German sculpture—where Baxandall not only takes over the established canon, but cites the views of scholars such as the early twentieth-century nationalist Georg Dehio, whereby this canon is justified.)

On the other hand, interpretive strategies produced by this new work have not often led to new empirical discoveries. Indeed, as seems characteristic of much recent work, they

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1. Here I do not mean to contest again the specific theses that Alpers and Baxandall have presented, and the price that may have been paid for the insights that they have brought. The first I have commented upon along with Anthony Grafton in “Holland without Huizinga,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1986); the second, more extensively by presenting corrective and different interpretations, in my recent *Court, Cloister and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

often simply take over the results of others’ investigations. As Eberhard Koenig pointed out in a little-known review of Baxandall’s limewood sculpture book (in the Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte), if methods are so thoroughly new as to cause a rethinking about art, then the basic material upon which they build, and which they survey, should also be categorized or treated in a different manner. Thus, even issues as supposedly rudimentary, and concerns now disparaged, as attribution of sculptures and stylistic filiation might have to be reconsidered. But this has not often been the case. When, however, some of Baxandall’s own methods of analysis are applied to the works that he uses to support his theses, the authorship of the individual works that he has accepted from earlier scholarship, and hence some of his story, is called into question.

This sort of discrepancy between theory and practice in the treatment of the objects of visual culture seems symptomatic of certain aspects of the “new art history” (not so new now). Claims recur—no doubt they will be voiced in this issue as well—about a division between a higher and a lower form of art history, the former informed by theory, the latter traditional or empirical. This sort of claim is also hardly new. It repeats a distinction already made by thinkers during the eighteenth century—ironically, one might say, since the Enlightenment is a period hardly in favor with many of those who now make such arguments—between philosophy, what is now called critical theory, and erudition, the latter being at best necessary, but inferior. It is found explicitly in the writings of Hans Sedlmayr, who also distinguished between two kinds of art history, although, unlike some recent critics, he argued expressly that they were necessarily interconnected. Much as this old opinion has again become modish in the English-speaking world, I believe that it makes an untenable distinction.

Sedlmayr is also worth calling to account for the issue of visual culture. First, it seems no accident that Baxandall studied with him in Munich. Sedlmayr’s “structural analysis” of the 1920s and 1930s seems, like the work of Otto Pächt, with whom Sedlmayr was closely associated at the time, a forerunner of the notion of visual culture (Pächt is indeed specifically acknowledged by Alpers). In an account of American “new art history” in the most recent issue of the Polish journal Artium Questiones, Mariusz Bryl also proposes Sedlmayr’s approach as a solution to some current problems of discussion, although, as suggested here, he is not entirely correct in finding Sedlmayr absent in the origins of recent Anglo-Saxon thinking.

Bryl presents the “new art history” in relation to the “culture wars,” or American academic politics, as something on the left. It is usual to see supposedly new approaches as politically progressive. In this context the antihumanist and anti-Enlightenment tendencies to be associated with the corporative generalities of visual culture would be linked with Foucault, and with Adorno and Horkheimer.
Certainly those who use such terms have found “visual culture” a way of liberating discussion of art, and of opening it up onto society and culture. I also do not think that they would regard themselves as belonging to the political right.

But I wonder if it should not give us pause that there exists another similar antihumanist and anti-Enlightenment (as well as antidemocratic) attitude that can rather be associated with the political right. Such are the views of the National Socialist, and later (as expressed in Verlust der Mitte, written in 1945 before the end of the war!) reactionary antimodernist Sedlmayr. Sedlmayr provides a much different context for visual culture than does the tradition of Warburg, one that represents a reformulation of some of Riegl’s views: we may read Gombrich’s repeated critiques of the writing of Sedlmayr and his pupils on this. Visual culture may suggest to some notions of visual mentalité. But more darkly, echoes of Volksgeist seem to me unmistakable, even if unintended, in discussions of national visual culture.

The questions that visual culture raises are difficult ones with which I (in thinking and writing about Central Europe) have long been engaged: even where I disagree, I am grateful for the stimulation provided.

Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

SILVIA KOLBOWSKI

One way to respond to questions about the desirableness of visual studies as an interpretive and academic methodology is to look at the complex metamorphoses of the objects of address. On the one hand, it seems moot to question the validity of these methodologies, since they correspond in part to what seem to be inexorable changes in these objects. Whether one supports shifts implied by a culture of postdisciplinarity or whether one digs one’s heels in to resist such changes, they will continue at an ever-accelerating pace. What should be in question is the progressivist assumption, common to some of the approaches of this methodology, that the loss or blurring of boundaries is always socially progressive.

While, for example, the episodic return of certain regressive aesthetic practices will persist, as always, art may never again claim or aspire to occupy an autonomous category. The erosion of this category might well mean the end of art. While art will continue to circulate through the market networks of surplus-value, it may have little to do with what art is transformed into by various contingencies (just as the current stock market has little to do with the state of the American economy). Will the cultural desire for art survive artistic and institutional attempts to camouflage it into any number of other disciplines? Maybe not. But whether one mourns this death or not, it is
crucial for art historians and cultural critics to theorize the conditions that are shaping these changes. To do so will involve understanding art’s disciplinary history, as well as the diffuse network of practices and social institutions that have acted to stretch the historical limits of art to a breaking point. Whatever label is applied, any methodology that does not take into account the specificity of art history in its various modes, or that does not seek to view objects and aesthetic practices through a historical disciplinary lens, will most likely succumb to superficiality, at best.

Whether the unique yet always contingent capacity of art to occupy positions in the culture unlike that of any other practice will be supplanted by socially significant hybrid practices or whether the changes foretell an unfortunate flattening of currently irreconcilable social fields is unknowable. Interpretive and analytical practices will have to transform themselves in relation to such questions. Suffice it to say the “advances” in technology alone have made the sustaining of categorical boundaries impossible. The differences between art and commerce and discourse and data on the Internet, for example, are negligible. Is this bad? Probably not for women artists who have always had to bend backward to accommodate themselves to the demands of the artistic persona, as attached as it is to certain masculinist presumptions and ideas of desirability.

On the other hand, it is possible to say that visual studies or relevant changes in aesthetic practices are “helping . . . to produce subjects for the next stage of globalized capital.” The current movie Babe might be seen as an allegory of this situation. Ostensibly a fable about an idyllic farm in which some animals attempt to transgress the limits of their species, Babe is a huge hit within the adult and juvenile mass market overlapping into some intellectual circles. I enjoyed it immensely on first viewing. “He should accept who he is and be thankful for it,” the old sheepdog patriarch intones, unable to keep up with the antics of errant farm animals trying to save themselves from the dinner table by making themselves useful—the piglet Babe is urged by his sheepdog stepmother to develop his gift for herding and protecting sheep; the duck tries to supplant the rooster by crowing at daybreak. A pig is a dog; a duck is a rooster. Old rivalries between species disappear. It’s a post-species world! It is a story enjoyable for its theme of inclusivity in a xenophobic culture, but the question is whether this story has aroused such passion and affection in a huge audience because it is also a story of surviving in a world where human beings are product, and reinventing oneself is a necessary and desperate response to downsizing and the exploitation of cheap labor. It’s a post-benefits world!

The reinvention of aesthetic practices, particularly in the inter- or postdisciplinary ways that attempt to make art “useful,” have to be analyzed without a rush to celebration. But this does not mean that old categories
should be supported without questioning their cultural assumptions. Without undermining some of the more socially progressive effects of postdisciplinarity, can or should we understand the “anthropological” model of aesthetic practices as separate from *Babe*? And what methodologies will address these concerns?

SYLVIA LAVIN

At a first glance framed by architecture, the development of studies in visual culture could only be considered a welcome if belated arrival. Architecture has, since antiquity—not to mention within the more recent context of modern institutions of scholarship—encountered difficulties in finding a secure place in art-historical and theoretical discourses. As if in prolonged imitation of the classical categorization of the arts, which contained architecture within the lower status of mechanical and illiberal activities, architecture continues to be ancillary to those disciplines and institutions that have acquired greater academic and cultural status. Thus, architecture is generally a lost soul in departments of art history, architectural theory often derided for being practiced by architects rather than by people with “proper” intellectual credentials, and is frequently but a footnote in larger discussions about the arts, even those organized by publications such as *October*. From this historical point of view, then, the inter- or even antidisciplinary framework of visual culture would seem to provide architecture with a way into new intellectual possibilities and beyond its own difficulties with things such as the vernacular, the commercial, and the everyday.

At a second architecturally framed glance, however, the isolation of the image by visual culture as the nexus between the various components of this new field would seem
once again to exclude architecture. If to embrace fully the ambitions of visual culture requires, as its corollary, the restricting of architecture to the economy of the image, one would have to accept that image only as contingent and as a partial picture at best. Indeed, the difficulty of disciplining architecture according to the logic of the visual is attested to by the fact that many of the recent theorizations of visual culture include only the most superficial treatment of architecture. This is no accident but rather a structural imperative, since architecture's imbrication with the embodied, with the image organized through structure, material, and use, seriously calls into question the generalizing ambitions of visual culture. Indeed, the exclusion of architecture is the necessary support and foundation for the disembodied yet still viable image.

The current relationship between architecture and visual culture exposes not a new phenomenon but an old one. The difficulties architecture once faced in relation to the placeless place reserved for it by art history and theory simply reassert themselves in the form of an unimagined view of architecture in visual culture. That these issues remain unresolved may account for the generally inactive and unambitious intellectual practices of architectural scholarship in recent decades. However, this current encounter between architecture and other branches of academe more productively exposes the fact that those most concerned with the questions raised by visual culture have not been architectural historians but rather practicing architects. It is in the work of such firms as Diller and Scofidio that one finds an engagement with multimedia interdisciplinarity, transgressions of conventional barriers separating high from low, and above all with the question of the autonomy of both architecture and its image from their historical and material contexts. Visual culture and all that the term would imply may well describe not the general condition of the visual or the cultural but rather a specific turn in recent artistic practices. To universalize this specific development would seem not merely to muddle the nature of the contributions made by these architects, but risks transforming the history of art into a teleological progression that could only lead to this one transdisciplinary yet visually hegemonic conclusion. Moreover, since this retrospectively projective conclusion, from an institutional point of view, eerily parallels the tendency toward consolidation and restructuring felt at increasing numbers of universities and corporations, it might be preferable to retain access to alternative possibilities and the particularities of material specificity.

Architecture,
UCLA
Art History, Visual Culture, and the University

STEPHEN MELVILLE

Because I take the disciplinary questions raised to communicate with larger questions about the university, I venture one set of remarks on each side of the situation’s two faces.

1. In a useful and important review of the history of the modern university, the late Bill Readings distinguishes between the University of Reason, the University of Culture, and the University of Excellence. A key text for the first of these is Kant’s Conflict of the Faculties, and a striking feature of it is that while philosophy is the discipline capable of understanding and articulating it, the university’s governance is consigned to the State. The University of Culture is our nearest past, with its self-understanding and governance alike settled in the representation of culture, above all literary culture (thus it produces what we tend to think of as the great university presidents). This valorization of culture is necessarily accompanied by the emergence of culture in the broad sense as an object of university study (and so the emergence of the social sciences as a crucial concomitant of the humanities). The University of Excellence is Readings’s name for the institution in which most of us actually find ourselves now. Its self-understanding and governance find their somewhat shifting center in a nexus of the social sciences, administration, and education (conceived as a university field significant stretches of which appear as social scientific doubles of the existing humanities).²

I suggest that questions about how both art history and visual cultural studies are located or locatable with respect to this historical taxonomy are of considerable interest. Art history clearly has had no trouble finding itself at home in the University of Culture; within the University of Excellence its sharpest institutional challenge probably comes from art education and its most interesting intellectual challenge from cultural studies. At the same time, it is worth noting that it is, at least potentially, not wholly contained by the terms of the University of Culture, and this on at least two counts. (1) To the extent that the term “art” inscribes an unavoidable reference to the aesthetic, it has an obscure relation to Kant’s university which I am tempted to put as follows: the structure of the University of Reason reflects the two

2. “We can be interdisciplinary in the name of ‘excellence,’ because excellence only preserves pre-existing disciplinary boundaries insofar as they make no claim on the entirety of the system and pose no obstacle to its growth and integration. The appeal to excellence marks the fact that there is no longer any Idea of the university, or rather that the Idea has now lost all content. Excellence is non-referential, a unit of value entirely internal to the system, which marks nothing more than the moment of technology’s self-reflection. All the system requires is for activity to take place, and the empty notion of excellence refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information” (Readings, “Be Excellent: Culture, the State, and the Posthistorical University,” Alphabet City 3 [October 1993]). Readings is inclined to see Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure as a key text of sorts here, although he admits that the heroes’ ability to distinguish and name some things as “bogus” marks an important difference from the contemporary university.
domains—of reason pure and practical—secured by the first two critiques; the third critique famously secures no such domain but only an articulation, and it appears in Kant's university as the fact of a distinction among the faculties without finding any faculty of its own. It might then be worth asking what stake art history as a discipline has in this moment of pure judgment. (2) Art history—now in reasonably sharp distinction from literary study's institutionalization—has a distinctly Hegelian foundation, which is to say a foundation in a place uneasily balanced between the claims of Reason and those of Culture. This too may seem a place with claims and stakes worth exploring.

An obvious question is how we are able to take visual cultural studies in these terms. It would appear to have no relation to Readings's University of Reason but to belong in some way to the hinge between the Universities of Culture and of Excellence—perhaps as a last resistance of the former to the latter, perhaps as an appropriation by the latter of what remains of the former. My own tendency is to see art education as doing the work of appropriation, and cultural studies as doing that of resistance, so the question comes to be about the validity or pertinence of such resistance. A closely related issue that might be useful in exploring relations between the various new art histories (including the social history of art) and visual cultural studies would be how far each has been inclined to take one of the burdens of "theory" to lie in a critique or an extension of the social sciences.

2. It is not clear to me that visual cultural studies is in any interesting sense interdisciplinary, nor that it can give rise to anything I would take to be interestingly interdisciplinary. Such uncertainty obviously depends on a rather special sense of the disciplinary, since it is clear enough that cultural studies, visual and other, routinely makes interdepartmental claims. Working this through entails sharpish distinctions among (1) the objectivity claimed by a science, (2) the territoriality of a profession, and (3) the peculiar—say, principled (Aristotle) or hermeneutic (if that will serve as shorthand for something at stake from Hegel through Derrida at least)—disciplinary claim to a "proper" object. Each of these has its way of imagining interdisciplinarity, and all three have varying degrees of purchase on art history's current self-understanding. In terms of figures generally taken to be foundational for the modern discipline, I am inclined to draw a fairly sharp distinction between work driven by some version of (3) (Wölfflin, Riegl) and that driven by some version of (1) (Panofsky, certainly, perhaps also Warburg), and so also am inclined to see Panofsky opening toward the interdisciplinarity characteristic of visual cultural studies.

3. This is, I think, close to Readings's reading, although he is unconcerned with the question I raise around art education, and much more explicitly alert to the ways resistance and appropriation inform one another, leading his argument about cultural studies (not simply confined to the visual) toward the claim that it is continuous with the globalizing movement of capital.
in a way Wölfflin and Riegl do not. One way to put this in brief compass would be to say that for the "scientific" (Panofskyan) line the visual is given and the question of interdisciplinarity is above all a question of method, while for the "disciplinary" line, the visual ("as such") is what is to be secured by the work of the discipline, and so interdisciplinarity is inscribed within its object as the place or way in which it is, sooner or later, found to be secured only through its simultaneous transgression. 4 Here the interdisciplinary is imagined as a folded or encrypted dimension of the disciplinary and a consequence of its very objectivity—its having an object, there being an object for it. It would take argument beyond the scope of these remarks and perhaps beyond my current grasp to bring this view of disciplinarity back around to the question of the university as a situation of judgment.

History of Art, Ohio State University

HELEN MOLESWORTH

It seems clear that we live in a visual culture, inundated with an extraordinary array of visual imagery. How to account for it all is at the heart of the anxiety engendered by the idea of visual culture as an academic field. Art history has made the visual its object, and perhaps we feel that the discipline runs the risk of being eclipsed by, or excluded from, this new idea. Visual culture also creates anxiety because it remains an amorphous and undefined term.

For me there are (at least) two separate problems. One is visual culture's relation to contemporary art and its attendant criticism; the other is its academic formation. One reason visual culture is so hard to define is its relation to postmodernism, a word that appears to have fallen radically out of favor. When I was an undergraduate, postmodernism stood for the introduction of continental theory into art-historical discourse, the engagement of mass culture by critical art and theory, and a renewed sense of art as a site of cultural critique. It also stood for the proliferation of compelling new versions of modernism—indeed, for an emboldened and engaged art history. This is the legacy that visual culture (itself a postmodern concept?) wants to inherit. It is as if we have lost faith in the concept postmodernism. There is an aspect of visual culture that desires to recapture the sense of energy postmodernism gave to both art history and art criticism.

4. This would be to say that art history, construed as a discipline in the sense I find interesting, is repeatedly called upon to "prove its object" (the locution is characteristically Hegelian).
It could be argued that postmodernism found its most vital production, criticism, and theory in the world of contemporary art, from Leo Steinberg's first use of the term in relation to Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreen in "Other Criteria," to Hal Foster's anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic.* Both of these examples share an intimate relation to the contemporary art of their respective moments, and a keen awareness of the historical narratives that made those moments possible. It is the ability to think the present and the historical simultaneously, dialectically, that seems to be missing from current discussions regarding visual culture. If visual culture is an updated way of talking about postmodernism, then what it lacks is a serious engagement with contemporary art. Yet it is critics who have forsaken their subjects, not artists. (This may be because without a cohesive group of artists, or in the absence of a definitive vanguard, critics assume that there are no stakes involved.) In short, critics need to step up to the plate. Too many of us have stopped writing about contemporary art, turning instead to the over-hyped terrain of cultural studies, or retrenching in a defensive posture to historical work. The result is twofold: a lack of art-historically informed writing about new and challenging work and a plethora of writing by non-art-historians about art.

Art history has a variety of valid methods for thinking about art objects. It seems inevitable, however, that visual culture will open the field of art history and demand that other manifestations of the visual be examined—advertising, television, computers, etc. We need to employ our methods on these objects, and if they don't work, then we need to modify our approaches rather than merely discounting the objects as unimportant. That art history's methodologies will change in relation to a new set of visual imagery is neither good nor bad, nor is it cause for anxiety or zealously; it is quite simply *necessary.* For it is in such discussions that engaged cultural criticism will be found.

The other problem is visual culture in its academic setting. We may live in a visual culture, but the establishment of an academic field demands some nitty-gritty questions. Primarily, what are we going to teach? While this may seem a tedious query for some, and a luxurious one to others (for whom the question is where or if they will teach), it needs to be addressed in this discussion. For example, will art historians teach Minimalism, history professors teach the Vietnam War, and cultural studies people lecture on the rise of rock and roll, youth culture, and a television in every home? Is it up to the student to synthesize the material, or will part of the task of a visual culture instructor be to trace the relations between these parallel historical developments? Can we open up art history's narratives not just to other discourses (semiotics, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism) but to other cultural objects as well (television shows, housewares, politics as usual, and historical events of
global significance)? If we are worried about disembodied images, no matter how boring television is, why does its appeal seem limitless? More important, if we are concerned about producing subjects for the next stage of globalized capital, then we need a better account of how those disembodied images work. (After all, might not Wölfflin, with his gas lamp projector, be partly responsible?)

Art history has a long history of pillaging other disciplines for its tools, but then it also has a nasty habit of worrying about the autonomy of its objects of study. A variety of composite methodologies can be brought to bear on the art of our period and the mass media images that dominate our visual culture, for when we write about contemporary art we are already writing about visual culture. This is so for two reasons. The first is quite simple: art is part of the larger phenomenon of visual culture. More important, however, contemporary art is formed by and in relation to mass media, computers, television, etc. The best contemporary art offers the potential for engagement with the very concept of visual culture. As art historians and critics, we must allow these discourses and practices to interface and disturb one another in our work; otherwise they will continue to do so without us.

Editor of Documents

KEITH MOXLEY

Challenged on the one hand by linguistic philosophies that emphasized the way in which language betrays the ideologies of its users rather than affording them direct access to the world around them and, on the other, by psychoanalytic theories that stressed the conventionality of human consciousness and the power of irrational forces in the constitution of human subjectivity, the notion of human nature has come to be viewed as a concept whose validity is historically relative. Just as the notion of the humanist subject as one capable of both knowing itself and the world around it has proven to be historically determined, so it is time to recognize that art history, a discipline whose fundamental premise is that aesthetic value is a universal human response, also belongs to the past.

Confronted with this challenge to its disciplinary rationale, art history has accommodated itself to the new circumstances without betraying its allegiance to its traditional assumptions. Far from choosing between continuing to do business as usual or transforming itself in the light of poststructuralist theory, art history has typically played it safe. The crisis in which art history stands is thus largely in the eye of the beholder.1 Somehow the discipline manages to

produce monographs, exhibition catalogues, etc., which are based upon a notion of objectivity whose basis is the humanist subject, as well as historical interpretations that acknowledge the active role of subjectivity in shaping the production of historical narratives. It encompasses established methodologies, such as stylistic analysis and iconography, as well as approaches such as feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and postcolonial studies that depend upon a posthumanist notion of subjectivity. Paradoxically enough, these contradictions now rub shoulders with one another, even if the contact is not always comfortable.

What would happen to the history of art if, in response to the challenge of visual studies, it abandoned its subscription to the belief that aesthetic value depends on a universal human response, and that that response can best be gauged by the response of the community’s most culturally sophisticated members? There seem to me to be at least two paths open, and both of them are better described under the rubric of visual studies than art history. First, the discipline could concern itself with the study of all images. It could study the image-making capacity of human cultures in all of their manifestations. On this model, visual studies would pay attention to all image-producing cultures both past and present. It would study digital and electronic imagery along with comic strips and advertisements without making qualitative distinctions between them. This conception of the discipline envisions a vast enterprise, one so enormous that its intellectual, social, or pedagogical agenda would be hard to discern. Each branch of learning would have its own paradigms of meaning-production, but the branches themselves would be indifferent to what was going on in others. In such circumstances, it would be hard to discern the principles according to which the activities of different fields might be hierarchized, organized, or even institutionalized. Why would photographs shot with an electron microscope be regarded as more or less interesting (valuable) than images produced in Rorschach tests?

Alternatively, and more advisedly, the discipline might concern itself with all images for which distinguished cultural value has been or is being proposed. Such a model would respect the tradition on which the discipline was founded, namely that certain objects have been and are given special cultural significance, but refuse to accept its corollary that aesthetic experience is derived from a universal response. Such a conception of aesthetics clearly involves a redefinition of its intellectual scope and social function. Briefly put, a conception of visual studies as the study of images identified with cultural value must re-articulate the idea of aesthetics as something concrete, specific, and local rather than inde-

finable, ineffable, and universal. Whereas the Enlightenment's definition of the concept of aesthetics made it into a kind of a sublimely intellectual black hole, a term with which to evoke that which is beyond articulation because it is allegedly accessible and obvious to all, I should like to define it as a term that only acquires significance according to the cultural and historical circumstances in which it gains articulation. Rather than being a concept that is regarded as part of the experience of all human beings in all times and places, the term becomes culturally specific. Used in this sense, aesthetics becomes a way in which the Western tradition can acknowledge the circumscribed limits within which its attempts to create meaning have valence and currency. On this view, aesthetics will respond to different classes, genders, races, and nationalities. In an age that has seen a proliferation of constructed identities, each seeking to question the way in which the concept of cultural value has been naturalized in supporting the social hierarchy, aesthetics becomes an integral part of the assertion of difference, the record of an unwillingness to subscribe to the myths of universality and homogeneity on which the effective use of colonial power depends.\(^2\)

One of the consequences of what might be called a motivated notion of aesthetics is that the focus of visual studies' disciplinary attention would no longer depend upon the medium in which the work was created. At the moment, art history manages to turn its back on the study of film, television, comic strips, advertising, etc. All of these media can be included within the scope of visual studies on the basis that it is concerned with the way in which all images manifest cultural value. It is clear, of course, that visual studies will not be able to pay attention to all of them with the same intensity. Just as in traditional art history the study of different art forms and the art of different geographical areas depended on the hierarchization of social interests, so that, for example, only those objects invested with aesthetic values recognized by the elite were considered worthy of study, so in visual studies there will be an ongoing struggle for attention that will result in the recognition of certain forms of visual production and the rejection of others.

Finally, the fact that it is impossible to define an aesthetic experience with any hope of universal validity, the fact that opinions are so widely divided, ensures that it will never be possible to be precise about the disciplinary limits of the study of images. What is regarded as central to the

study of visual culture at one moment may not be included in another. The content of these studies will depend upon the success of competing constituencies. Unlike art history, whose disciplinary parameters have been fossilized by its allegiance to an ahistorical and therefore "natural" notion of cultural values, visual studies can engage in an endless dialogue with the social forces which would seek to privilege one conception of the valuable above another. By animating aesthetics, by making it a keystone of its disciplinary focus, visual studies can ensure its continuing capacity for change.

Art History,
Barnard College/Columbia University

Paradoxes of the Visual

D. N. RODOWICK

There are two distinct though interrelated opinions woven through October's questionnaire. On one hand, each response acknowledges the emergence of a new area of study—visual studies—as a matter of fact. On the other, despite the variety of responses—positive, negative, or ambivalent—each assumes that this emergence requires a concomitant critique of long-standing notions of disciplinarity in the arts and the history of art.

I hold this position as well. However, I find it most productive to consider visuality as a paradoxical concept. In this respect, the critique of disciplinarity implied in the emergence of visual studies, no matter how it is defined, is based on two divergent series of questions which can, at the present moment, be quite productive in their circularity. These questions may be summarized as follows:

Are the old disciplines dissolving because of a failure to conceptualize new phenomena? Thus visual studies acknowledges the increasing visuality of contemporary culture, or the ever-augmented power and currency of the visual as driven by the appearance of so-called new media—the electronic and digital interactive arts.

Or is disciplinarity under suspicion because of an internal critical and philosophical pressure? Disciplines seek to create intellectual empires and maintain their borders by asserting the self-identity of objects—painting, literature, music,
architecture, cinema—and the knowledges that adhere to them. Both Derrida and Foucault have powerful critiques of a foundationalism that produces regimes of knowledge based on the self-identity and presumed internal coherence of authors, concepts (sign, system, subject, the unconscious, the image), or fields (history, philosophy, science, art). I will argue as well that the new “figural” media rest uneasily in aesthetic categories of self-identity and thus may inspire a critique of the disciplines seeking to take them up as objects.

Powerful political and economic forces are in play as well. The increasing scarcity of resources available to universities means that fewer faculty are teaching more classes and, consequently, are asked to specialize less and improvise more in new areas. There is a dark side to interdisciplinarity: deans and provosts may encourage the growth of areas like visual studies in order to reduce and reallocate resources as well as diminish the size and power of departments.

Undoubtedly, all these factors are relevant for the present moment. Thus I begin with a caution. Many of the most innovative thinkers and administrators are walking a tightrope. Interdisciplinarity emerges most strongly where institutional structures and philosophical positions are in flux. In the 1960s and early 1970s, institutional forces encouraged innovative programs like women’s studies, film studies, and Africana studies in a time of economic expansion. Now interdisciplinary innovations are motivated instead by the increasing scarcity of resources. The first paradox of visual studies may well be that of a creative interdisciplinary founded uncertainly on scarcity.

This issue will haunt all kinds of interdisciplinary programs for some time to come. Nonetheless, I want to set this historical caution aside and inquire more deeply into the philosophical paradoxes raised by the idea of visual studies. At the University of Rochester, we offer a Ph.D. in Visual and Cultural Studies. Our program, like many others, holds together through a consensus based on recognizing commonalities among visual media—painting, sculpture, photography, cinema, video, and new media—and the critical theories that accompany them.

But what happens if our “common sense” notion of the visual is relinquished? What if we no longer grant the concept of visuality internal coherence by submitting it to a philosophical and genealogical critique?

Derrida, among others, has shown that the self-identity of a concept can only be asserted and maintained through a logic of opposition and hierarchy. The presumed coherence of visuality is the product of a long philosophical tradition of dividing the discursive from the visual arts. In his Laocoön, Lessing codified the conceptual distinction of the visual from the poetic or literary. The currency of this distinction, widely held since the eighteenth century, remains undiminished despite the force of various artistic and philosophical challenges. No aesthetic
judgment was valid, he argued, without clearly drawing borders between the arts based on succession and those based on simultaneity. In other words, Lessing argued for a strict division of the temporal from the spatial arts. From this moment on, the philosophical definition of the aesthetic became a matter of differentiating media through criteria of self-identity and then ordering them in hierarchies of value. Through Kant, Hegel, and beyond, the most temporal and immaterial arts like lyric poetry ranked highest since they were presumed to be the most spiritual, that is, they corresponded most closely to the immateriality and temporality of thought. This is a logocentric bias since the instantiation of poetry in print in no way devalued the equivalence of speech and thought. Nor did it demand that “text” be treated as a spatial or figurative phenomenon. Conversely, the more material and gravity-laden arts rank lower in this schema. Simultaneity as “spatial” expression implies that the thickness of matter—pigments, earth, stone, bodies—resists and slows both expression and thought. The idea of the aesthetic in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy thus presumed a distinction between perception and thought in relation to matter or substance. Thinking, or the “play of ideas” in Kant’s account, slows and thickens if expressed by the hand and absorbed by the eye. Yet it soars weightlessly if released by breath to enter the ear. The idea of reference or designation also plays in two directions. The spatial or visual arts wrest perceptions from matter and, by the same token, tend to be valued (or devalued) for their resemblance to the physical objects or events that inspired them. The linguistic or temporal arts derive value from the abstraction and immateriality they share with the pure activity of spirit or thought.

From at least the late seventeenth century, then, the idea of the aesthetic has relied on an opposition between the linguistic and plastic arts. Visuality or the visual arts are defined here as a quickening of thought in matter, pleasurable if not ultimately desirable. This is what simultaneity means for someone like Lessing and the philosophical tradition that follows him. A sign coheres spatially, and thus becomes a “visual” sign, only in virtue of the brute and intractable qualities of a matter from which sense must be wrested with as much force as craft. The visual artist labors, but the poet flies.

Among the “new” media, the emergence of cinema, now a hundred years old, confounded this philosophical schema even if it did not successfully displace it. In the minds of most people cinema remains a “visual” medium. And more often than not cinema still defends its aesthetic value by aligning itself with the other visual arts and by asserting its self-identity as an image-making medium. Yet the great paradox of cinema, with respect to the conceptual categories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics, is that it is both a temporal and “immaterial” as well as spatial medium. The hybrid
nature of cinematic expression—which combines moving photographic images, sounds, and music as well as speech and writing—has inspired equally cinema's defenders and detractors. For cinema's defenders, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, film represented a grand Hegelian synthesis—the apogee of the arts. Alternatively, from the most conservative point of view cinema can never be an art precisely because it is a mongrel medium that will never rest comfortably within the philosophical history of the aesthetic. These problems are exacerbated by the emergence and proliferation of digital media. The digital arts further confound the concepts of the aesthetic since they are without substance and therefore are not easily identified as objects. The basis of all "representation" is virtuality: mathematic abstractions that render all signs as equivalent regardless of their output medium.

As a concept, visuality is a space inhabited by paradox. What interests me most about contemporary visual studies derives neither from the presumed distinctiveness of media nor the cultural ethnographies of spectators. Indeed, the constant challenge I want to raise to both visual and cultural studies has to do with a philosophical problem: the invention and critique of concepts raised implicitly in the historical emergence of new media. For me, the new media inspire visual studies through an implicit philosophical confrontation. Cinema and the electronic arts are the products of concepts that cannot be recognized by the system of aesthetics, nor should they be; they are ahead of philosophy in this regard.

Visual studies for me is based, therefore, on the recognition that the new media demand a deconstruction of the concepts of both visuality and discursivity as well as the philosophical tradition from which they derive. This position requires both a genealogical critique of the aesthetic and a positive investigation of the concepts invented or suggested by new media which I have loosely designated under the signs of "the figural" and "audiovisual culture."1 Our era is no longer one of images and signs. It is defined, rather, by simulacra in Deleuze's sense of the term: paradoxical series where concepts of model and copy, the Same and the One, the Identical and the Like, are no longer easily reconciled nor reduced by principles of unity and self-same.

English/Visual and Cultural Studies,
University of Rochester

The Paradoxical Task . . .
(Six Thoughts)

GEOFF WAITE

1. The Absent New. The paradoxical task of intellectuals (who must never again believe that they make history, let alone by ourselves) is not to “think the accomplished fact.” Rather, it is to think (as Althusser reads Machiavelli) “the fact to be accomplished, what Gramsci called the ‘having to be’ . . . to be founded . . . and under extraordinary conditions, since these are the conditions of the absence of any political form appropriate to the production of this result.”¹ Which fact to be represented and which result? That’s the rub. A succinct reformulation of this perennial (part transitive, part intransitive) paradox today becomes: “To think the new in a total absence of its conditions.”² So how might we academic intellectuals think something new—or just really different—about visual studies (our subject) or visual culture (our object)? How might each term be defined? And to what end would we ask such questions, given the possible, if not likely, absence of effective sociopolitical forms appropriate to the production of any really radical result of this desire to think or make the new? And all this at a time when vision and visuality (and their precondition: visibility), even as they appear hegemonic in a postliterate age, are fast being (once again) replaced technologically (if not also conceptually) by “sightless vision”?³

2. Against Interdisciplinarity. Yet it is an error, in this condition, to think that any disciplinary or interdisciplinary (or, mutatis mutandis, any intermedia or intercultural) field must respond a priori and necessarily to all current, historically contingent pressures, either intestine or external, real or imagined. Whatever their source and form, it is obviously necessary to react to pressures. But reaction is never sufficient. Additionally required of any discipline or interdiscipline worthy of the name (disciplina: the activity of training and teaching, which is necessarily, constitutively informed by the aleatory and by violence—as opposed to doctrina, the thing to be trained and thought, which attempts to banish the aleatory and disguise ontic violence, and by this means can become ontologically, invulnerably violent) is an active, ongoing interrogation of one’s self-definition, social responsibility, methodology, and philosophical or theoretical grounding. (Which is not to say, however, that permanent revolutionary grounding should be permitted to take the form of abject, endlessly self-legitimating navel- or stargazing.) The problems surrounding and informing all such grounding are comparatively perennial and transhistorical, universal even. Furthermore, it is a well-known but often forgotten fact that the attempt to

identify ostensibly new trends "out there" is additionally a performance or creation of those same trends "in here." To "locate" trends, and then respond to them, is therefore a veiled form of "prediction." And, as Gramsci noted, "Anybody who makes a prediction has in fact a 'program' for whose victory he is working, and his prediction is precisely an element contributing to that victory."\(^4\) In other words, we need to take often overwhelming theoretical, methodological, and ideological responsibility for all our more or less reactive, more or less active responses to pressures indwelling the siting, critique, and creation of disciplines or interdisciplines. I reject the desire to pullulate trends only to forfeit knowledge of what they are really serving, including those that inevitably exceed disciplinary and interdisciplinary boundaries. And I particularly lament the recent backlash, ranging bovine through the human and social sciences, against philosophical and theoretical precision and the ability to draw lines of demarcation within and against flabby, mindless pluralism. This certainly goes for the various pressures that exist both for and against merely interdisciplinary attempts to define or practice, say, visual studies and/or visual culture.

3. The Real. With regard to today's common call to turn from disciplines to interdisciplinary work—around real and conceptual "round tables"—I can add very little to a remark made by Althusser: "The practice of 'round tables' is necessarily accompanied by an ideology of the virtues of interdisciplinarity, of which it is the counterpoint and the mass. This ideology is contained in a formula: when one does not know what the world does not know, it suffices to assemble all the ignorant."\(^5\) The uninvited guest "that silently inhabits the 'consciousness' of all these specialists" is "common theoretical ideology," and "when they gather together, it speaks out loud—through their voice."\(^6\) "Very concretely, interdisciplinarity is usually the slogan and the practice of the spontaneous ideology of specialists: oscillating between a vague spiritualism and technocratic positivism."\(^7\) In less insulting (to all of us), though still necessarily negative terms, our own evident turn to interdisciplinary work is too often nothing more than a cover-up of the ideological fact that we know neither what a discipline is nor what the communal inter-, intra- and extra-disciplinary social results, facts, and desires are or ought to be. The ambivalent social is always already even more informed than are any disciplines or interdisciplines by that which exceeds expectations and control. (As Bataille noted, excess exceeds philosophy; and, as Lenin noted definitively, revolutions are always more unpredictable and unruly than can ever be predicted or controlled.) It should go without say-

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
ing that I am not arguing against disciplinary or interdisciplinary work on other grounds or in principle, but I am arguing against the very common, self-satisfied, and counterproductive presumption that we know a priori what disciplines or interdisciplines are, and why we even bother doing them, save for the most careerist reasons. In short, the slogan of interdisciplinarity is ideological in Althusser’s sense, that is, “false in what it claims to designate, but at the same time a symptom of a reality other than that which it explicitly designates.” For Lacan this other reality might be the Real; for Althusser (the neo-Spinozist philosopher and “specialist of the ‘totality’”) this reality is “the Whole”; and for Althusser (the communist) it is global “living conditions” and “modes of production”—in the harsh or seductive light of which vision, visuality, and visibility are important, overdetermined modalities of one basic problem among other modalities.

4. **No Object.** As a self-defined communist intellectual, still working—roughly—in the Althusserian, and hence Spinozist, philosophical and political tradition (which entails, in part, attempting to negotiate the irreducible gap between communism and philosophy), I must say that—like all other “human science” (with possible exceptions such as Lacanian psychoanalysis and linguistics, which for this reason may not be human science) and unlike all properly natural sciences—visual culture and visual studies have no object. And hence no real objective, either. If the human sciences cannot be committed to the correspondence definitions of truth of the natural sciences, then they must at least be committed to criteria of coherency. In this regard they resemble theology, which, as Kant showed, is a “science” (in the sense of systematic mode of study, if no other) “without an object.” Instead, like philosophy, visual studies and visual culture must strive to produce an object proper to themselves, the properties of which they might then study—and to the objective constraints of which they would then also have to submit. Therefore, visual studies and visual culture would require what they may think they have and nonetheless precisely lack, namely, cogent and effective philosophical or theoretical grounding. So it is that “the philosophies and or philosophical categories thus ‘exploited’ by the human sciences are used practically by them as an ideological substitute for the theoretical base they lack” (Althusser). In contrast, the subject and object of philosophy is to “create concepts that are always new” (Deleuze), to “produce theoretical ‘objects’ without any counterpart ‘in the real’ (if you like, a particularly unyielding and particularly effective sort of fiction)” (Balibar paraphrasing Althusser). And this is what visual

8. Ibid., p. 79.
9. Ibid., p. 80
10. Ibid., p. 89.
11. Ibid., p. 91.
studies and visual culture have not done for the simple reason that, lacking an object, they cannot do so—or at least cannot fail to oscillate back and forth between spiritualism and positivism, recreationally body surfing the tides of fashion, high and low.

5. No History. In this, our chiaroscuro, apparent paradigm shifts or epistemological breaks, apparent evolutions or revolutions in things visual, reveal themselves to be just this: apparent. So it is the case also with what is apparently the most pressing problem at hand in October, namely, the debate about whether visual culture and/or visual studies have moved and/or ought to move from a model based on “art in context” or “new art history” to a model based on “anthropology.” Might this be a nonissue? For the simple reason that the same philosophical criticism of the one can be applied to the other, insofar as neither takes into account the Whole of which it is one mode inter alia inter pares and neither makes clear its philosophical underpinnings, or lack thereof, and insofar as both are based on undemarcated allegiance to “interdisciplinarity” and both are predicated on at least two biconditional, and fundamentally false and dangerous assumptions that were definitively demolished by Spinoza: humanism and historicism. For these are not only twin sins against God and Nature (Deus sive Natura)—accusing the former of existing and turning the latter into a lethal cesspool—but also a double crime against all humanity. What in “new art history” passed as “history” (historia) was pretty much what now passes for “man” (anthropos) in either the new “anthropology” or the inevitably nationalistic “ethnography” (ethnos) of art. In an apt paraphrase of Althusser and Macherey, “The supreme originality of Spinoza consists of having rejected the notion that the individual [or history] is an expression of a more primary substance to which it must necessarily be reduced to be intelligible. For Spinoza, the old philosophical question of the relation of the whole to its parts and of unity of being in relation to its diversity cease to be problems: the unity of substance is its diversity, substance has no existence apart from the diversity without end of an infinity of attributes.”

And so it also is, as Gramsci used to say, that our current “debates” about visual culture and visual studies only exemplify the ruthless mechanisms whereby “political questions are disguised as cultural ones, and as such become insoluble.” In their sheer lack of philosophical grounding if for no other reason, we might say that, like ideology itself, visual culture and visual studies have no history (if no object, no history)—and hence the possibility of neither real evolution nor real revolution. Which is to say: nothing new under the sun, except, crucially, the luminous appearance of trends and the opaque fact of trendiness. (Schein, to redirect the idiom of German Idealism.) This is not to say that we should turn cynically away from histor-

ical determinations to ahistorical or transhistorical notions, either. Nor is this to say that the object of visual studies should be, say, any “newly wrought conception of the visual as disembodied image”—for the simple reason that visual studies has no object even as it has no history. Nor, finally, is this to say that anything visual so conceived (i.e., as a “disembodied image”) necessarily runs the risk in “helping in its own modest, academic way, to produce subjects for the next stage of globalized capital.” For, at the end of the day, this is what all disciplines and inter-disciplines do, or at least all those that, from a properly communist perspective, remain at once (a) ungrounded in philosophy and (b) fundamentally uncommitted, including in any appropriately modest academic way, to the collective overthrow of capital. Which returns us to our basic problem of existence within the geopolitical aesthetic of capitalism, as described at the outset: “To think the new in a total absence of its conditions.”

6. Para-noia. What direction should visual studies and visual culture take? In light of the current hegemony of capital—its relentless, rapacious externally imposed and internally incorporated drives for global domination—paranoia is not wholly in/appropriate. (Visual culture or cultural studies have no exemplary place in this picture—pro or con.) There is reactive, clinical paranoia, and there is active, philosophical and creative paranoia: para-noia, para-doxa. So we postcontemporaries might recall here the distant modernist project—part collaborative, part independently arrived at—of Dali and Lacan to study and produce “reasoning madness,” namely, “a delirium of interpretation in which suites of images, ideas, or events are perceived as having causal connections, or are all related to one central idea, and are internally coherent for the subject of the delusion though meaningless to an outside observer.”

(For what is most of the world except an outside observer to the visual studies of intellectuals and to the productions of visual culture?) In other words, we must be para-, a particularly elusive Greek prefix, meaning among other things: beside, besides, beyond, past, faulty, irregular, adjacent to, proximate to . . . mind or doxa. In his exemplary solitude-cum-responsibility, Althusser painfully observed that “hallucinations are also facts” (meaning also communism). No doubt: Dali’s peculiar political proclivities also show (as might those of Lacan or—certainly—of my own argument) that delusion—at least if it is merely individual—is at most the beginning of our problems, never at their end. Or so some of us, all of us, might hope. Forever against hope.

German Studies,
Cornell University

CHRISTOPHER WOOD

“Visual studies” has become shorthand for the idea that images, buildings, and design ought to be handled by the same discipline, and the idea that the distinction between high and low art is specious. “Visuality,” meanwhile, is shorthand for the idea that vision is an active, interpretive process strongly governed by communities and institutions, rather than an innocent openness to natural stimuli.

I am not sure what is gained by a shift in nomenclature, since all these ideas are already contained in the concept of “figurality.” Figures are flattened, manipulable placeholders that allow us to anamorphize, compare, and critique perceptions. Figures are metaphors, born of necessity, for the results of perception and cognition. They are also the starting points for interpretations of complex data. We unravel unfamiliar skeins by looking for matches with already familiar patterns. It is hard to see how we would get beyond figures.

Figurality has been the prevailing model for thinking about images within art history for a century. Despite the warnings of Norman Bryson and others, lax assumptions about the naturalness of perception or the transparency of mimetic technology have little foothold within the discipline. The historicity of any act of figuration is obvious. Impatience with the high-low hierarchy is also not exactly a fresh idea.

There are two possible objections to the model of figurality, however. First, it doesn’t really address the problem of perception. Figurality has in fact so little to do with the peculiarly visual that the term does equal service in literary analysis. One might think from the name alone that visual studies would do a better job of this. Actually, visual studies has little to say about vision. Vision is a hard puzzle. Scholars in the humanistic disciplines are scarcely equipped to deal with it. Claims of interdisciplinarity are misleading, since the term as it is used by humanists customarily rules out exchanges with the disciplines actually studying vision and perception, such as neurobiology or cognitive science. What art historians sometimes do is dismiss the whole problem with axiomatic assertions of the historicity of vision, assertions drawn from the social sciences, of all places. Or they reduce perception to an act of inferential interpretation. And as a result, what art historians say about visuality ends up being about figurality anyway.

Visual studies, in other words, decides the question of perception in advance. The model of figurality at least has the merit of bracketing the question, or declining to comment on it. Figuration is a hypothesis of perception. It is by definition the historical aspect of vision.

To introduce the real, ahistorical problem of vision into art history would be to breach the boundaries of formal and semiotic analysis. Semiotics and formalism announce their own outer limits, of course; but they properly don’t make any predictions about what lies on the other side. Curiosity
about that other side ebbs and flows in the humanities. The most dramatic interpretive projects of the earlier twentieth century always involved rebelliousness against the self-discipline and metaphoricity of formalism. Aby Warburg’s symbology, to take an example from art history, drew on late nineteenth-century theories of empathy and expression. For Warburg, the symbol was a concretization of elemental impulses and aversions. Symbols were the vanishing points where conventions dissolved, and the work of art got linked back to the somatic sources of human behavior. Warburg, incidentally, quite mistrusted dark drives and primitive rituals. He counted on rationality to intervene and provide *Denkraum*, or intellectual distance. Warburg was impatient with the prevailing historicist approaches to art for relativizing and neutralizing the power of figures. To dehistoricize figuration as he did was to bring it back to life—but then only for the purpose of mastering it again with reason.

Today art history admires Warburg for his audacity and disrespect for disciplinary boundaries. But the fact of the matter is that imaginative interdisciplinarity of this sort may entail awkward hypotheses about the real sources of figures. It sounds good when sketched out elliptically, in manifesto form. But when it is extended to scholarly projects, people recoil, and understandably so. The instinct of the scholar is to bracket perilous questions about reality and instead proceed with the interpretation of figures.

A second possible objection to the model of figurality is that it is too deeply implicated in aestheticism and the cult of fine art. If this is the case, it might well be a reason to revamp the discipline.

It is true that figures are the building blocks of texts. Texts are complex assemblages of signification calling for very elaborate overlapping gestures of interpretation. Texts are sealed off from surrounding textual or nontextual material by frames, and so make space for virtuality or fictionality; they generate meaning through tropological operations, such as catachresis; these tropes (or figures) are typically interpreted by inferential processes such as abduction or overcoding. Texts often make claims of semantic transparency that they can’t uphold. They remember but are always severed from some initial, authentic performance rooted in real life.

But I would argue that so-called aesthetic texts are not different in kind from texts in general. The aesthetic text is just an unusually ambiguous and self-conscious (or self-focusing) text. Or put the other way around, textuality is just a relaxed version of aesthetic textuality. A discipline attuned to the transformations effected by figuration will tend to fix on aesthetic texts. When the aesthetic text is defined this way, I cannot believe that anyone would object to it. Antagonism to the “art” in art history is grounded in resentment not of aesthetic textuality, but of the institutions and interests that protect the aesthetic within our culture. Art history is derided when it
serves as research assistant to the museums and auction houses, or court chronicler. Clearly, when a culture favors or rewards some kinds of textuality over others, or ranges them in an invidious hierarchy, then that culture is asking for critique. But one could not proceed at all without some advanced concept of textuality. And it is hard to imagine what thoroughly nonaesthetic figurality (or visuality, for that matter) would be like.

Worrying about the name of the discipline is a pastime for bureaucrats. Art history has been pretty flexible under the name it has. What art history does need is an ever more refined semiotics of the image. Indexes—true indexes, that is, and not merely the signs of contiguity, such as metonymy—play a huge role in the Western image’s discourse of authenticity. And iconicity is still a baffling problem. The perception of similarity—that is, the isolation of common properties with the result of identifying things as members of a kind—cannot be logically analyzed, as Quine has shown. For how is it that some \( x \) will seem more similar to \( y \) than to \( z \), even though it shares countless properties with both? Science has evaded this problem by doing away with similarity as a working category. Science treats the effect of similarity either as a learned response, that is, as a subject for a historical semiotics, or as a subcortical or prerational response, and therefore of limited use to scientific practice, which is built on logic. But art history is presumably interested in these nonlogical possibilities. If it is going to retain any interdisciplinary authority—as the discipline responsible for figurality, for example—it has to concede that the reception of iconic signs will recapitulate many of the puzzles of perception itself.

History of Art,
Yale University