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Lag and Impact in Visual Studies

Sara Blaylock

A few weeks ago, I found myself sitting on my porch with a friend and my partner, trying to explain just what visual studies is. My friend, a historian, and my partner, who teaches in an English department, both listened patiently as I muddled through my usual preambles:

It's like art history, but with a more politicized vision... Some people approach visual studies as a means to think about perception and technologies that have *literally changed* vision... Others use it as a means to explain how what is made (or allowed to be) visible is a tool of consolidating and maintaining hegemonic power... Some people see it as a development of art history; others define it as a radical rupture....

I listed examples of potential objects of study. I began with the obvious: art, posters, film, advertisements, maps. I then listed more totalizing, which is to say less concrete, examples: systems of representation, discourse, the use of space, the commons. I inventoried the range of theoretical tools at my disposal: Marxism, feminism, critical race studies, indigeneity, postcolonialism, and queer theory... My historian friend nodded generously. "Yes," she said, "people in my discipline work on these issues, as well." My partner, more than a bit familiar with this intrigue of mine, acknowledged that his classroom and writing practice also welcome a variety of methodologies and source materials. So, what then, I proceeded to ask, is it that makes visual studies a discipline when its approach—that is to say, its

methodology of interdisciplinarity—is being practiced (and seemingly welcomed) across the humanities?

The question is one that the foundational thinkers of visual studies publicly and passionately grappled with for about ten years, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s.¹ One need only pick up the introduction to Margaret Dikovitskaya's *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* from 2005 or James Elkins's *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* from 2003 to find a comprehensive bibliography of the works authors penned to stake out the discipline.²

These texts may be traced back to *October's* controversial 1996 roundtable “Visual Culture Questionnaire.” The responses, which Dikovitskaya describes as “openly unsympathetic to visual studies,”³ elicited a sincere and varied list of concerns over the promise of the burgeoning discipline from nineteen scholars in various fields.⁴ “Perhaps,” she writes, “this baptism of fire was necessary: conceived as an attack on the new research area, the questionnaire did not eliminate the increasing interest among its students, but rather helped proponents of visual culture to articulate their positions and thus contributed to the theoretical growth of the new field.”⁵ Nevertheless, just over a decade later, although the arguments about what visual studies is as a discipline seem to have all but disappeared, visual studies still seems to be searching for a way to explain itself.

Is this a sign of the irrelevance of the designator that my graduate degree assigns me? Have the foundational figures, overburdened with the task of bearing the visual studies torch, now left its embers in the hands of an unprepared generation? Elkins, in his earnest reflection for *Refract's* inaugural issue, grapples with concern over a presentist younger generation of visual studies scholars seemingly unaware (and perhaps taught to be unaware) of the historical legacies of the discipline or the primacy of the image, which to him is a necessity.⁶ To be sure, I do not criticize Elkins's less-than-optimistic view. Rather, I take it as a kind of testimony to a current juncture in (a decisive moment for) the future of visual studies. If we cannot agree on what our discipline is, then do we really have a discipline?

What Elkins raises in his *Refract* essay is not without context. Here he writes with the same concerns (misgivings) raised over twenty years ago in his groundbreaking text, *Visual Studies*. Do his words in 2018 suggest that the debates over visual studies have not only run their course but led to a tepid, even dismal conclusion? Were the fears about its inadequacy, its false premises, its lack of discipline, raised in *October's* 1996 questionnaire prophetic? Is visual studies dead as a discipline? Was it ever alive?

These are questions that truly keep me up at night, particularly in light of the fact that I codirect the International Association for Visual Culture, an organization begun by the progenitors of this field. My route to this position began in

2012, when I attended the IAVC's second biennial conference, hosted by Nicholas Mirzoeff at New York University. It thrilled me to be there: the range of speakers as well as formats: the inclusive workshop-like environment stood in stark contrast to the intimidating atmospheres I had experienced (or which had been described to me) at other professional meetings. I left New York with a feeling of being a part of something that would take my questions and swerves seriously. The openness of the NYU event, I should say, remains a template for the IAVC conferences, which we envision as gatherings for intimate and profound cross-disciplinary and nonhierarchical exchange.

The beginnings of the IAVC were auspicious: summits at the Clark Art Institute that brought together some of the most innovative thinkers and makers from the US and western Europe; biennial conferences in major Western cities like London, New York, San Francisco, Boston; and a growing list of board members, conference participants, and attendees.

Though a separate undertaking entirely, the IAVC may also be understood as a project spurred by the success of the *Journal of Visual Culture*, which formed in 2002. Now in its eighteenth volume, the *JVC* continues to publish three issues annually. By any measure of success in academic publishing, this flagship journal of visual studies is thriving. A tertiary glance at its contents likewise demonstrates an editorial board conscientious about its contributions. In important ways, a journal can do more in terms of uniting disparate geographies than an organization like the IAVC, which has thrived on the community built in physical contacts enabled by its biennial conferences. These gatherings are by their nature exclusionary. It is expensive to travel cross-country, let alone abroad, and to this point—despite our best intentions—the IAVC conferences have taken place in some of the world's most costly Western cities.⁷ (Here's hoping that the volunteerism that defines our organization will elicit even stronger bonds with people willing to invest time and resources into hosting more of our events!) In any case, the IAVC conferences aspire to represent a different mode of engagement at an international conference whose attendees share a drive and a vision, if not a curriculum vitae. Quite simply, the IAVC and the *JVC* both share a desire to host the committed thinker who cannot (or who chooses not to) find a place in more traditional or immediate disciplinary homes. Our cast of presenters in 2018, for example, included students of fashion, filmmakers, faculty in education, women's studies, and fine arts departments, and representatives of major museums and self-run spaces, as well as independent scholars and artists.

Occasional relationships between the IAVC and the *JVC* have and will continue to emerge.⁸ Both organizations share a number of editorial board members. This continuity demonstrates, on the one hand, a kind of institutional

presence that matters (even if it is not a formalized affiliation, like the CAA and its *Art Journal* or *Art Bulletin*). On the other hand, is this continuity a sign that diehard visual culture scholars are desperately maintaining the ashes of a discipline that no one else will rekindle?

To get to that answer, I'll take a step backward. When I revisit the original debates over visual studies, I note a distinct desire for a new kind of criticality that exceeds disciplines and breaks down barriers between what is acceptable and unacceptable scholarly inquiry. In visual studies, a scholar of seventeenth-century Oceania has peers both in her geographic region and in the theoretical debates that capture her imagination, and likely also her politics. This matters because that kind of interdisciplinary exchange reflects the intersectional way of being that our world now demands. Indeed, to come back to my friend in history or my partner in English, it is not just *de rigueur* to claim an interdisciplinary “visual studies-ish” focus in one’s classroom or scholarship, it is—by all accounts of what the latest generation of first-year students desires—an expectation that, say, a course on the history of Jewish expulsion includes material on exile artists or a science fiction literature class teaches Samuel R. Delany with H. G. Wells. Another historian friend who researches ancient subjects likewise balks at the idea of joining a Classics department. The desire instead is to be placed in larger interdisciplinary contexts that not only do not *seem* to support white supremacist thinking (a kind of unfortunate by-product of the current “Make America Great Again” consciousness)⁹ but actively discredit it.

To take examples closer to home: it is now conventional that an art history classroom engage with a variety of case studies that exceed the figures this discipline has itself defined as significant. The kind of circularity of significance intrinsic to canonical thinking and teaching—“These examples must be included in a survey because they are important because they have long been said to be important”—is now being challenged in very public ways. Art History Teaching Resources, for example, offers an adaptation of the standard History of World Art survey,¹⁰ with thematic lesson plans in topics such as “Art and Cultural Heritage Looting and Destruction,” “Disability in Art History,” and “Sexuality in Art.” These plans are carefully presented as alternatives—and not brief addenda—to the Stokstad/Gardner-inspired chapter outline they also provide, and which the majority of current faculty were exposed to as undergraduates. Remember, standard classes are the bread-and-butter of an art history department or program, with the metaphor describing not only the large enrollment numbers such classes typically muster but also the necessity of these introductory classes for national accreditation. In other words, the art history survey, *as such*, is not going away. However,

the expectations for the way we teach it or learn it are. Visual studies, I believe, has a lot to do with that shift.

And here I come to the apogee of this missive, specifically, a kind of claim to the absolute necessity of visual studies, as both an area of study and a way of thinking that prepares us to be in the world today.

A few months ago, I had a long conversation with the visual studies scholar Jill Casid about the idea of lag. We spoke about how a teacher might influence a student (or vice versa) in unanticipated ways many years into the future. We spoke about how time lag defines life experience, specifically how one of the blessings of getting older is the way that disparate things begin to come together because of the kind of constant piecing together a critically engaged mind invites.

I'd like to suggest, then, that the visual studies as envisioned and outlined by the visionaries of the fecund period of the 1990s to mid-2000s has indeed produced the impact it intended. That there has been a lag—but not a slack or a regression or even an abandonment—between what they envisioned and what has come to fruition. Remember, no one could agree on a single definition of visual studies, but all could agree that *something had to give*. Whether that be the “obligation” to old masters (artistic and academic) or the tenacity of the disciplinary divisions between real world and classroom, real world and museum, or real world and virtual life, even the most skeptical of the visual studies luminaries came to a consensus. The future cannot maintain the certainties that academic discourse had helped normalize.

Visual studies corrects the problems of art history by offering a different way of seeing and engaging with the world. It questions the rules of the game and requires that scholars, artists, and educators be accountable for the premises of their practices. Today, the expectations—at least among those who define themselves as visual studies scholars—are that people invest themselves in readings across disciplines, that they are social justice minded in both historical and contemporary subjects. In 2013 Mirzoeff called this “militant research.”¹¹ His definition is staunchly activist: “Let’s begin by saying that [militant research] is the place where academia and activism meet in the search for new ways of acting that lead to new ways of thinking.”¹² He continues, quoting the activist Judy Vaughn, “You don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking.”¹³ Today, “militancy,” in some form or another, has become (almost) mandatory.

Indeed, as I write this, a subsection of the debate over the merits of the 2019 Whitney Biennial represents a divide between those in and out of the know. To take an example, a recent article by Seph Rodney in *Hyperallergic* examines the artist Simone Leigh’s diatribe against critics who have called the show (and thus

her artwork) lacking in radicality.¹⁴ Rodney responds to a May 16 Instagram post, in which Leigh assails her critics for misrecognizing the multiplicity of references her artwork makes, including the black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman, the relationship between the concept of Négritude and surrealism, and the Herero Genocide, which in important ways precipitated the Nazi Holocaust. Rodney identifies about twenty-four topics in the post, which closes with Leigh asserting that her critics “lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in [her] work.” Leigh’s listing of references becomes a kind of reading list for her critics.¹⁵ At the very least, the artist is expecting a conscientious viewer, that is to say, one who is receptive to (if not already engaged with) the criticality that she regards as fundamental. She says as much: “And that is why,” she writes, “instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.”¹⁶

Rodney concludes that the critics Leigh may be targeting have offered simplistic or reductive definitions of radicality—that they define art activism as that which only has an immediately legible impact—that “aesthetic production can do the work of social and political movements.”¹⁷ But, as Rodney observes, “in our history no profound change has come about until we have made each other deeply uncomfortable in all aspects of our lives—at church, at public parks, at lunch counters and restaurants, at schools and courthouses—uncomfortable enough to change the ways we behave.”¹⁸ He identifies a thing akin to lag here, that is to say, a requirement that impact is individualized and process oriented, rather than predictable. Jacques Rancière’s theory of dissensus, a political vision rooted in aesthetics, resounds: “Artworks can produce effects of dissensus because they neither give lessons nor have any destination.”¹⁹ They do something and then (to borrow a metaphor I used earlier) leave the embers burning, hoping—though not expecting—someone to keep the fire going.

Visual studies has prepared me to, if not immediately identify Leigh’s twenty-four references on my own, then seek them out—to humbly acknowledge that a lack of insight is not necessarily a shortcoming on my part but an invitation to a new way of seeing the world. Visual studies prepares us all to do that work, to be critical, to be self-critical, to be receptive, to work across disciplines as a means of correction en route to connection.

Pedagogical resources are available in “Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom,” an open access zine co-produced by Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon.²⁰

* * *

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Notes

¹ Also referred to as visual culture studies.

² Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³ Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 17.

⁴ Note my hesitation to call it a “newfound” discipline, given the observations of many that visual studies is an aggregation of the social history of art, new Marxism, and cultural studies, rather than some radical break or invention.

⁵ Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 18.

⁶ James Elkins, “What Is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 15–22. <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141455>

⁷ To preempt any critiques of the locations for these meetings, I find it necessary to explain that the IAVC has consistently sought but has been unable to maintain the support to hold a conference in less Western-centric locations. As of printing, our 2020 conference is scheduled for Rijeka, Croatia.

⁸ We are currently reviewing texts for the first ever IAVC/JVC Early Career Researcher Prize.

⁹ Art history has, of course, also made efforts in recent years to defend itself against the appropriation of its classical subjects. As a prime example, see Sarah Bond, “Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical in Color,” *Hyperallergic*, June 7, 2017,

<https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/>.

¹⁰ I also have to teach this course. My go-to instructional resources have been AHTR and Khan Academy, both of which also provide students with excellent open access materials.

¹¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff et al., “Militant Research Handbook,” New York University, 2013, http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH_Web.pdf.

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Seph Rodney, “Probing the Proper Grounds for Criticism in the Wake of the 2019 Whitney Biennial,” *Hyperallergic*, June 7, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/503513/probing-the-proper-grounds-for-criticism-in-the-wake-of-the-2019-whitney-biennial/>.

¹⁵ The text of Leigh’s May 16, 2019, Instagram post: “I’ve seen some preliminary thoughts on the Biennial and concerns about radicality. I need to say that if you haven’t read, not a single thing written by Saidiya Hartman or Hortense Spillers. And if you have no knowledge, never heard of Negritude or how it’s related to surrealism. If you don’t know who Senghor is or why he would have anything to do with art. If you never spent anytime figuring out who was and wasn’t at FESTAC 77. If you have no idea what critical fabulation is. If you didn’t know what I meant when I said In The Wake. If you never studied Independence architecture. If you don’t know why Pauline Lumumba walked through the streets of Kinshasha [sic!] bare breasted. If you have no idea who Katherine Dunham is or her scholarship, but yet you consider yourself well versed in the work and contributions of the woman she hired as a secretary, Maya Deren. If the words Black Feminist Thought bring absolutely zero concepts to mind. If the words “Dave the Potter” mean nothing to you. If you didn’t ponder the significance [sic!] of Sharifa’s unruly kitchen when she embodied Uhura in my video and you don’t even know what a kitchen is. If the words “Dogon statuary” conjurs [sic!] nothing. If the only thing you know about Benin bronzes is that Europe stole them. If you casually use words like ethnic, exotic and tribal and you still think those are useful words. If you don’t know what story I’m referring to when I talk about A Question of Power. If you thought I was being weird when I told you I was too busy sharpening my oyster knife. If you’ve never heard of the Herero Genocide. Then you lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work. And that is why,

instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience. #whitneybiennial.”

¹⁶ Simone Yvette Leigh (@simoneyvetteleight), Instagram photo, May 16, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxiJI58gl4t/>.

¹⁷ Rodney, “Probing the Proper Grounds.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 140.

²⁰ Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon, “Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom,” <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Decolonial-Strategies-for-the-Art-History-Classroom-Zine.pdf>.