



James Elkins, fotografia de Afonso Ramos, Novembro de 2009.

James Elkins, professor na Escola do Art Institute of Chicago, é autor de uma vasta bibliografia no campo da História da Arte e dos Visual Studies que tem por um lado focado uma reflexão sobre a prática historiográfica e por outro tentado prestar atenção a temas que são habitualmente ignorados ou considerados incómodos por essa prática. É autor de livros como *Pictures and Tears, Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts, What Painting Is, On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* e prepara-se agora para publicar *What Photography Is*. Organi-

zou também os volumes resultantes dos encontros no Stone Summer Theory Institute de Chicago, como *Is Art History Global?* Esteve em Lisboa no fim de Novembro de 2009 a convite da Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, onde, além de ensinar um seminário de doutoramento, proferiu uma conferência pública com o título “Conceptual problems in the study of art criticism, history and theory”. Esta longa conversa teve lugar por ocasião dessa visita.

COM JAMES ELKINS

CONDUZIDA POR AFONSO RAMOS (AR), JOANA CUNHA LEAL (JCL) E MARIANA PINTO DOS SANTOS (MPS)

Entrevista

JCL: I'd like to begin by asking you, aren't the conceptual problems in the study of art criticism, history and theory virtually infinite?

Probably. But it should be said that I didn't choose that conference topic because it is infinite. The most challenging problems are the ones that people don't recognize as problems. On top of that list, for me, is the material nature of the art object, because art historians are full of ideas about materiality, but the discourse of art history actually doesn't get very close to the substance of the artwork except in very rare cases.

Here's a nice case in point. The Stone Summer Theory Institute in Chicago in July 2008 was called "What is an image?" At the conference, the French art historian Jacqueline Lichtenstein was trying to tell everyone that art history does not take *paintings* seriously as material objects; her example was French 18th and 19th centuries oil painting. According to Jacqueline, art historians are really only always talking about *pictures*, even though in the 19th century there was a discourse exemplified by people like Huysmans and Zola, in which the painting's

materiality was acknowledged. That was met with silence, basically, because no one at the seminar was much interested in descriptions that sounded like they might have become detached from art history – Zola's poetic descriptions, for example, as Jacqueline was quoting them.

Often enough, if you start talking about individual brush marks in a painting, you risk being seen as a formalist, because it seems you're no longer dealing with a social context. I consider myself out on a lunatic fringe on this issue; my book on that subject called *What Painting Is* goes into much more detail than people like Zola do. The point I made at the conference is that if you try to attend to the materiality of a painting, for example, on an inch by inch basis, you do not necessarily become a formalist. What happens is that the connections between what you're looking at and anything that has historical meaning become more and more difficult to find. So the *speed* of your writing and the speed of your thinking slow. It can seem as if that kind of seeing is sequestered away from historical concerns, but I don't think it is. It just takes so long, and results in so few insights, that it can appear to be "merely" formalist.

I think one of the few scholars who really care about this in historical terms is Tim [T.J.] Clark; in many different texts he tries to slow his own looking, and attend to the matter of the painting itself, to the point where his reading almost stops. There's a passage in *Farewell to an Idea* on Pollock's *Number 1, 1948* in which Clark looks at a little red hook of paint that's in the upper center of the painting, and makes a claim about its importance. In another chapter, one on cubism, he looks at a little bit of a painting by Picasso, a passage just a quarter of an inch square. At moments like that I have the impression he feels that there is a kind of a limit case to the *historical* perusal of the inch-by-inch matter of visual art. If you get too close, your reading in terms of art history actually slows down, almost to a stop, and at that point there is a break. You can then go on and do something else, which he chooses not to do, because he wants to remain within art history. (The book *What Painting Is* has all kinds of problems, and one is that it forgets history all the time.) We were talking, earlier, about what might be the most difficult problem in art history and visual studies. Perhaps it is problems like this that don't appear as problems. Because academics often feel that they are good at naming problems, and they feel that the framing of the problem is sufficient to articulate the working issues around it. So materiality has a huge literature. But that literature, from this point of view, doesn't help. The issue is what happens when you try to put your sense of an artwork's materiality into words. How much of the sum total of art historical and critical literature captures or embodies the artwork's materiality, as opposed to simply pointing at it, defining it, speaking about it in a general or abstract sense, or finding social contexts and meanings for it?

JCL: I would turn this conversation toward the question of theory, the relation between art history and theory. You have made a thorough analysis of the kind of impact theory can have on the common practice of art history, considering the dominance of – or at least the temptation of producing – an archival art history. In your book *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts* you present a new term:

metatheoresis. I believe that this kind of analysis is vital to the contemporary practice of art history, since there isn't much archival work left to be done as it has been well recognized since the beginning of the eighties. There is that famous article by Henri Zerner...

My own dissertation supervisor E. E. Rosenthal, used to say that Renaissance art is not a very promising study field because it's like a meadow that has too many sheep on it, and the grass is too sparse. He was thinking not about archival but iconographic studies, which he thought had reached their end point.

JCL: Yes, that's included in my understanding of the common practice of art history. But isn't this appeal to theory constitutive of a significant part of the discipline from the beginning?

In what sense, for example?

JCL: For example, we tend to separate the common practice of art history from theoretical writing which lies at its foundation. I'm thinking about the work of the first art historians, the ones that worked most in defining the discipline, from Riegl to Wölfflin, but I can also mention Burckhardt or even Panofsky. The appeal of theory is right there, in the first texts and on the most relevant art historians. Because when you consider the common practice of the discipline, it seems that the only work deemed acceptable would be an iconographical analysis or the positivist archival practice...

It's a difficult subject, I think, because I wouldn't disagree that there are theoretical moments in Wölfflin. Of course in the *Principles* he starts with that and in his essays. And there are overtly theoretical moments in Panofsky. But there are two things to be said about this: one superficial and the other perhaps not so superficial. The superficial answer would be that the theoretical

moments in those writers are exceptional, unusual. Panofsky is exceptional in his generation for writing, in the beginning of his career, a number of theoretically inclined essays on subjects such as artistic volition. And also in the collection *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, where he thinks about his time in the United States ["Epilogue: Three Decades of Art History in the United States. Impressions of a Transplanted European", *Meaning in the Visual Arts* – London, New York: Penguin Book, 1983, pp. 368-395 (1st ed. Doubleday, 1955)], he considers his theoretical essays and says something like "of course I don't write this way, I don't use this when I write". So, for the first generations of twentieth-century art historians, theory was optional both in the sense that an historian might opt not to meditate on his or her philosophic position, and also in the sense that such meditations could be seen as detached from the work of art history.

That's a superficial answer because, so it is said, theory already exists everywhere. The most difficult question here for me is not whether this argument makes sense or is fruitful, but why it is made to begin with, because every time I've heard versions of this argument in the past, it's been made from a post-structuralist point of view in which no discourse exists without theory. In other words, from a position that shouldn't require the argument to be made to begin with. Yet, it's of interest from a certain standpoint to demonstrate that theory runs through other practices. From here, there are many paths you can take. You can say the presence of theory in texts is a sub-textual question, even a question of the unconscious, so that any full or close reading will reveal theory, but from my point of view the interesting question is the motivation, which is to show that there isn't a demonstrable distance between the older art history, what I call *normal art history*, and contemporary art historical practices.

One of the things that I did in *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts* was to suggest in a very straightforward way that there is a difference between *normal art history*, with its sense of its distance from theoretical reflection, and contemporary art histories, with their insistence that theory is everywhere in texts. I did this in two ways. One was to say: Look in your library, see how many journals there

are that actually mention Lacan, or the theorist of your choice. That is a bibliographic way to demonstrate the two kinds of art historical practice. The other way, which I still think is perfectly plausible, if somewhat aggressive, is to say to people: If you think that there is no difference, can you write something that will be accepted by, let's say, the *Burlington Magazine*? Often, I think, the answer will be no. It's hard to write for those *normal art history* journals; just because you can demonstrate the existence of unvoiced theory in those texts doesn't mean you can reproduce their practices, which are very different from current practices. Hence, art history really can be divided into practices with and without theory.

JCL: I can tell you my motivation and it has to do with the relation to visual studies. It seems like art history is the poor relative. And visual studies act like the old challenging theoretical stances coming from fields other than art history, when it's not the case... Actually, some of the most interesting and challenging subjects discussed in visual studies spring from art history. For instance, even with Wölfflin, when he proposes an art history without names, that would certainly please many structuralists.

What counts as visual studies in your question? Visual studies implies a certain position or relation to theory which is different from the positions that art history proposes. Visual studies is meant to replace the disciplinarity and the specialties of art history. It replaces specialized bodies of knowledge with knowledge of theory, so theory exists differently, and for a different purpose, in visual studies. That can create problems for comparisons of the place of theory.

MPS: Nevertheless, in your writings you seem to oscillate between the two fields, visual studies and art history. Do you consider yourself an art historian or are the boundaries between art history and visual studies difficult to establish? Where are the boundaries?

I can answer that in a very straightforward way. In terms of visual studies, I am very skeptical of a lot of things, not just those that I've written about already. I'm planning a conference two years from now called "Farewell to Visual Studies". (Chicago, 2012; see www.stonesummertheoryinstitute.org)

I've heard a lot of problems and complaints about the way the field has developed all around the world. In terms of art history, I have never been a proper art historian, I have never been a well-behaved art historian, because, as a reader of a manuscript pointed out years ago, I have never written a monograph about a single artist, which by the way Gombrich never did either. Most recently someone characterized me as a meta-theorist of art history, meaning that I'm not even theorizing anymore, I'm just observing other people's theories, right? So, in terms of relative disaffection with the disciplines, I'm relatively disaffected with visual studies than with art history, which is more differentiated and in some ways less disciplinary than the allegedly interdisciplinary visual studies.

AR: You just mentioned Gombrich, but I remember that he didn't consider himself as an art historian, but rather as a "commentator on art history".

Yes, that's right. You know, when he died there was a proposal that the College Art Association (CAA) in the States had to have a web site with a forum on him, but it never happened. And they asked me to write an essay to start the conversation and the essay is called "Ten Reasons Why Gombrich Is Not an Art Historian"; it has recently been re-written and published in Bratislava, in *Ars*. I don't think Gombrich would disagree with anything in that essay. He was very clear about his relation to what he thought of was art history.

MPS: I was just going to ask a question related to the previous one because visual studies seem to operate a leveling of subjects while art history basis itself on distinction. Do you agree that the key question in differentiating one from another is a

question of value? And why do both have difficulty in assuming they operate with value?

Yes, to the first question. Along with the function of theory in the discipline, I think that question of value is the other major determinant of what visual studies could be. If visual studies is going to be coherent, if it's going to be a discipline, then value is definitely the major criterion. The problem is that I know only very few people around visual studies who live and act and believe that there are no distinctions between low and high art or between any kind of visual object and fine art object. That's a problem which I think is so widespread that you could almost use the failure as a sign of what visual studies is.

MPS: And do you believe in it?

You mean, do I believe that there is effectively no distinction between high and low? Well, not in the sense that people like Fred Jameson and Victor Burgin do. For me, there is a slightly different issue involved here, which people like Fred Jameson aren't interested in, and that's the place and value of non-art images. When comes to the distinction between high and low art, I doubt many people truly experience the domain of images as a continuous mixture; I know I don't. But when it comes to the distinction between art and non-art, I would be happy to say that I think there is potentially no difference in richness between the *Mona Lisa* and a map.

JCL: It depends on the map...

Yes. I wouldn't say a table of numbers, for example, could be that rich in meaning. There are limits to this, but the limits are much farther afield than most people think. I'd be willing to say that an electrocardiogram could be as rich as a painting. And richness is not a random word, because richness is one of the substitute words for value. This word *richness* was brought to my attention by Charles Altieri, a scholar of modern poetry and literature in Berkeley (he used to be Chair of the Art Department there). He used the word *richness* as his main criterion for discrimi-

nating what he should look at in place of value or quality. I am not at all interested in wondering if a cigarette ad in a glossy magazine could be as rich as the *Mona Lisa*. Potentially, sure. But in fact, in the historical record, any number of the pictorial practices could require the same number of words as the *Mona Lisa* if it's a matter of providing a preparatory contextual description and inventory of meanings.

MPS: But surely the kind of richness that you find in a cigarette ad or in an electrocardiogram, must be altogether different from that of the *Mona Lisa*?

You feel it has to be different?

MPS: Yes.

And how would you justify that?

MPS: Perhaps because the *Mona Lisa*, or any other painting, has a background of cultural relations attached that other things do not. It's not just the object.

Now you're shifting the operative term from richness to cultural value. Back to value, in other words. So value and quality, the two modernist tropes... Well, let's take a more concrete example, the supposedly biggest printed atlas of the world, the *London Times Atlas*. I read somewhere that it has something like 200 million discrete names in it. To those 200 million you'd have to add all of the ultimately unspecifiable spatial relations that come when you have those names not only indexed at the end of the book, but also placed in the individual maps. So, for a nominal, verbal equivalent of the *London Times Atlas* you have, let's say, a 200 million word essay. Well, if you switch from richness back to value, it's not the same. But if you stay with richness, you have a problem. And the reason why people like Altieri prefer richness, prefer artworks they perceive as rich in meaning, is because value is part of the modernist aesthetic.

JCL: We have reached what I believe to be the key question of art history, because if you push art history to its boundaries, it deals with value and nobody knows exactly where value comes from.

We are talking about things that are too big for one conversation. But value is a problem in art history, in a way that it is not in art criticism. For Greenberg, value is not a problem: value is the given. And if the business of the critic is creating judgments based on value that's a straightforward business. I mean, how it gets done is different but the objective and the purpose of the criticism is clear. But I wouldn't say that art history deals with value, it avoids value. It is predicated on value but it avoids value. You study Rubens because you think that his value is ultimately related to the culture. When you study him, you don't actually deal with the value, you assume the value. In fact, if you dealt with the value you wouldn't be an art historian, you'd be a critic. Take for example Picasso's idea that Rubens was a cartoonist. He said something very derogatory along those lines. Well you can't believe that about Rubens and be an art historian. Art history is actually predicated on avoiding the question of value. It deals with it only in the sense that its concern is other people's valuations.

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AR: In *Pictures and Tears* you remark the lack of emotion of many contemporary viewers in contemplating a number of artworks that should be able to move us to tears. Do you think the opposite case could be argued, that with modernism and post-modernism that kind of overwhelming emotion hasn't always been a priority for artists?

Yes, I argue that in the book. I'm not advocating that everybody should bring a handkerchief with them to the museum because there are periods in which the artist's intention doesn't include the full range of passions. And definitely large parts of the last hundred years have fallen into that range. So the claim in that

book is that if you're an art historian and you study periods in which passion, emotion, or effect were at stake and you *haven't* felt something, then there is a problem, and that problem has an historical significance – it's significant to the study and writing of history. I don't say anything about periods, times, and places where people haven't generally felt strong passions in front of artworks, except to say that strong emotions are always possible on the continuum of responses to art. I think of affective responses as a bell curve. If the majority of responses to a given kind of art fall under the middle of the bell curve, and if those responses are relatively emotionless (let's say the subject is a Carl André floor piece, something that provokes thought more than passion), then it is still possible to be what statisticians call an "outlier," someone whose response falls on one of the "tails" of the bell curve. The point of that metaphor is to claim that responses are continuous, so very strong responses are actually tied to normative, "tearless" responses. They are not the solipsistic reactions of psychologically unstable viewers (as some critics have said). So if you're looking at a work that's full of emotion, a sublime landscape or something like that, and you feel strongly in response, you would be in the normal group of respondents. If you choose to respond by writing an academic essay about the concept of sublimity, your response might be relatively dispassionate, but it is still linked to – provoked by – the kinds of response the artist intended. In that way intellectual, "cool" writers like Joseph Koerner can say interesting things about artworks that were intended to elicit much stronger responses, and vice versa: the "teary" respondents in my book can still say something about artworks that were not intended for such responses. Koerner's account of Caspar David Friedrich is scholarly and intellectual; mine, in *Pictures and Tears* (which I gather he hasn't read) is a kind of opposite. On the other hand, if you're looking at a Joseph Albers painting (a work that does not normally provoke strong, passionate feelings) and you feel something very strongly, then you're way off into the "tail end" of the bell curve, but your responses are linked to the rel-

atively passionless majority. It's not the same thing as saying that everybody is missing out of not crying when they see Joseph Albers.

AR: But someone like the Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay strongly criticized what he considered to be a lack of affection in contemporary art. If there's any truth to it, then people must be learning a new position towards art, more intellectual and emotionally disconnected, so that the art produced today directly affects the way we are looking at the art of the past.

Oh, definitely. That's an art historian's disease too, by the way. There's a problem with having a career as an art historian in this regard, because everyone starts out knowing which art they love, and the longer that they're employed as an art historian, the more they're asked to teach a wider and wider ranges of cultures and art, and after a while they can end up like Panofsky, who could look at an enormous range of art practices with equal sympathy, equivalent understanding. He claimed that he only knew an archipelago – the line is something like, "My knowledge is like an archipelago: most of it is under water." Of course that's false modesty because by the standards of his generation, he knew everything. But he knew it in a way an art historian would know it, that is to say, with a very articulate but ultimately even attachment to all cultures, developed from a study of their own terms and discourses. That's an illness in art history from which there is no cure except unemployment.

MPS: You claim that we must read everything: science publications, neurophysiology publications, art publications from all over the world. And that we must practice art or at least that we must learn how to draw. Aren't you demanding an impossible super-specialist?

Well, let me separate your question into three parts: the idea of reading everything, the interest of science, and the claim that art historians should learn to draw.

My reasons for saying that you should read everything have to do with things that I've learned from doing these conferences in which I get a whole range of participants to talk about one question. I found that in any given specialty having to do with visual arts, a certain set of issues keep coming up over and over again. The best way to change that situation is by asking people to read more widely in their field. The idea of reading more widely has two purposes: it can introduce new concepts and problems; and it can prompt people to look more deeply into their own specialty, to address questions that have conventionally gone unsolved. Within particular identifiable fields like art criticism, for example, there are issues that have been dealt with seriously and others that tend to be ignored or left unsolved, and are therefore raised over and over again. In art criticism, for example, very few people have read the philosophic literature on the nature of judgment, even though it is central to art criticism; and the result is that certain debates get repeated over and over. It's also the case that few people have read critical literature outside the usual nineteenth and twentieth-century critics, and if they did criticism would expand in unpredictable directions.

This double problem doesn't happen in science, which as I hear it is the second part of your question. It can happen in science that someone raises an old problem, something long ago asked and answered, but then that person will effectively be sent to a library to look up the literature. Reading and looking widely in art history and criticism is the analogue of studying all kinds of creatures in biology. Biologists don't just prefer large warm fuzzy animals like tigers and lions; they also study bacteria, because bacteria are more common. So if the commonest kind of image is a chart or a graph and the rarest an oil painting, we should be looking at charts and graphs. It's really that simple.

I know this doesn't answer your implicit question: Why read science? But the answer there is actually very simple: most images that are produced within the university are made outside the humanities, and most theorizing about vision takes place in cognitive psychology and neurobiology, not in the humanities. so if we don't read

science, we're not participating in the full conversation on the visual world.

And then I would also separate both these issues (of reading everything, and of science) from the issue of whether or not art historians should draw. That, for me, is an ongoing problem and, even though I published a little bit on it, I have a lot that I haven't published because I still can't figure out how to pose it in such a way that art historians would pay attention. When I say art historians should learn to draw, I'm taking drawing as a synecdoche of all kinds of activities. Art historians who haven't practiced artists' techniques are apt to make claims that are astonishing and bewildering to artists. This is not at all to say that it's important that everything that gets written as art history should be acceptable to artists. Of course not. It's more a question of stopping art historians from being so confident that artists are in complete control of their projects and therefore susceptible to a thorough or systematic interpretation of all the details of their work. And it's a matter of being more realistic about what is and isn't understood at the time of making.

MPS: That relates to my next question. But I'm afraid you might get mad at it.

It's not very likely I'd be mad at it.

MPS: I have briefly studied the reaction of art history to David Hockney's book *Secret Knowledge...*

Oh yeah... [LAUGHS] I'm not annoyed...

MPS: And I understand how annoying the media coverage was and all of the sensationalism brought about by the book. What I thought was that the thesis could however be worked out seriously by art historians if they were to discard the prejudices and the errors of Hockney. And what I would like to ask is: wasn't the art historians' reaction a bit corporative?

Maybe. That big NYU conference in 2000 was amazing – the biggest art history conference in my lifetime, in terms of popular and media interest. Most art historians were defensive because journalists were entirely on Hockney’s side: the journalists were happy to be able to tell their readers something which they could then take to a museum and use. But the defensiveness was, I think, largely based on a feeling that art history as a discipline was being misunderstood, because Hockney’s interests are purely technical and optical and to call that kind of interest a minority in art history is almost an exaggeration. You have a few people like Martin Kemp or John Gage, for whom the scientifically verifiable facts and circumstances of Western representation are the object of study. But in the 2000 conference there were scholars of artists like Caravaggio and Brueghel who look at many things *other than* technical prowess – and when they do look at technical prowess, it’s to understand cultural values, not the production of naturalistic images. Hockney is way, way off the scale of interest of contemporary scholarship.

To answer your question: I’m a little hesitant to speak for a large group of art historians who decided for a wide range of reasons to participate in that conference. But my sense of it was it’s not so much that Hockney’s work was wrong, as that Hockney seems to be substituting his own painter’s technical concerns for the reasons why art historians are interested in Caravaggio and other artists.

I have been shadowed by Hockney’s collaborator Charles Falco and a scientist who argued against Falco, David Stork. Ever since the conference I have been getting emails saying: “Here’s my latest finding on the scale of Pollock’s gestures, interpreted mathematically,” or just “I’m coming to Chicago. Can I lecture at the Art Institute?” Both Falco and Stork have made actual discoveries about the way the perspective works in certain pictures. But that doesn’t seem to have any point of contact with any art historian’s interest, even in perspective. And there are very few of us interested in perspective anyway!

MPS: You said that those kinds of investigations around the Hockney-Falco thesis would probably

go on in magazines like *Leonardo*. And there was an article published precisely in *Leonardo* in 2003, that tried, not to prove Hockney’s thesis, but to understand when it would have been possible to use that kind of mechanisms, the mirror... And he advanced circa 1580, as the date in which that kind of things were possible.

Just before the camera obscura.

MPS: Exactly. And in 1589 there is a description of the mirror being used with the camera obscura in a way that they could project images with much more definition. This is in a book by Giambattista della Porta.

JCL: *Magia Naturalis*.

MPS: Well, that book had two editions. In the first one he talks about the effect of the mirror and in the second one, after the invention of camera obscura, he talks about the effect of the mirror with the camera obscura. And the author would use it to produce magic and theater performances. The point is that it is in fact, as you said, in *Leonardo* magazine that these kind of things are discussed and they seem to have no repercussion and no interest to art history.

Why is that?

MPS: That is my question to you.

I’ll tell you a story. You know Douglas Hofstadter? He wrote a book called *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. He’s a scientist and he writes very popular books, sometimes bestsellers, which are, as you can tell by the title of that book, mixtures of mathematics, science, and art. Hofstadter came to a meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (ASA) some years ago and presented a piece that he was doing in collaboration with a computer scientist. They had developed software where if

you play a little bit of Mozart to it, the computer will compose a Mozart piece for you. What he had done was he had played it some Rachmaninoff and then had the software produce Rachmaninoff pieces that never existed. He played us five pieces, all played by a human pianist; three of them were really Rachmaninoff and two of them weren't. He asked us to vote after each one. Most of the audience was fooled each time. He got very stern with us and said "You're all aestheticians. You should really have gotten this right. You should have known what was Rachmaninoff and what wasn't." And he said, "So we're improving this software all the time and sooner or later we're going to get to the point where we can fool the world's foremost Rachmaninoff expert with our computer generated Rachmaninoff. Then," he said, "we will be in possession of the true explanation of Rachmaninoff". At dinner, Joseph Margolis, who is an aesthetician, and I had this argument with Hofstadter. Our claim was that if he did do that and produce the perfect Rachmaninoff forgery, his computer code would not be an explanation of Rachmaninoff, it would just be computer code. The computer code would not contain words like *romantic* and *sublime*, which are necessary for what we consider to be explanations of Rachmaninoff. Therefore the code, the software, would not count as an explanation of the composer's works. Hofstadter wouldn't budge. He said "No, I'm sorry. It just means that my explanation would be more accurate. It's the way science works. If you get a better explanation, you can give up the other explanation". So that argument didn't go anywhere. This is my response and it's my explanation about *Leonardo* too. *Leonardo* could explain every millimeter of some perspective picture and it still might not have anything to do with the reasons it is valued in the rest of the literature.

MPS: I understand that's the kind of approach of Falco – the scientist who reveals the secrets of painting – and it is of course rather sterile. But I think Hockney's view wasn't like that, I think it was a passionate view about the paintings.

Well, it was passionate, but it was in terms of optics. So how does it change it that he was passionate?

MPS: I think this kind of information could be used by art history and could be related with another kind of reflection and discussion.

It could be. I wouldn't even deny there could be a few of these examples, but not many. I think that Hockney is a marginal figure. Like John Onians, from East Anglia, who has for years been pursuing a kind of neurobiology of vision; he has just published a first book on this subject, called *Neuroarthistory* and he's going to come out with two more volumes soon. I'll give you another brief story to illustrate the marginal nature of optical and scientific studies. Onians works in the World Art Studies Centre in East Anglia. I sat in on a seminar one time with him, three students, and me. And they spent an hour or an hour and half in the seminar reading a paper by a scientist about Mondrian. The paper claims that the evolution of Mondrian's paintings follows the development of the processing of the image in the visual cortex. Early Mondrians are all organic, then things fall into geometric form and then finally they're just verticals and horizontals. And in the visual cortex this is the way that things are processed up to a certain point. There will be neurons that will be looking for vertical and diagonal elements and different primary colors and so on. So I listened through this whole thing and I said at the end to John: "Look, I don't want to interrupt your seminar. This was your seminar and it's your program and I'm just a guest. But I don't see how any of this is helping us to understand Mondrian as he is currently understood." And John said "I agree with you. It's not very promising, this particular article." And then he said something brilliant: "That article doesn't do much, but wait twenty five years and science will own art history."

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JCL: I would like to introduce a different subject now, your praise of the irrationality of art history.

I'm thinking about the chapter "The Theory of Meandering" in your book *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*.

I don't like to pose as the misunderstood author because that is such a common pose and I don't think that I am misunderstood much of the time. But I haven't heard from anyone who read that book the way I intended it. And I am also not the kind of person who says it's the reader's fault. Sure there are many things wrong with that book that prevented it from being read the way I intended it. But one of my intentions was to say that what I was calling *normal art history*, for which theory is an unnecessary addition, is richer than what theory imagines its interaction to art history to be.

JCL: While we are on the subject, I was always curious to know if you consider T. J. Clark's work an example of *normal art history*?

No. At the time I wasn't thinking of him at all and I wouldn't include him because what I meant by normal art history was, to put it emblematically, writing without Hegel in the footnotes. The irrationality I praise in normal art history follows in part from the richness of a practice that depends, often, on Hegel, but does not cite him. It seems to me some really astonishingly wonderful texts have been written in this manner – excluding what is perceived as theory – going back to the beginnings of the discipline as it identified itself, in the 19th century. These texts by people like Roberto Longhi and August Schmarsow can be amazing. What is taken as their complexity by theoretically-minded contemporary readers is of the same order as the complexity of a novel as it appears in the hands of a literary critic. Theory, as we see it, was not necessarily present. It didn't need to be articulated and often wasn't recognized at the time of the making of the text. So, necessarily, when you're in that kind of situation your practice meanders, and theory has the virtue of picturing itself as something that is transparent and is controlled by

the person who is deploying it. But practice in the sense that I am meaning, it doesn't have that luxury.

For me, there is a parallel here with the book I wrote on art instruction, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*. At the end of that book I got some criticism for having said that studio art instruction is so deeply irrational that I don't actually have any proposals to change it. What's much more interesting is to study it, which I have tried to do in that book, just to try and understand a little bit more of it. But you can't intervene with any confidence in a practice which is so entangled in lack of self-awareness.

JCL: But you do believe that we have to invest in creating a conscious background for the contemporary practice of the discipline, studying methodological...

Yes. I think if you claim in your practice as an art historian to be doing certain things whether or not you count them as theory, then those are things which you are, as far as I'm concerned, more or less obligated to attempt to understand. That doesn't mean you're actually going to make their operations in the text clear, and it certainly doesn't mean you're going to improve your practice by elucidating them – even if you could.

That's why I like to say to students who are struggling over Lacan or some other theorist, that theory is easy. Theory is the easiest part of art history; it just appears to be the hardest part. Once you take the trouble and make the effort to learn it, theory always presents itself as transparent to itself. What is not transparent is, you might say, what's around it, as people from Freud onwards has said in many different ways. That means that what's left over, all the other things that don't present themselves to you as objects of philosophic enquiry, are really the interesting things, as far as I'm concerned.

There aren't many authors who are concerned with this issue – recently I've discovered Alain Badiou's "inaesthetics," which comes near this: he's concerned with how philosophy and artworks might mutually discover one another, rather than the usual situation in which

philosophy mines art. (His position has been well critiqued by Jacques Rancière.)

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AR: I'd like to know your views on the idea that nowadays art has lost the power to communicate on itself. Or, as Adorno famously put it, "Today it goes without saying that nothing in art goes without saying". Do you think that, broadly speaking, art is more in need of criticism than it ever was?

Some art. Some modernism definitely requires discourse and that's been under development ever since the beginning of modernism. But you could easily argue that there is no clear time limitation on that particular requirement: discursive contexts that support and elucidate art existed before modernism.

But as a way that art understands itself, critical discourse is relatively recent. The conditions under which artists could say, "You need this text in order to understand this work," are relatively recent. That didn't happen with Byzantine icons, for instance, although you could easily claim that a Byzantine icon requires an interpretive context of a complexity that is compatible with contemporary academic discourse – as in the work of Marie-José Mondzain.

AR: Considering the endless, ongoing proclamations that painting is dead, do you think this crisis is really in painting or in the critics' inability to judge it? Someone like Luc Tuymans for instance, complains that from a painter's perspective this discussion just doesn't make any sense at all.

Well, I don't think it's a problem at all. It's only a problem if it stops somebody from making work, or prompts them to switch prematurely from painting to video art, or some other medium. Otherwise it's not a problem, it's a trope in the discourse of modernist painting. The "death of painting" is built right into painting; the his-

tory of modernist painting is characterized by a motion of continuously diving toward the "death of painting," coming back from it, and diving towards it again.

The "death of painting" raises exactly the same issues as the recurrence of the monochrome. From many different perspectives and for many different reasons the monochrome keeps presenting itself as an option; people return to it, and then go away from it. Hence in conferences about the death of painting – and I've been in a number of them – it seems to me the first thing to do is to look at the immediate context that surrounds the asking of the question and find out why it is that painting seems suddenly to be hopeless, historically exhausted, or terminal, and then to just get on with painting. This idea of taking the death of painting seriously is a little bit like learning a language but missing out on a really important word like the verb *to be*. Then you really have problems.

AR: So in the end, could we all agree with Salvador Dalí when he wrote "painting is dead – long live painting!"?

At the moment, one of the ways painting dies is by dismembering itself. There's a trend in the last five or six years to make paintings that are parts of paintings. You take two pieces of the stretcher bars, tear off the other two, put a bit of canvas on them, throw them on the floor, step on them a few times, and after a while you get little pieces of dismembered painting lying around... but those fragments are still painting.

There's a great essay on this subject, by Stephen Melville, in the book called *As Painting*. What he says there, essentially, in a very abstract but interesting way, is that after minimalism, painting has had to reinvent itself in much more radical ways than had been necessary before minimalism. For example painting has had to re-imagine itself as something that is not singular, but multiple. Many different kinds of things can now be called painting that couldn't be called painting before.

The reason to stick with painting is because ultimately the discourse of painting is the one that is most deeply rooted in Western critical writing. And so, even if it's necessary to

completely reinvent what you want to call painting, it's still useful in the end to keep that word *painting*.

AR: You've also tackled the conspicuous lack of judgment in present criticism. Is it something specific to art criticism or could it be extended to, say, literary criticism?

I think it's specific to art criticism. It's worth saying that if you're a novelist, you can be attacked in the most vicious, personal way in a newspaper.

AR: And why do you think that isn't the case with visual artists?

The superficial answer is the art market. If the art market has so much to say about things then it's not very likely that the newspapers would want to publish something that says, "This new work is absolutely nonsense." If Pessoa's editions were selling for a million Euros each they would probably attract some criticism, but basically there would be a lot of industry and market on board. So that's the superficial answer. I don't know if there is a single, deeper answer, unless it has to do with what's taken to be the nature of the visual—that it is somehow outside argumentation. A deeper answer would also have to do with the heritage of romanticism, because if visual art exists to express inward thoughts, then who's to say your inward thoughts are wrong? And much of contemporary visual art is, in that particular sense, a heritage of late romanticism. If you were to compel me to come up with a more detailed answer it would have to do with those two things. But that's a puzzle through the whole book *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Nobody really knows why art criticism is non-judgmental. The standard post-structuralist answer is that conceptual art forced that change.

JCL: And therefore the most interesting thing to do is construct the argument and you don't have to express an opinion, a judgment?

Yes. If you're constructing concepts then in that context judgment is not pertinent.

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MPS: You have also been very interested in studying the place of religion and emotion regarding art historical discourse. Could you talk a little bit about your interest in these subjects?

I'm still very involved in that. Just last week I accepted an invitation to a Christian scholars' conference in a university few people have heard of: Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee. The topic, as usual, is this: Is religion accepted in the art world and, if not, why not? It's a huge issue. After writing this book [*On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, 2004] I've been invited to a lot of Christian colleges. I'm very interested in them because almost invariably what matters in those contacts is your commitment. In an art history conference no one ever asks you why are you spending your life studying your chosen specialty. If they do ask, you can give them nearly any story. If an art historian studies Mondrian, for example, and she is asked why, she might say, "You know, I went to Amsterdam when I was ten..." and so forth. But in the religion conferences the strength of your commitment to your profession is second only to the strength of your commitment in faith. You need to have a good, thoughtful, reflective answer to the question, "Why do you specialize in Mondrian?" because your thoughtfulness on that topic is a mirror of your thoughtfulness on your religious beliefs. I find this exhilarating and wonderful. The first conversation that has to happen is: "What is your faith?" And I get to say I am a lapsed Jewish boy. I was Jewish when I was ten. What am I now? Nothing. It doesn't matter what I answer. What matters is the *sincerity* of the answer. Then people will raise what is to them the really difficult question: What is the relation between commitment to art and commitment to religion? Can commitment to art be a calling? Or does it have to be something lesser? Does it have to

be just affection? I find that kind of conversation just great, much more whole than the discourse of academia: your whole self is engaged.

MPS: That concern of yours with passion and emotion within art history frequently reminds me of Daniel Arasse's writings, and I'd like to know what you make of them.

I think they're wonderful, and when you were mentioning him earlier, I was going to mention Jean-Louis Schaeffer who I also think is great, especially, to my mind, because he writes so passionately that he is on the edge of a kind of writing that isn't history or criticism.

You could say that basically what I'm trying to do at the moment is split two kinds of writing as far apart from each other as I can get them. All these academic conferences and public lectures – I'm trying to keep them very far away from my more personal writing projects. The book I'm writing now is called *What Photography Is*. It's written against *Camera Lucida*¹, and I'm trying to write it in as weird as possible a way. I want to take writing itself as seriously as Barthes, Schaeffer, and other authors have done, and the only way I can feel sufficiently free to do that is to make a big division between that project and those texts that have footnotes – the ordinary texts that come out of conferences and public lectures, the ones that result in university jobs and lecturing invitations. In this photography book, I am trying to let the writing develop as it will, trying to let my own convictions find voice, trying not to write for an imaginary public of other academics, trying to find out what I really care about for myself. And to do that I need to risk writing books that will not be read, in academia or outside it. My own way of doing that is to split my academic work from these writing projects. Some of the themes you have asked about go in the academic direction (such as the question about neutrality in criticism), and others go away from it, in the direction of experimental, writerly responses (as in the question

about passionate responses to artworks). This, I think, is the crucial question for all academics in the humanities: Do I have a voice of my own?

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MPS: In what way do visual studies relate to the museum?

Only in an uneasy way. Take for instance the famous Kirk Varnedoe exhibit, the *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, from ten or fifteen years ago, special exhibits like Charles Falco's motorcycle exhibit at the Whitney, or the Armani exhibit at the Guggenheim. Visual studies come into museums in those odd, miscellaneous, inventive, marginal ways, because the museum is about patrimony, patriotism, civic identity, and cultural heritage. It doesn't fit the mobile, transcultural, ephemeral, commercial nature of much of what visual studies looks at.

I spent a lot of time in our museum in Chicago, teaching classes where art historians draw and paint and obviously taking classes too. So I have a good idea of what average museum visitors say and think – a better idea, perhaps, than some people who rely on the polls that museums commission. I've heard people, for example, asking "How do you get out of the modern wing? I hate all this modern painting. What's the way out?" I've seen them almost running out of the galleries because they're "trapped" in modernism. I was looking at a Rembrandt one time and this guy came in with his two little kids and he said: "See that? That painting is not just hung, it's bolted to the wall. Why? Because it's worth six million dollars." There was a pause for about a second, and then he said, "Okay kids, we're going." So, I think I have a very good sense of what a museum does for a community. Unless the museum works really hard, it is just a proof or token of general cultural value. Our big painting in Chicago, the Seurat *Grande Jatte*, is not understood by anybody outside a small circle of art historians. Even though we've had a number of special exhibits

¹ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire – note sur la photographie*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.

about it, the painting doesn't mean much most people other than an emblem of Chicago's stature. I mentioned polls because I don't think curators, docents, and art educators always have a fair idea of the *average* museum-goer. This is a huge challenge as far as I'm concerned for museums: to try and make that connection and to produce meaning other than cultural pride.

MPS: I would like to ask you if you feel art history will dissolve itself in visual studies, to close that subject.

In my experience, yes. In most places I have visited that have a visual studies department or people who work more or less in the name of visual studies, it's pretty consistent. Visual studies takes students away from art history. In that sense, yes, art history is in trouble. Conceptually, in terms of literature, in terms of what we were calling patrimony, no, art history isn't in jeopardy. One thing we haven't talked about is postcolonial theory, which in my mind poses the most direct threat to art history. Visual studies per se has different objects of interest than art history; art history is not competing, for example, to write about advertisements. But postcolonial theory directly competes with art history, because it is sometimes concerned about the same major art works, but from a completely different perspective. You have accounts of national traditions of modernist painting in postcolonial theory that completely avoid aesthetic criteria, except in so far as aesthetic criteria are the products of certain social constructions and socio-economic conditions. Why was Pakistani modernist painting valued in Pakistan in the 1960s? Well, it had to do with social-economic issues there that created a market. That's a generally speaking post-colonial way of looking at that kind of issue. And if you do that, you cannot also, at the same time, in the same text, use the terms that art history employs, regarding value and quality, because they would have to be reconfigured as questions of society and economics. But purely institutionally, in terms of student numbers and funding, visual studies is the principal threat, because advertising is more fun for students than Michelangelo.

MPS: But while we are on the visual studies versus art history subject, you say that visual studies should go back into the past, should go into antiquarian studies...

Well, to me that's a separate issue. One of the reasons I'm disappointed in visual studies is that the initial claim in cultural studies in the 60s in the UK was that cultural studies – what became visual studies – was the general study of cultural production – which became the general study of visibility. Visual studies has never made good on that claim. In fact, it's restricted itself to a smaller and smaller set of subjects.

MPS: Yes, because you say visual studies should go back into the past and study things like the curiosity cabinets, things you consider as the antecedents of the discipline.

Absolutely. But I mean things even further afield than curiosity cabinets, which are now an accepted topic. Visual studies should look at the entire world of the visual: ordinary objects, craft, and – in terms of older European culture – popular visual imagery such as Nuremberg broadsheets.

MPS: So why shouldn't that be a recommendation for art history? For art history to broaden its field?

It should be. The reason I address this to visual studies is because visual studies is the field that began more or less with the claim that it (visual studies) is the field that emerged *after* specialization. It's the field that studies really production and perception of image and visibility in general. Art history has never made that claim. Art history has grown that way, as we all know from Riegl and Warburg, and it keeps growing. But it's also become a trope within art history to praise the field by saying it has always grown in these interdisciplinary directions, away from fine art. Actually only a tiny portion of art historical scholarship is concerned with anything other than painting, sculpture and architecture.

JCL: I have done some research on JSTOR and I found out that the *Burlington Magazine* was probably the only international publication in 1909, 1911, 1912, that published studies on Portuguese art. And one of the contributions is about the ox-yolks used in the north of Portugal. It's a completely unexpected subject.

That's interesting. Was the essay published as part of the general sense that art history's origins are in antiquarianism?

JCL: I don't know. And perhaps back in the beginnings of the discipline the desire to construct the archive was really a broad invention.

That's quite possible. Well, you could use JSTOR to pursue that research. The 18th century origins of art history include antiquarian studies of coins, medals, busts and all sorts of things. A large number of articles in late 19th century in German journals – the predecessors, you might say, of the *Burlington Magazine* – are about silver, jewelry, and the whole range of things you can collect and own, such as candelabras and stucco. So before the connoisseur was the antiquarian. You would want to make sure the essay you found is evidence of

the growth of the art historical discipline, and not a lingering effect of the earlier antiquarian interest.

I don't see early twentieth-century art history gradually widening out from only the *Mona Lisa* through the Scythian belt buckle (Riegl's famous subject), and I don't see the contemporary discipline continuing to widen. What I see instead is, if anything, a narrowing. Look at Georges Didi-Huberman, he deals with a very particular set of fine-art objects. Even most interesting contemporary scholarship is not going from more Scythian belt buckles.

JCL: I've read his last book about the Brecht albums [*Quand les images prennent position*, Éditions du Minuit, 2008]. And it's about the idea that image prompts theory.

Interesting. My point here is that even someone like Georges is not studying oxen yolks. Most art historians don't. Then there is the larger question of motivation for the claim that art history is expanding. Broadly speaking, we're still studying painting, sculpture and architecture.

JCL: We'll see in the next generation!

I hope you're right!

