AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

A STUDY OF VISUAL CULTURE: HOW ITS HISTORY AND THEORY INTERACT WITH ART HISTORY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE ART OBJECT

by

David B. Griffin

A thesis submitted to the

College of Music and the Arts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree Master of Arts in Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism

Azusa, California

July, 2018

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Jennifer, and children, Anabel and Dylan, and to my parents, Richard and Dorothy Griffin.

ABSTRACT

**A STUDY OF VISUAL CULTURE:
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WITH ART HISTORY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE ART OBJECT**

David B. Griffin
Master of Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism, 2018
Azusa Pacific University
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This study is intended to address some of the questions that have arisen due to or because of visual culture studies as an academic discipline and overall visual theory. These questions are: How is visual culture defined today? How does visual culture encounter traditional art history and its objects? How has visual culture made claim to the study of these art objects, and what other objects does it study? What methodologies does it use to fulfill its analysis of the art object? Does visual culture, whether intentional or not, usurp or merely ask to modify art history as the valid method of visual interpretation? What has been the effect of the rise of visual studies on traditional art history study?

By examining visual culture, its development, and its methodologies I hope to provide insight into how visual culture and art history have intersected, especially during a time when art history faces its own struggles for validity and scholarship. I will examine the types of visual objects art history and visual culture study, which leads into

the biggest controversy between the two, the debate on the existence of high and low culture, especially in the contemplation of art.

As part of this study I will examine several images, both historically fine art works and more general mass media images, to show how there are striking similarities in some of the approaches to technique as well as point out the seemingly irreconcilable differences that keep art history and visual culture at a distance.

Keywords: visual culture, visual studies, object, high-low, pedagogy, art history

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in a visual world. This is especially true the more developed, western, and/or capitalist the culture we live in happens to be. We are inundated constantly with images and objects that are designed to be looked at. From television to magazines, the internet, billboards, roadside signs, storefronts, cars, houses, theme parks, shopping malls, and grocery store shelfs, everything is designed to be looked at, usually for the purpose of selling something. This visual world surrounds us from birth and confronts us at every stage of our life. It is busy, cluttered, and seemingly happenstance, a flurry of visuals that vies for our attention. And it is inescapable.

How do we filter through this endless parade of visuality? How is this visuality used within a culture and to what purpose? By what method can we understand the nature of these images and objects and how they relate to and affect our society? These are the primary questions and motivating force behind the study of visual culture. As a practice, visual culture seeks to decipher and decode the visual objects of a culture to better understand how they function within that culture. Visual culture believes that understanding the nature of the visual objects in a culture makes a person more discerning and a better critical thinker.

Visual culture is no longer the new kid on the block. In the three plus decades the concept has been around, visual culture has developed and strengthened its methods,

though to this day it still has not quite coalesced as a comprehensive theory. There is even debate as to whether it should be considered an academic discipline or not. What could cause this uncertainty in a concept that appears so solid in a culture so obviously inundated with images? What is implicit in its history and development that leaves visual culture still ambiguous today?

Though visual culture has its roots in art history it is from art history that visual culture faces its largest challenge, and vice versa. One of the traits of visual culture is that it tends to see all visual objects as equally important. There is no hierarchy of images, or at least there is not one acknowledged. This does not sit well with art historians, critics, or artists themselves. Art history is a discipline that favors the privileging of certain visual objects over others, and so it has an inherent conflict with visual culture, which at its core is contrary to this practice. If, and if so how, is this conflict resolved by art history and visual culture? What does visual culture's equity of images mean to the study of art history?

Art history and visual culture are studied alongside one another at many universities, though more often than not in different departments or schools. Despite both being a study of visual objects, they are not synonymous. In fact, they are quite often adversarial. This is due in large part to the way each regards the visual object, although this is not the only area of contention. Much is also made of the way visual culture seems to overshadow or supplant the discipline of art history in the arena of education. This is especially true in schools where there has been a shift away from traditional art appreciation or art survey courses to those of visual culture. Proponents of visual culture believe that it serves students best to have a working knowledge of how

images function in a society. Compared to this, art history's dedication to a select group of objects seems counterintuitive and unable to prepare students for the barrage of imagery they will face in their lifetime. There are other factors to be explored in this academic relationship, but the difference in how images are categorized and prioritized and how students are prepared for the contemporary world are among the most influential.

The differences between art history and visual culture are even more striking when they are viewed in light of the many similarities they share. Art history has undergone many changes over the last fifty years, and this has led to an increase in the types of methodologies that art history uses to analyze its subject. To the system of formal, aesthetic, and conceptual analysis has been added such methods as feminist thought, Marxism, gender theory, semiotics, colonialism, and globalism. In this respect, art history has become much more aware of its viewer and the social conditions that both produce the art work itself and condition the perceptions of the viewer. Thus, art history examines the social role of the images it studies in the culture in which they were made. This is very much what visual culture seeks to do, even to the point of using some of the very same methodologies as practiced in art history. This sharing of methodologies is important, as it creates a relationship between visual culture and art history at the core of their practice. A critique or a study of an object from a visual culture position might be very similar to that which art history would supply.

Both visual culture and art history value the image and the visual. Both share methodologies. Both have methods of constructing meaning from visual objects. Both seek to be inclusive. Yet they are in inevitable opposition to one another because of

differences in their basic theoretical positions. This opposition creates an interesting and explorable tension in the relationship between the two. What is the relationship between art history and visual culture? How do they define their object of study? And, is it possible for the two to be reconciled? Herein, an attempt will be made to answer these and other questions. By examining visual culture, its history and how it relates to its object of study, it can be seen how art history and visual culture affect one another, and their view of culture.

CHAPTER 2

LITERTURE REVIEW

The texts on visual culture are as diverse and widespread as the objects of the field's study. Though oddly coherent in the way that they believe understanding the image is a vital necessity in contemporary society, they are rather differing in their view of the nature of visual culture and how it should be practiced. Though they largely agree that visual culture is an academic pursuit, they disagree whether it is a new discipline or an interdisciplinary practice. In fact, books on visual culture do not "define a new field as they define their differences from existing fields, especially art history."[1] And "If one were to judge visual culture from its textbooks and anthologies, it would appear as a healthy new discipline with little agreement about its nature."[2] This disagreement over nature has hindered the growth of visual culture by keeping it scattered and disjointed, but has allowed for multiple methodologies and approaches.

One of the earliest definitive texts on visual culture is the *October* "Visual Culture Questionnaire" of 1996. It was sponsored by the magazine *October* and intended to read the pulse of what was happening within this new approach to visuality. The questionnaire had respondents that were art historians, art critics, sociologists, and

[1] James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17.
[2] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 17.

anthropologists. Included among them were the likes of Svetlana Alpers, Michael Ann Holly, and Thomas Crow. There were responses both favorable and unfavorable to the emerging field. Most of those with an art background were warier of the intentions of visual culture while the others were generally more positive and accepting of the concept.

In 1998, while working to create visual culture courses at New York University, Nicholas Mirzoeff, professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University, released *Images and Texts: Understanding Culture*, a book that explores how images and texts characterize contemporary life.[3] This was followed in 1999 by *Introduction to Visual Culture* and *Interpreting Visual Culture*, texts which further sought to define, explicitly or through methods and objects of study, the theory of visual culture.

The years 2001 to 2003 saw an increase in the books and literature on visual culture.[4] This included Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's *Practices of Looking*, a text that added methodology based on such theory as the gaze and feminism. This time period also saw James Elkins', Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction,* released in 2003. Elkins' work is significant in that it is text book on the development and theory of visual culture, but it is also known for attempting to cross the rift between art history and visual culture studies.

In 2005, Margaret Dikovitskaya, Landsdowne Professor of Art History at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, released her research, *Visual Studies: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural turn* was released. It brought together the thoughts of

[3]Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Studies: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 86
[4] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies," 45

some of those who had responded to the *October Questionnaire*, among others, into a study that examined the definition and theoretical framework of visual culture. This is the latest text examined in this study. There are some other later writings, but these mentioned here seem to be at the core of visual culture, especially as it pertains to the college classroom, as many of these books are used as class texts.

James Elkins, in reviewing these books and other texts of visual culture during this period says that from these books visual studies emerges "as a set of overlapping concerns united by a lack of interest in several subjects- older cultures, formalism, and canonical works of art."[5] And as Kevin M. Tavin puts it, "The plethora of writing on and around visual culture has not necessarily helped to form a consensus on what the term signifies."[6] Clearly there is some doubt as to the unifying theory of visual culture, yet there are commonalities these texts all address, and their core interest in the image remains.

One of the main questions we encounter in visual culture is what are we learning when we are learning to see?[7] This question is important in visual culture's belief that in understanding this question we can better understand the contextual, ideological, and political nature of the experience of the visual. This is important in piecing together how the power structures are formed and exist within various classes.

Visual culture also tells us that images are largely responsible for teaching what and how to see and think, and with this, they mediate the ways we interact with one

[5] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 17
[6] Kevin M. Tavin, "Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture*". Studies in Art Education* 44, no. 3 (2003): 197-213
[7] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies/Cultural Turn," 53

another.[8] These images are central to the process that makes meaning in a culture.[9] As Thomas Gunning says, these images "are part of our experience and a record of it."[10] These images can and often do, form reality.[11] Paul Duncum describes it as that never before in our history has it been so true that the image is as central to the creation of identity or the gathering and distribution of knowledge.[12] This all combines to make the image, and its study, of prime importance to visual culture. This then, is visual culture's overarching theory.

These texts also propose that we live in a more visual culture than at any point in the history. That, "it is undeniable that contemporary experience in much of the world is profoundly affected by the rise of technology and the flood of imagery in a different respect than in the past."[13] Whether or not it is true that our culture is more visual than those in the past is debatable, but the effect of imagery and visual objects on the population at large is undeniable. Visual culture seeks to explore these effects, and how images interact with us on a daily basis.

All these features are common to all the definitions of visual culture, but what are those definitions? How do these texts define visual culture? The definitions are as varied as the methodology, although they share, along with the importance of the image, a fundamental agreement on the visual nature of culture and the necessity to understand

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[8] Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M Gaudelius, "The Spectacle of Visual Culture," *Studies in Art Education*, (2004): 298-312
[9] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies/Cultural Turn," 1
[10] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies/Cultural Turn," 79
[11] Paul Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments, Definitions, and Directions for Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 42, no.2 (2001): 100-112
[12] Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments," 100-112
[13] Tavin, "Wrestling with Angels," 205

this visuality. For Paul Duncum, Lecturer in Visual Arts Curriculum in the School of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, visual culture was "usually thought to be composed of two closely related elements: a focus on ways of seeing, often referred to as 'visuality'; and an expanded range of visual artifacts that lie beyond the art institution."[14] For Duncum this implies two things: 1. the visual suggests a concern with visible artifacts, and 2. culture suggests an interest in more than the artifacts themselves. This was an interest in the social conditions, in which the artifacts exist, as well as their production, distribution, and use.[15] The former of these positions defines visual culture again by what it is not, by the fact that its subject lies "beyond the art institution." The latter could as easily be in the definition of art history as in that of visual culture. Art history is interested in visual artifacts, and due to the changes in methodologies in the last twenty to thirty years, it has also become more concerned with the social aspects of art. Duncum's definitions do not include the object of study; at best it is implied in "an expanded range of visual artifacts."

Most of the definitions provided by the texts do not attempt to define visual culture directly. They often describe what visual culture does or how it should apply to the study of visual objects. James Elkins proposes a formulaic, in his own words, definition, "…visual culture studies the sum of popular visual practices since the mid twentieth century, with an admixture of contemporary fine art."[16] Here we have the objects to be studied described, but again part of that definition is through what it is contrasting, fine art and art history. Elkins also gives a date for these objects, after the

[14] Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments," 104
[15] Ibid., 106
[16] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 36

mid twentieth century. This puts into a perilous position all those art works that have come before, yet it also leaves out photography and mass produced printed materials of the time, such as posters, magazines, and newspaper advertisements. For Elkins, visual culture is just not interested in these objects, primarily because they are not part of contemporary culture.

Nicholas Mirzoeff, considered one of the original and leading voices in visual culture, says that visual culture "should concern itself with 'events' in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology"[17]. Mirzoeff's choice of words is interesting. Gone is the viewer of an image, it is replaced instead with the more capitalist term 'consumer.' This readily indicates a more active role on the part of the receiver of an image, creating conditions in which the thoughts, feelings, and history of the consumer are taken into account. Also gone is the object, to be replaced by the 'event' and visual technology. Mirzoeff here is acknowledging that much of the imagery he is intending should be studied is never in the form of an object. This includes digital imagery and video, in which the only medium is a computer processor. These images are transient, some existing only when they are viewed. They never take a physical form.

Perhaps the most thorough attempt at a concise definition comes from Arthur D. Efland, Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University, who defines visual culture as:

> an all-encompassing category of cultural practice that includes fine arts but also deals with the study of various forms of popular culture; the folk traditions of artmaking; industrial, interior, package and graphic design; photography,

[17] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies/Cultural Turn," 90

commercial illustration and the entertainment media including cinema, television, and their electronic extensions via the computer and the internet.[18]

All these texts provide definitions of or propositions on visual culture, what it is or what it does, but they are hardly unified, sharing only the most fundamental of traits. Visual culture is a wide-open field without a single definition. Depending on location and source texts, it is practiced in different ways. This lack of cohesion has impeded visual culture's growth and evolution, in some cases confusing even the few unifying points of the practice. This confusion of intentions led James Elkins to say: "Visual studies as it currently exists has a narrow; statistically uncommon set of interests and a distinctive politics far from its ideal of ecumenical interest in the sum total of image production,"[19] and that "…visual culture is not the generalized study of visuality that it tends to describe itself as being. Visual studies scholars keep to a specific set of theorists clustered around (Roland) Barthes, (Walter) Benjamin, (Michel) Foucault, and (Jacques) Lacan."[20] Taken from this, Elkins then claims these writers and thinkers as the unifying force for visual culture, asserting that, "the theory of the gaze, together with a Foucauldian sense of institutional power, is probably the best candidate for a governing interpretive strategy."[21]

So, there is some commonality and unifying theory to visual culture in the texts, despite being pulled in various directions by theory and admitting no overarching strategy. Taken together, the founding texts of visual culture do describe what can be

[18] Arthur D. Efland, "Problems Confronting Visual Culture," *Art Education*, (2005) 35-40

[19] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 42
[20] Ibid., 62
[21] Ibid., 27

said to be an academic discipline, and they give at least provisional definitions. Despite its variances, visual culture has theory, methodology, and an object of study. It is enough, at least, to have grown to be a sincere challenger to visual culture's most influential competitor, art history. Each of the texts is careful to ensure that visual culture has differentiations between it and art history, as the two encountered one another frequently as visual culture grew as a practice. Over the thirty odd years visual culture has been refining itself art history has had to deal with conflict of its own, largely internal, but both remained at the forefront of the conversation in contemporary art. This inevitably led to conflict and confrontation between the two competing theories. In order to better understand the nature of these confrontations between the two methods of constructing visual meaning, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the origins of visual culture.

CHAPTER 3

A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of visual culture is the history of an academic discipline. It has been that way from its beginnings as a theoretical conversation among art historians to its current position as examiner of global visual culture. Though academic, this history has not been single-minded or linear, however, with different forms or branches of visual culture arising concurrently. These differences are institutional, and it depends much on the geographic location of the school in which it develops for its theoretical makeup. In the United States, visual culture sprang from the art history departments, and is more in tune with art history, hence the conflict, literature, and film studies. In England visual culture is more closely linked with cultural studies, a close cousin, while in Europe and South America visual culture is more closely allied with semiotics, philosophy, and communication theory. Each branch retains their own particularities by virtue of which academic departments it develops in.

Visual culture in the United States, what we are interested in, can be traced to the rise of cultural studies in England in the 1950s. Like visual studies later, cultural studies borrowed from a number of other academic disciplines. It was a largely non-historical, more anthropology-based perspective, which focused on the effects of culture and incorporated social concern. This social concern spread with cultural studies throughout

England in the 1970s, and reached the rest of the world, including the United States, in the 1980s.[22]

This arrival was during a time of social upheaval in the United States. "The history of visual studies can be linked to the culture wars of the 1980s."[23] During this period, cultural studies eventually found its way into the art history departments, which at the time were seeking to become more inclusive in their interpretations and were looking for a means to make its product more culturally relevant. At this time, post modernism had already introduced the concept of considering art in relation to its social context.[24] Art historian Svetlana Alpers is credited with coining the term 'visual culture' when she first used the term in 1983s *The Art of Describing.*[25] It was not until the late 80s, however, in an encounter between art history, literature, cultural studies and poststructuralism that visual culture truly took form. By this time, there was already friction between art history and the theory that would become visual culture, insomuch as it was believed by Michel Ann Holly, Chairperson of the Art History Department at the University of Rochester, and Keith Moxey, Barbara Novak Professor of Art History at Barnard College, that visual culture, if properly induced by poststructuralism, could lead to "a reorientation, as opposed to the destruction, of art historical perspectives."[26] Others, however, held a harder view of what all this meant to art history, saying "in the wake of

[22] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 3
[23] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 85
[24] Donalyn Heise, "Is Visual Culture Becoming Our Cannon of Art," *Art Education* (2004) 41-46
[25] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 9
[26] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 11

cultural studies, the approaches deployed by traditional art history were seen to be inadequate."[27]

By the mid-90s, visual culture appeared as an academic discipline, similar to how cultural studies grew in Great Britain, but with the emphasis being on the visual and the visual object. Of this new discipline it was said that visual culture was "less Marxist, further from the kind of analysis that might be aimed at social action, more haunted by art history, and more in debt to Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin than the original English cultural studies."[28] As an academic discipline, visual studies had all the requisite components, it had theory, methodology, it had an object of study, and it had a history. As an academic discipline, visual studies had all the requisite components. It had theory, methodology, an object of study, and a history. This latter via its connections with art history, from whom the majority of proponents of visual studies wanted to cut themselves off.

It is during this period of the 90s that visual culture as academic discipline begins to make inroads into the curriculum of the university. In the early part of the decade, W.J.T. Mitchell designed and began offering a course on visual culture. It was intended to be a revision of Art 101, Art Appreciation, and to be concerned with all visual media rather than just the strict canon of art. The course was arranged around ideas of how one learns to look.[29] It was designed to be interdisciplinary and open to all students. Toward the middle of the decade, in 1994, Harvard University began offering a course on visual

[27] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 27
[28] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 3
[29] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 86

culture. It was largely intended to prepare students to decode and decipher the meanings in visual objects and images to instill a higher degree of critical thinking.[30]

Also, at this time, brought together by an interest in poststructuralism, four professors of Rochester University designed a program on visual culture to be housed in the department of art and history. Michel Ann Holly; Mieke Bal, director of the PhD program in comparative literature; Kaja Silverman, professor of English and Film Studies; and Craig Owens, professor of contemporary art, first called their program Comparative Arts, as it was to be balanced between art and literature, but the name was later changed to Visual and Cultural Studies to reflect the emphasis on the visual and cultural aspects of the courses. This program was the first graduate degree program of its kind and incorporated courses from art history, English, anthropology, film studies, comparative literature, history, music, and philosophy.[31]

In the early 90s, at the University of California Irvine, a program was proposed that would have as its basis the art history and film studies programs. This was to be a visual culture program. After nearly a decade of work on designing the program and some consultation with Rochester about the effects of their own program, U.C. Irvine's plan was approved in 1998.[32] It chose the name visual studies rather than visual culture due to what they saw as the blowback from the *October Questionnaire.* They felt that visual culture had been sullied and chose to use instead the more recently popularized term visual studies.

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[30] Irene J. Winter and Henri Zerner, "Art and Visual Culture", *Art Journal* 54, (1995), 42
[31] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 91
[32] Dikivitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 95

1998 also saw Nicholas Mirzoeff's book *Images and Texts: Understanding Culture*, which sought to further define the field and cement its place as an academic disciple. Mirzoeff followed this up in 1999 with his *Introduction to Visual Culture* and *Interpreting Visual Culture,* all of which became seminal texts used in various university programs of visual culture. Visual culture was compiling its textbooks.

The first half of the 2000s saw an increase in the amount of writing and scholarship on visual culture, including Marita Sturkin and Lisa Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* and James Elkins' *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction.* These texts would form part of the core of texts used in the new university-level visual culture courses.

Over the course of the 2000s and into our own decade, more colleges and universities have added visual culture courses to their curriculum. The majority of these are intended as basic introductory courses however, and not as entire programs as with Rochester and U.C. Irvine. An accurate and current count of the number of the programs at these schools is an immense task.[33] The number of different names these programs fall under is only one problem with an accurate count. Many are also attached to different schools and departments, so the interdisciplinary nature of visual culture prevents its being identified through a disciplinary manner. Also, the proposed aims of the courses are very different from one school to the next, so they cannot be categorized by their expected outcome.

Colleges and universities are not the only places visual culture has caught hold. Over the last couple of decades there has been a movement within the k-12 system to incorporate visual studies into the art programs. Since the 80s, most schools have

[33] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 91

employed a discipline-based art education (DBAE) which teaches art through exposure to art works, engagements in critical discourse, and by student production of works of art.[34] Some educators thought that DBAE was too structured, elitist, and Eurocentric, given the art works that were being used in the courses. There was an evolution of DBAE that was concurrent with the movement in art history at large to include more diversity of art and art education. This movement embraced fine art, folk art, and non-western art.[35] This was not enough for the proponents of visual culture, who felt that leaving out mass-produced imagery and focusing on objects with the designation art was too limiting and was not preparing students for a critical understanding of the contemporary world of images they faced. Articles appeared in education journals espousing a change from the discipline-based art education to a visual culture-based art education. Here, however, unlike the university, VCAE has struggled somewhat to replace or reimagine art education in the k-12 school systems. The larger structure of traditional art history has prevailed for the most part, and visual culture remains an addition rather than an alternative.

To this day visual culture still stands side by side and in competition with art history, whether its intention was to influence or replace. The university has, in some instances, provided an alternative method for the study of the visual object, but it is usually not at the expense of traditional art history. Visual culture has exposed the necessity of understanding visual objects in our contemporary society however, so its importance as a theory has not diminished, but it has not provided the new way to explore

[34] Donalyn Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 42
[35] Laura Trafi-Pratts, "Art Historical Appropriation in a Visual Culture-Based Art Education," *Studies in Art Education,* Vol. 50, No. 2 (2009), 152

visuality that would replace other theories as promised. Much of the future of visual culture is still as ambiguous as it was thirty years ago. How visual culture will continue its relation to art history is also uncertain. As we shall see the various types of visual culture do not even agree on their purpose in regard to art history, with some seeking only a change in the objects art history chooses to examine, while others see art history as an outdated concept inextricably linked to colonialism.

CHAPTER 4

VISUAL CULTURE AND ART HISTORY

Though it can be argued that visual culture originated in large part from conversations in art history, the relationship between the two runs the gamut from grudging acceptance to outright contention. The rhetoric has generally been ardent on both sides. There are quite a few reasons why visual culture and art history are so antagonistic, from the obvious in the fact that they are two competing theories about visual objects and visuality to the insidious, such as inter-department politics in the university setting. Debates about the nature and merits of each method begun thirty years ago are ongoing still today, and though each has had its moments, there seems to be no end to the deliberations. To this point, we have formulated a working knowledge of visual culture, its definitions and its history, but how does it see art history? And alternately, how is it seen by art history? Considering the interwoven history and methodology of visual culture and art history, and what each stands to gain or lose by the answers, these are important questions. They are significant to the debate as a whole.

In the 1930s, art historian Erwin Panofsky brought the German model of art history to the United States. This transformed a field attached to liberal studies and archaeology into an independent discipline. Panofsky's vision was an art history that was taught at select privately funded universities for the purpose of educating future

scholars.[36] Panofsky's model may have been elitist, but its basic structure is still used at the university level today. Criticism came in 1932, foreshadowing visual culture, in the form of philosopher and psychologist John Dewey's "William James Lectures on the Philosophy of Art" at Harvard University. Dewey questioned the elitism of Panofsky styled art programs. He questioned a connoisseurship and academicism that segregated art from the everyday experience.[37] Despite such efforts as Dewey's, art history remained largely an elitist model, aided in this by modernism's turn to abstraction. It now took specialized training to understand at what one was looking. Art remained in the hands of a relatively small percentage of the population.

In the 1970s, there was a movement to include a social history of art into art history. This was an early reaction to the ideas behind the emergence of cultural studies in Europe, as well as an attempt to re-legitimize the relevance of art to the larger culture. It failed to revitalize the category of art, which is the entire foundation of art history.[38] It was not until art history encountered cultural studies in the late 1980s that things began to change. Art history hit a critical time. It had a crisis of self-awareness and a lack of definition in its product. Along with this, the culture wars began to inject a sense of the importance of the social aspect of art. This was the time that visual culture became an idea. A "fracturing of the field of art history helped give rise to visual culture."[39]

Since the 90s, visual culture and art history have existed side by side in the university. Although feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and

[36] Trafi-Pratts, "Art Historical Appropriation," 156
[37] Ibid.," 156
[38] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 66
[39] Ibid., 2

multicultural perspectives contributed to diversification in art history, and added to the social role of art, it has not bridged the gap in the selection of objects. Art history studies a select group of visual objects, while visual studies see no differentiation between objects. At its heart, this divergence is known as the high-low debate, and it is the main source of conflict between and within art history and visual culture.

The high-low debate centers around the controversy of the existence of a high, or refined, culture, and a low, or popular one and the validity of each. Art history is predicated on the belief that the high-low divide exists and art is considered to be a sign of high culture. In visual culture theory, however, it is the popular that is the most authentic expression of culture. This makes it relevant on a level that high art cannot be, unless it is simply considered on equally relevant terms.[40] Thus, in visual culture theory, the distinction between high and low ceases to exist. All visual objects are considered to be signifiers of culture.

Art historian and critic, James Elkins, calls the high-low debate the most important discussion in visual culture.[41] He makes this claim noting that it is a debate that exists within visual culture as well as between art history and visual culture. For Elkins, there are two positions one can take in this debate within the sphere of visual culture. They are, quite obviously, that first, the division between high and low still stands, and second, high and low can no longer be considered functionally separate. Proponents of visual culture who believe that there is a distinction between high and low can be said to use a "soft" visual culture, since in pure theory visual culture does not

[40] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 69
[41] Elkins, "Visual Studies,"45

allow for a division between high and low. "The lines that once separated fine art from popular culture have either become imperceptible, or register as disputed territories or sites of contestation."[42] And as Elkins himself puts it, "So far it has seemed that if the field (of visual culture) is to become a truly general study of images, capable of considering production, interpretation, and dissemination of images of all sorts, then it has to adhere to its basic tenet that the difference between high and low has become inoperative." Visual culture seems clear in its position on the hierarchy of visual objects.

The distinction between high and low had long been under study in art history before visual culture became significant. Modern art was the art of the future. It was high art, or fine art. Lower forms of objects that were a part of popular culture were known as "kitsch." By the 70s, however, this distinction was under debate, especially challenged by minimalism and conceptual art. Modern art began to lose its elevated sense of purpose.[43] Due to the emergence of postmodern theory the distinction between high and low was lessened even further.[44] Postmodern art mingled high and low to the point that the distinction was no longer relevant. [45] Thus, the debate was within art history even as the idea of visual culture was taking shape. Just as visual culture has its core belief in its object of study, so too does art history. Both study objects that are generally decided by intention. Art privileges its objects by the purpose for which it was made. Visual culture similarly privileges its objects based on their intention of production. The existence of the high-low divide is inherent in art history's theory.

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[42] Arthur D Efland, "Problems Confronting Visual Culture," *Art Education*, Vol. 58, No. 6, (2005) 36
[43] Ibid., 36
[44] Donalyn Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 41
[45] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 47

Visual culture, at its core intent, denies the relevance, or even the existence, of this divide.

This is not to say that there are no adherents to visual culture that attempt to provide for some sense of high-low in their methodology. Fredric Jameson, literary critic and political theorist, does not claim that there is no high and low, but that that concept "is superseded, absorbed, and reconstituted as commercial culture, which consumes such distinctions."[46] This is still however, a negation of the high low distinction in the end. Margaret Dikovitskaya is not interested in erasing the high low- distinction, the boundaries still exist, "but their definitions are determined by the type of materials rather than the degree of aesthetic sophistication."[47]

Perhaps those that take the view that the high-low distinction does exist, even in an altered form like Dikovitskaya's, are aware that visual culture as a practice does tend to favor certain visual materials. Whether this is medium based: film, video, advertisements, or subject based, there are exemplars of visual culture. This is true with Benneton advertisements, of which Elkins says, "they remain a favorite subject in visual culture, sometimes even serving as exemplary subjects for the field as a whole."[48] He goes on to state that these ads are privileged because they are more innovative, complex, and ambiguous than other examples. However, if there is such a distinction of importance and relevance to these ads then, "why study ads at all when art is tailor made

[46] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 47
[47] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 69
[48] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 52

for such a study."[49] So in some ways, the division between high and low that exists in art history are replicated in visual culture.

The high-low distinction is also relevant because of its significance to the distribution of power in a society and the effects images have on it. Visual culture is occupied with how visual objects affect the larger population of a culture, so it employs methods to discern the ways in which that power is utilized to influence and control. As such, fine art, being less known to the general public and inclined to being studied by only a small segment of the population, unlike images from television, the movies, and the internet, does not have the impact on the culture at large that images created for mass consumption do. This mass dispersal is important to visual culture, which is only interested in how these images relate to the population as they impact the entirety of culture, rather than only a small, more highly defined few. Art simply does not have the reach of a nationally distributed image, such as a magazine advertisement.

In the end however, sociologists recognize that people can be divided between those who adhere to fine art (high) and those who consume mass media (low).[50] So a distinction between the two is an observable fact. This can be broken down even further when it is acknowledged that different kinds of images and visual objects are produced for different social classes specifically for the purpose of distinguishing one class from another.[51] Due to the poststructuralist and Marxist influences, class division and the distribution of power within a culture are important to both art history and visual culture.

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[49] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 52
[50] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 47
[51] Paul Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments, Definitions, and Directions for Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 42, no.2 (2001), 108

For art history, however, the importance of the object and its autonomy remain the primary concern, while visual culture sees the visual object as more of a signifier of the hierarchy of culture and places its emphasis on exactly how and why these images are used by the empowered within a culture. To art history, the object is preeminent. For visual culture, it is the culture in which these objects function that is most significant. For education reform advocates like Paul Duncum, the reality of an aesthetic hierarchy is undeniable, but his concern is that art and art educators will neglect the impact of those images which affect the everyday function of society and focus on that which is more esoteric and approachable only by a few.[52]

Though the high-low debate can be said to be the most important conversation between art history and visual culture it is by no means the only source of contention. The high-low debate and the distinction, or lack of, it in the designation of objects is significant in the discussion of the two. The perceived elitism this division of objects implies are also points of difference between art history and visual culture. Visual culture objects to the concept of the use of the term "art" to designate works where particular aesthetic features are present and are said to raise them above the level of merely being useful.[53] Though largely ignoring anything prior to the 1950s, visual culture includes all of those objects designated as art in its inventory of visual objects, granting no privileging hierarchy. For some like Dikovitskaya, this creates an entirely different discipline when compared to art history. "The scholarship that rejects the primacy of art in relation to other discursive practices and yet focuses on the sensuous and semiotic

[52] Efland, "Problems Confronting," 39
[53] Ibid., 38

peculiarity of the visual can no longer be called art history…"[54] In its departure from art history, however, visual culture creates its own canon of visual objects to study. Visual culture concentrates, "on the larger range of visual artifacts connected to postmodern technology produced and reproduced phenomena and their extensive global reach."[55]

Despite having its own particular canon of objects, visual culture criticizes art history for having the same type of established set of artifacts. "The idea of a canon of masterpieces repels enthusiasts for visual culture since the act of listing forces one to exclude other works that might reveal important cultural or social factors."[56] Once again, it is the value or relevance to the culture that gives the object its significance, and not a prescription to a set of aesthetic values. To visual culture this privileging of objects, as well as the tendency to allow autonomy to objects, is undesirable. As Kevin Tavin puts it, "Art history's disciplinary parameters have been fossilized by its allegiance to an ahistorical and therefore 'natural' notion of cultural values, visual culture can engage in an endless dialogue with the social forces which would seek to privilege one conception of the valuable above another."[57] Visual culture even asks what makes art and history go together in the first place and should this connection be rejected in favor of the overall of culture.[58] Dikovitskaya even states, "categorizing something as a part of art history implies that it has the distinct and privileged status of an art object, thus imbuing the category itself undermines the very premise of visual culture."[59] The categorization of

[54] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 49
[55] Trafi-Pratts, "Art Historical Appropriation," 153
[56] Efland, "Problems Confronting," 38
[57] Tavin, "Wrestling with Angels," 208
[58] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 66
[59] Ibid., 20

visual objects then, is contrary to the very nature of visual culture. The idea that some works might be in some sense aesthetically better than others is ultimately resisted by visual culture.[60] Visual culture simply does not hold with the traditions of art history in the passing of technique and style from one artist to the next. It does not give weight to the idea of schools or movements and it rejects the notion of the individual artist as a genius untouched by the world.[61] Visual studies, "treats all images as worthy of investigation."[62] To visual culture, the popular art in comic books, television, and political cartoons plays a role much like painting in the past.[63]In this regard, the medium of the image is much less important than it is to art historical analysis.

The debates between art history and visual culture over these issues can be quite contentious. As James Elkins writes, from a visual culture perspective, art history is "disconnected from contemporary life, essentially or even prototypically elitist, politically naïve, bound by older methodologies, wedded to the art market, or hypnotized by the allure of a limited set of artists and artworks."[64] Elkins, however, also points out art history's reply: "Visual culture can appear lacking in historical awareness, transfixed by a simplified notion of visuality, careless about the differences in media, insouciant about questions of value, and sloppy in its eclectic choice of objects and methods."[65] Some art historians consider visual culture studies a "deskilling of the refined practices of visual interpretation that art history training provides."[66]

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[60] Efland, "Problems Confronting," 38
[61] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 120
[62] Ibid., 119
[63] Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments" 107
[64] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 23
[65] Ibid., 23
[66] Trafi-Pratts, "Art Historical Appropriation," 153

These are strong words from both sides of the debate. There is, however, a contingent within art history and visual culture that seek reconciliation. Those on the art historical side of the divide can see the cultural relevance of popular imagery. This is especially true since so much of popular imagery has been used in art since the advent of pop art. Those on the visual culture side see the relevance of contemporary art to their field, especially given that usage of popular imagery. The pop art of the 50s and 60s is as far as visual culture is willing to go, however, and has little interest in images that predate what they see as the turning point in the visual nature of society. This inclusion of popular imagery in contemporary art suggests that visual culture and art history may not be so separate after all. It brings a certain continuity to art history. "Dividing art history from visual culture also severs the continuous history of art, which after all includes contemporary popular images…"[67] In this light, art history can be seen as a forerunner to visual culture, which is ostensibly poised to replace it. This is one of three positions one can take, writes Margaret Dikovitskaya, that visual culture is a natural outgrowth of art history, which concludes that art history is a valuable tool for, and a viable root of, visual culture. The second position is summed up as believing art history and visual culture are separate and independent of one another. In this form they would be competing, but independent theories of visuality. This does not explain the similarity in methodology or the fact that visual culture's earliest conversations were among art historians. At least in the beginning, art history and visual culture share a part of their history. The third position is that visual culture threatens art history as a traditional discipline.[68] This is a

[67] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 54
[68] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 2

more academic oriented position than the others and refers to how and what should be taught in art curricula, not only at the university level but also in the k-12 classroom. Art history is seen as outdated and inefficient at preparing students for the challenges of interpreting the constant bombardment of mass visual imagery.

CHAPTER 5

PEDAGOGY

Of the programs that are offered at the university level Nicolas Mirzoeff has said that if, "students do not get the ability to be critical viewers from the university they will not judge them to be providing the tools they need."[69] Making the task of preparing students for their real-world encounters more difficult are the changes that both student culture and the university culture have been going through for the past 20 years. Global capitalism has made the university more corporate and the domination of modes of discourse by electronic media has influenced a generation. American culture across all ages and boundaries is bombarded with imagery. The emergence of these new media technologies is the visual culture students experience on a daily basis.[70]So students already arrive with some pre-rendered decisions about the meaning behind the popular images that constitute so much of their visual perception. This can, however, make it difficult to get them to question some of these beliefs through visual culture methodology of images that they find so familiar.[71] As Paul Duncum states, "A visual culture approach requires a substantial shift in what is to be known about images."[72] This shift is

[69] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 85
[70] Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 41
[71] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 86
[72] Paul Duncum, "Clarifying Visual Culture Education," *Art Education* 55, no.3 (2002), 7

ostensibly the critical thinking necessary to decode these images that educators are trying to establish in their students.

Margaret Dikovitskaya claims that visual studies does indeed prepare students for the contemporary world,[73] but art critic and professor Rosalind Krauss says all that visual studies really does in the end is to train students to be better consumers. The contention does not end at the theoretical level and is contested at the university level just as vehemently. This conflict is predicated on theoretical differences but takes as its practical site of contestation the hallowed halls of academia. Quoting Arthur Danto, "You cannot tell when something is art just by looking at it, for there is no particular way that art has to look." Arthur Efland says, "one cannot teach art simply by looking at examples. So, the question is, how does one teach the arts and what does one teach?"[74] These are questions struggled with by both art history and visual culture pedagogy, both on the college level and below. Art history because globalization and colonialism have pushed at boundaries in the legitimizing of their object, and visual culture because the apparently limitless nature of its visual objects left little consensus on what was to be studied. Art history had at least its pedagogic tradition; visual culture was left as a scramble of intradisciplinary processes.

In the 1990's, it was largely the lack of a conversation between cultural studies and art history at the academic level that solidified the necessity, in the minds of proponents, for a new academic discipline.[75] And such was what was born in visual studies. It has all the requisite attributes: a methodology, borrowed from other disciplines

[73] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 85
[74] Efland, "Problems Confronting," 36
[75] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 27

including art history, a history, if as nothing other than an outgrowth of art history or film studies, and an object of study, if a rather vague and ambitiously broad one. Visual culture fires the imaginations of educators with the possibilities of a literate populace capable of discerning meaning in the images encountered. Visual culture-based art education, unlike the more stoic art history discipline based, could focus on the diverse ways people deal with the visual products of a global capitalism.[76] The argument for a visual culture-based art education has been made.

Visual culture was invited into the classroom by new media technologies and post-modern theory; this left some educators with confusion over what was an appropriate educational response to these contemporary non-art images.[77] Mass marketed images dominate the visual world, while postmodernism blurs the lines between art and kitsch. Traditionally, art educators place art from museums and galleries, especially historical works, at the center of the art education curriculum, however, in a constantly increasing fashion, the art student's perception is pieced together from popular culture images. This causes a disruption in what is seen as appropriate culture between what is accepted as high, or good, culture in the art pieces that are studied and low common culture that proliferates in the imagery of everyday life. This reinforces the cultural hierarchy that implies one is better or higher than the other.[78] It injects the high-low debate into the pedagogical discussion. In response, visual culture proposes cultural and narrative approaches, rather than what it views as a highly selective

[76] Duncum, "Clarifying Visual Culture," 8
[77] Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 44
[78] Tavin, "Wrestling with Angels," 197

standard of art history education that is based on "sequences of events and facts."[79] This proposition lessens, but does not alleviate, visual culture's problem with the hierarchy of images.

These approaches are, however, already pertinent to art historical education. These are approaches which are favored by methodologies like post-colonialism and Marxism, and as such have already been integrated into art history curricula, in varying degrees. There is less room to implement cultural Marxism in the k-12 classroom, but by the post-secondary years, Marxist theory and other methodologies are essential to the programs. It is of note, however, that for almost two decades, postmodern theory and socio-reconstructionist art educators "have embraced a model of art history based on inquiry, cultural critique, and alternative cultural narratives, but the institutional realities of how art education students learn art history often do not reflect the theoretical developments…" of the field.[80] This is especially true at the k-12 level, where there is often a limited time in the art classroom that precludes the use of these critiques and narratives.

As with the larger general theory visual culture's objects of study in the classroom are not tantamount to art's history. Visual culture is not interested in painting, sculpture, and architecture, but in film, photography, video, television, and the internet. These latter are contemporary images. As previously stated, visual culture is not interested in any pre-1950s medium. This severs visual culture from art history by labeling as unimportant much of the works art history analyzes and critiques, while reinforcing the notion that

[79] Trafi-Pratts, "Art Historical Appropriation," 157
[80] Ibid., 157

only contemporary images have any relevance for a particular culture. As visual culture claims these images and they are largely ignored by art history this leaves a sense that art history is left "stranded teaching an apparently old-fashioned, essentially European canon of artists, inculcating what appears to be a traditional aesthetic education centered on painting, sculpture, and architecture."[81] Only a very few of those images; art history so highly prizes are interesting to visual culture.

At the university level, the separation of visual culture from art history is as apparent from their respective positions within the university as is the difference between the images they study. Visual culture's appearance in the university presaged a move from art to the visual and from historical to cultural.[82] This occurred in large part due to the department or departments of art history and visual culture found themselves in. Visual culture is usually not tied to the art history department in larger universities, but more often is hosted by the film studies or women's studies departments, and can have connections to English, comparative literature, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. Due to these connections, visual culture is generally considered to be interdisciplinary. This is a label most enthusiasts and researchers support. Not being tied to any single department or even school gives visual culture the appearance of autonomy in its methodology. The relationship of visual culture to such disciplines as anthropology, and its connections to postmodern theory, also gives a perceived place for scholars of the visual within the university, thus granting legitimacy to the overall study of visual culture's images.[83] The validity of visual scholars and the connections to many different

[81] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 22
[82] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 5
[83] Ibid., 18

disciplines gives proponents of visual culture the belief that it contributes in a significantly different way to academic scholarship than the known practices in the humanities. Further, it has "the capacity to uncover connections between parts of the university that are now largely disjointed."[84] For the contemporary university this is significant and to be desired.

The modern university sought to compartmentalize disciplines according to their type and methodologies. The contemporary university is run more like a corporation, in downsizing mode. Visual culture's apparent interdisciplinary nature appeals to this trend. "Essentially, interdisciplinarity serves the efficiency directive, and in this capacity, visual studies do threaten the discipline of art history."[85] However, visual culture "as a transdisciplinary practice, does not negate or discount all disciplinary areas of inquiry- it merely refuses to remain confined to restricted parameters defined by experts in a given field."[86] James Elkins cautions, however, that though universities continue to struggle with where to place visual culture, "it does not follow that the scattered practices are interdisciplinary in a theoretical sense." For Elkins, the lack of a solid academic anchor may not be the blessing visual culture takes it for and is a main cause of friction between art history and visual culture. This is due to the assignment of older art, by default or preference, to art history and new images and media being appropriated by film studies and other departments and by the lack of a conversation in academia between two theories that both examine visuality.[87] Disagreement over object and academic anchoring

[84] Elkins, "Visual Studies," vii
[85] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Culture: Cultural Turn," 99
[86] Tavin, "Wrestling with Angels," 208
[87] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 8

may exacerbate the differences between the fields of art history and visual culture, but they are not the only conditions to be considered.

Elkins goes on to describe what he sees as one of the top sources of contention between the two fields and it has nothing to do with theory. "Mistrust between the two fields springs less from genuine methodological, historical, and political disagreements than from two much less exalted sources: a fear, sometimes legitimate, about jobs and the relative positions of departments within universities."[88] Elkins point is that economic considerations cannot be ignored. Teaching art history requires a number of experts in specific fields, while visual culture can borrow professors from other fields. There are simply fewer positions to fill in the faculty. There is no need, and no practical way, to hire specialists in the different areas of visual culture. All that is necessary is that the curriculum be rearranged so that visuality becomes the subject being taught. This enables visual culture, though it lacks a disciplinary home in all but a few universities, to thrive within several different disciplines at once. It is cost effective. Not needing new or specialized faculty, the university is quicker to accept visual culture as a very contemporary interdisciplinary practice that needs no special considerations. Art history on the other hand, relies on specialized faculty and requires its own home within the university. This then is Elkins friction.

For the university student, visual culture programs offer both more opportunities and more considerations. Visual culture programs, like those at Rochester, offer advanced degrees in visual culture, and draw their students from an assortment of fields. This is limited however, as the majority of students pursue the field in which they began

[88] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 24

their college career. Nor can visual culture expect art students to naturally gravitate toward this newer theory of visuality. For the art student who specializes in pre-modern art, the contemporary images of visual culture hold no appeal. The problem, however, extends beyond those universities that offer advanced degrees in visual culture to those universities that offer courses of the interdisciplinary nature. It might seem logical to attach visual culture courses to the graduate degree requirements but how does one integrate these courses into programs that already leave little time for courses outside a student's specialty? Some universities' art departments, like Azusa Pacific in California, have requirements for visual culture courses within its graduate art history program. This can solve the problem nicely, but only for those universities where the visual culture courses are already considered within the art history department.

For those programs not affiliated with art history programs the solution can mean one of two possibilities. The first is to incorporate art historical conventions into visual culture and require courses on pre-modern art. The second would be to design each visual culture course to spend an equal amount of time on pre-modern and non-western images as it does on contemporary visual objects.[89] Neither of these solutions compels visual culture enthusiasts. Bringing art historical conventions could lead to reinforcing the hierarchy of images, which visual culture advocates strive to reduce or eliminate. The second may be more palatable, but the study of pre-modern art raises some concerns in that visual culture does not believe that pre-modern images can have any bearing on, or be definitive of, our contemporary culture. Besides, visual culture already has an enormous number of contemporary images to choose from so why add in images that

[89] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 42

simply are not relevant to our culture? In this light, restructuring visual culture to be more like art history does not seem to be a solution to the friction between the two.

Visual culture in arts education promises much in its proposition to make understandable the vagaries of the contemporary image and to give students some sense of the meaning behind how mass media images work within a culture, but it is not without its problems. These problems cannot be overlooked by those intent on replacing traditional art history education with a visual culture approach. From the political structure of the university departments to the k-12 sense that visual culture's excessive breadth of genres makes it unmanageable to teach in the time allotted for the arts.[90] It seems that visual culture has questions to answer before it can replace traditional art history, if it ever could. The division between the two competing theories remains with no apparent answer.

As proponents of visual culture see it, the need for a study of visual culture will not diminish in the foreseeable future, "as developed societies increase their reliance on visual imagery, so will the need for understanding it increase."[91] Conversely, art history is a valuable tool for education because it is the language and representation of human reality and possibility.[92] Both art history and visual culture seem to have staked their place in arts education, but can both thrive? With the deficit of time allotted in the k-12 arena, the politics of the university, and overall theoretical differences, can the two coexist, especially as visual culture appears so intent on severing its relationship to art history? But it is not a zero-sum game. The strength of one does not indicate the

[90] Efland, "Problems Confronting," 37
[91] Duncum, "Visual Culture: Developments," 109
[92] Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 42

weakness of another. The possibility for visual culture and art history to continue to exist side by side in art education is very real and quite likely, whether visual culture is considered a part of art history, vice versa, or they are two separate entities. Neither seems poised to be going anywhere any time soon.

CHAPTER 6

THE OBJECT

The differences between visual culture and art history are readily apparent in a comparison of their theory and pedagogic positions, but how do they relate to one another in practical application of their methodologies? How does each approach their object of study and how do the results of their analysis compare? Given the differences in theory and the contention between the two over what objects comprise their inventory one might expect that there would be quite a bit of disparity between their analysis. This is especially true given their disagreements over what visual objects are considered important. The truth, however, is that much of their methodological approach is similar and the results of their analysis might look very much alike. The questions each asks and what is considered important about a visual object varies but qualifying an analysis as being of visual culture or art history can be difficult without the knowledge of the approach to objects.

Compared with visual culture, art history places much more emphasis on the individuality and unique status of each object it addresses. For art history this unique existence of each object has much to do with the medium out of which it is created. Visual culture tends to gloss over the medium of the image in its analysis.[93] Visual

[93] Elkins, "Visual Studies," 49

culture downplays the significance of the medium due to so many of its objects being reproducible in various forms. This is especially true with the proliferation of digital images. Both visual culture and art history both agree, however, that visual objects are primary data and should be used as evidence of culture and philosophy rather than as illustration. This importance of the object aligns art history and visual culture with a common belief about how images express culture, with visual culture probing farther in its search for how visual objects affect culture. Art history, with its much more selective adherents, is interested in this aspect but from a different vantage point. Art history, though interested in what an image says about a culture is only interested in how it affects the production of other objects and the philosophy behind statements believed to be made by its objects. In this regard, art history is often concerned with more theoretical and philosophical meanings than visual culture, whose primary focus is upon the effect of images in culture.

The result of visual culture's privileging of cultural and objects interactions results in restrictions on its choice of visual objects. Since images are relevant mainly in regard to what they say about a culture and how they interact with it, much traditional artwork is not considered important, visual culture being only interested in contemporary imagery and considering anything pre-1950 as irrelevant to contemporary culture. Art history is, of course, built on a selection of images and visual objects from various historical pre-modern periods. Despite this vast difference in the consideration of objects, both apply similar methodologies to their selected images. Art history grew to incorporate strategies that visual culture originated with. Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, gender studies, queer studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and globalism

inform the approaches of art history and visual studies alike. The use of these approaches by both art history and visual culture is what causes the resulting object analyses can be very similar, even to the point of being hard to distinguish on a case by case basis. In fact, visual culture often sought to "apply methods previously reserved for high art objects to those things which are thought outside of that but are yet cultural objects or images."[94] The only distinguishing feature between the two might be the concentration on the object itself as autonomous by art history and the focus on cultural interactions by visual culture.

Discussions on the selection and approach to visual objects made by both art history and visual culture remain in the realm of theory. The actual similarities and differences of the result of study is a practical application. As an illustration three images have been chosen to consider from the vantage points of both art history and visual culture. Two of them are well-known traditional art images, Paul Cezanne's *Still Life with a Basket of Apples* (c.1895) and Francios Boucher's *L'Odalisque Brun* (1745). The third is a late twentieth century advertisement, viewed mostly in the medium of the magazine. This latter is a Benetton ad, chosen because of its proliferation in visual culture texts and pedagogy. Each has been examined through the lens of art history and visual culture perspectives. Side by side it is often striking to note the similarities between the results of visual culture's and art history's study, but the differences are highlighted as well.

[94] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies: Cultural Turn," 29

Figure 1: Still Life with a Basket of Apples, Paul Cezanne, 1895. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago.

The first image to be considered is Paul Cezanne's *Still Life with a Basket of Apples*. This painting is one of a series of still life works that Cezanne painted over his career. He returned to the genre time and again. As with the others in the series, this image is considered vital to the growth of modern painting. Art history might note that the painting is post-impressionist and is still concerned with impressionist sensibilities in its seeking to represent space and light. It was an impressionist concern to represent the totality of the experience of seeing, including the effects of light, position, time, color, and how the subject was perceived. Cezanne's painting reflects these influences. In this respect, however, the painting also becomes interesting to visual culture, which is also attentive to the process of seeing.

Art history would note that the painting was made at a time when the influence of photography was growing and may account for some of the artist's apparent decisions to forgo pictorial accuracy. This is true in both the rendering and the perspective. The

image seems to be composed from different angles, foreshadowing cubism. The table edge is not continuous from one side to the other and the cookies or rolls that sit on the plate are rendered from both edges on and top down. These instances might appear as mistakes made in drafting and composition but are actually calculated maneuvers designed to enhance the effect of movement through time and space. The viewer's position does not seem to be as frozen in place as was typical with Renaissance inspired perspective. As the viewer's eye wanders the painting so to moves the position from which the scene is viewed.

Art history would also note that the painting is in the genre of still life. During Cezanne's time still life was not considered to be genre of interest to artists and their patrons. Historical/ Heroic painting came first, followed by portraiture and landscape respectively. Still life was a lowly genre and not considered as a serious subject. Yet Cezanne proved that still life as a genre was ideal for the exploration of light and space. Unfortunately for the artist, his pioneering work and the important influence it would have on later painting was not recognized during his lifetime. Still life remained a neglected art form.

Cezanne routinely worked with apples in his still life paintings. This predilection for apples may partly be due to the fact that they do not spoil quickly but also can be attributed their usefulness as a simple form for exploring color and space. Apples are very varied in size and color. This was advantageous for Cezanne's purpose. In this image there are three types of apples that can be seen. These are some rather large reddish orange apples, a cluster of large green ones, and a large number of red, yellow, and green variegated ones.

The entire composition is split vertically down the center. The dark wine bottle and fold of the tablecloth serve to divide the other components into two distinct sides. This lends an overall balance to the image through the way that Cezanne arranges his composition. The image is closely cropped, showing only part of the table, the arrangement of objects, and a solid colored background wall. This makes the space very shallow and lends to the sense that the items are quite close to the surface of the canvas. Adding to this sense is the way that the basket seems to be tilted so that the apples are spilling forward. They push toward the edge of the image and along with the tilt of the table give the sensation of motion toward the picture plane. This movement gives a sense of the passage of time. Interestingly enough, the support that holds the basket up has been painted in. This is obviously a purposeful inclusion, possibly to add to the sense of the tilt of the basket, or to keep it from appearing to float in the air.

The paint quality varies, from the full thick richness of the apples to areas of the tablecloth that appear unfinished or even unpainted. This lends a variety to the painting that is mirrored in the types and positions of the apples. Yet the whole composition is balanced overall to achieve a rather stable depiction. Within the image, however, the variety and positioning of the objects lends to that sense of movement. It can almost be considered a static movement. Because of the quality of the brushstrokes and the differences in thickness and color, constant attention is drawn to the quality of the paint itself. This is a distinctly modern sensibility.

Pictorial realism does not seem to be the objective with Cezanne's painting. Though he has painted the objects using a realistic, if possibly embellished, color palette, the objects are often outlined rather expressively. Occasionally Cezanne's outlines are in

black, further reducing the faithfulness the pictorial representation. The application of the paint is not in thin washes designed to capture the texture and color of the objects. This is achieved rather by the use of bold swatches of color that are often thickly applied.

Art history's analysis of this image is not complete at this point, but it is easy to see that the concentration lies upon the actual physical object and nature of the painting. There are other methodologies that can be brought to bear, though considering the subject of the painting they may have little to say here. It is not even evident from the study of the image that any notion of class or cultural importance can be gained. For this particular image, the newest of art history's methodologies would not be useful. Psychoanalysis might make something of the particular objects chosen, such as the relation of the apple to Christianity and as symbolic of the Garden of Eden, but much more would be reading into the image. Cezanne's painting, especially as it was an ignored genre in his own time, seems to have no real relation to the culture in which it was produced. This makes it an uninteresting subject for a visual culture study. The only aspect of this image that would hold any curiosity for visual culture is its sense of overall visuality rather than simple realistic depiction. Cezanne's painting, considered a vital component of art history, would be largely ignored by visual culture.

The second image to be viewed, and one that has considerable more of interest to visual culture, is Francois Boucher's *L'Odalisque Brun.* Because of the subject it depicts, among other factors, this image has achieved a notoriety in art history and plays into the considerations of visual culture. Boucher's representation of his nude female subject in a luxurious setting can be examined easily by the likes of feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic methodology. The questions visual culture seeks to answer, how do

Figure 2: *L'Odalisque Brun*, Francois Boucher, 1745. Oil on canvas. Musee du Louvre, Paris.

images embody racist, sexist, or class specific interests and how is power portrayed in the image, are similar to the ones that art history asks. Though this painting was made prior to the self-imposed statute of limitations of visual culture, it would still hold interest in our contemporary society. Visual culture would acknowledge the differences in culture between the one in which it was created and our contemporary society but might also see relevance in the depiction of women and the notions of class the painting represents.

Boucher's painting was made in the Rococo style, a very extravagant and sensuous style that was popular in the court painting of the aristocracy under Louis XV in France, circa the mid-1700s. Boucher's work was highly regarded during his lifetime, and he had many wealthy aristocratic patrons. He was even appointed the painter to the king. Rococo was an entirely upper-class creation, though the masses could see some of the paintings in the annual Salons. Boucher's works were highly regarded as Rococo exemplars and his career was supported by the French aristocracy. It was so popular that this particular pose was to go on to be one of a series, with only the face and background

being changed for individual patrons. Boucher's painting is a perfect example of what was later to be seen as the decadence and excesses of the noble class during the Rococo period.

The painting that inspires such discussion itself depicts a young woman, nude from the waist down, lying with her backside offered up to view she looks back over her shoulder at the viewer. The bedclothes are soft cottony white; the drapery is velvety and supple. There are porcelain jars and strings of pearls on a small table below the woman's elbow. A Chinese screen emerges from the folds of the velvet and the bed sits on a patterned rug. The entire scene is one of extravagance and wealth. The palette is blue and pink and white, Rococo colors, arranged to set one another off. The scene is intimate and blatant. The girl does not look surprised. She is enticing and inviting.

There is what would be considered problems, in contemporary times, with almost every aspect of this painting. Classism, sexism, and even racism can all be argued in this image. The Marxist would point out the class considerations implied by the painting. The décor is lavish and rich. The painting itself was created for an elite group that consisted of the wealthy French aristocracy. It was not created for the masses in any sense. In this way it is symbolic of class and wealth divisions, especially considering the plight of the average citizen in France at this time as compared to the aristocracy. The feminist would engage the ideas of the way the woman is depicted. She seems to have been painted as a willing participant in a setting designed to satisfy the fantasy of the male viewer, who, in turn, becomes a voyeur of the prurient scene. The bedclothes are unkempt, as if rumpled by passion, further adding to the idea of male fantasy. The depiction approaches race in its orientalism. The Chinese screen and porcelain vessels

allude to the east, which was also in fashion among the aristocracy of the time, and the title of the work literally means a female slave or a concubine. It is a harem scene, depicted in a perceived foreign manner so as to not have to place the blatantly sexual nature of the image on the shoulders of western culture. It is a form of cultural appropriation that would continue through the time of Picasso before it became self-aware of this fact. Psychoanalysis applied to Boucher's painting would be inclined to inflate the idea of male fantasy and the gaze of the viewer as psychological occurrences. Psychoanalysis would be as interested in the psychology of the viewer as much as to that of the painter. As it focuses on the site of spectatorship psychoanalysis asks questions that are of interest to visual culture, as the viewer can be considered to always be in contemporary time and thus relevant to contemporary culture. Art history would be interested in such questions as well, but approach the subject from a more historical position, trying to understand the culture in which the painting was created just as well as the one in which it exists now. Overall, Boucher's painting is important not only to art history, but to visual culture as well, though the fact remains that as a pre-1950s visual object it would not generally be targeted for analysis.

The final image is an advertisement for Benetton created in 1991. It was seen mainly reproduced as a photograph in magazines, though the controversy surrounding it gave it some representation in the medium of television. It is important to note that though the image may seem rather tame now, it was shocking and precedent setting when it was produced. Gay rights had not made the advancements it has since 1991 and interracial relationships were viewed with suspicion. In fact, the image is often one of

Figure 3: United Colors of Benetton Advertisement, 1991

considered one of Benneton's most controversial ever. This is part of what attracts visual culture to it.

There is a confrontational message in its construction. A message that is relevant to the culture in the time it was produced, as well as being relevant to culture today given its relatively recent creation. In an aesthetically pleasing way, that would appeal to an art historian, the Benetton ad confronts the viewer with issues they might not want to address.

The image depicts two young women, one bond hair and blue eyed, the other African American, holding a baby of Asian descent between them. They are all wrapped in a green and pink blanket, presumably what Benetton was selling. Their hands are crossed over one another's, and they appear to be unclothed beneath Benetton's blanket. They are unified together as a family, just not the one that was expected in 1991. The background is an indistinct white, overall lending to a feeling of intimacy in an implied shallow space.

In this advertisement Benetton address several social issues, as relevant today as in the late 90s. Lesbianism, interracial relationships, and gay adoption are prominently depicted. These are issues that have come to the forefront of the national discussion since 1991. They are the issues we deal with every day. They are the issues of culture. Advertisements like Benetton's are privileged by visual culture for their willingness to address them. They make any analysis of them by visual culture methodology easier with the attention they place on these types of taboo social issues. Add to this the notion that there is an aesthetic value to the ads and you have an image tailored to visual culture analysis. Art history, on the other hand, might acknowledge some aesthetic thought to the image, but still be disinterested in its analysis. This image is not an object that has been afforded with the status of art object. Postmodern theory might blur the lines, but it is still known that the ads are not art in the accepted sense of the word.

The depiction of social issues in the Benetton ad would be examined with the same methodologies as visual culture approached the Boucher painting. Marxism might take interest in the depiction of young beautiful people as the targets for the ad. It would be interested in the class of people that Benetton is trying to influence. Feminism would look at the social position of the women in relation to the acceptance of their relationship and rights. Post-colonialism, globalization, and minority studies would examine the racial combination of the group, noting the diversity added by the choice of the baby. These theories would be interested in the interracial relationship and the inclusion of an Asian child as the adopted infant. Psychoanalysis would again be as interested, if not more, in the psychological position of the viewer of the image. How is it received by the viewer, alone and as an aggregate of society? There are implications of social change

occurring between the period the image was produced up to the current time. These implications are at the heart of visual culture analysis, how images such as this Benetton ad affect culture and are affected by culture at a given time.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Art history and visual culture are inextricably linked. This is because they share a common history in academic discussion, especially in art history departments, in the 1970s and 80s and because they are both theories of visuality and seeing. Due to these things they have in common, they are seemingly destined to be set in competition with one another. This competition is not over methodologies, however, but over the objects that are relevant to their area of study. Visual culture is interested in visual objects that proliferate in popular contemporary culture, while art history concerns itself with a set of select objects that are said to have aesthetic and conceptual importance. For visual culture, most art objects, because they date to a period prior to 1950, are no longer relevant. They simply do not apply to, or have meaning in, the lives of the contemporary public. Art objects may even have a diminished significance due to its adherents being such a small segment of the population. For art history, most of the images that visual culture finds interesting are too mass produced and common to have any relevance to art history. Once and a while an exception may be made, but in general art finds these objects to be kitsch, too mass marketed and pop culture to be considered art, and are therefore unworthy of attention. The history of art and the history of images and objects are important to art history. Visual culture is mainly focused on the contemporary, the moment of now. The debate over what should be studied can be cantankerous. Visual

culture is reluctant to consider any visual objects as privileged and art history is loath to afford the same status to a magazine ad as it does to a Rembrandt. Although postmodernism has blurred these lines in art history and criticism, they remain still.

This argument is amplified by the realities in the universities of funding, staffing, and space. Often visual culture and art history compete over positions for professors and funding for programs. The corporate-like atmosphere of many universities demands that finances be carefully measured. Art history is a storied member of the university system. It is a traditional discipline. Art history has its own lecture halls, classrooms, and buildings. Visual culture is a newcomer. It has no tradition or history yet to hinge upon, and it is generally taught in the spaces of various departments. It needs no special considerations of place. Due partly to the fact that visual culture is, arguably, interdisciplinary and does not require their own spaces, it has found not only a foothold, but has grown within the academic atmosphere.

Visual culture offers a fascinating look into the images that use and are used within a culture. As a process, it is important in that it asks us to be aware of the meanings and intentions behind the images that bombard us on a daily basis. It gives us insight into who we are as a society. So, too, does art history. Only the objects it uses are different. It is meaningful here to remember the words of Donalyn Heise, who said: "Artists are often inspired by their surroundings. They create in response to their personal experiences and as a means to share their stories. Their work often reveals their culture, identity, and beliefs."[95]Art history is just as valid a method for exploring culture and identity as visual culture. Both are important academically and theoretically. Both

[95] Heise, "Is Visual Culture," 43

share a passion for the objects they study. In the end, visual culture and art history do much the same thing. They help us to learn more about who we are and why we do the things we do. This makes them both important to our sense of being human.

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