

Forum, “Art History and the Digital World”

The Getty Research Institute and the College Art Association

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As the newest president of the College Art Association, I would like to extend the most heartfelt thanks to the Getty for sponsoring this program. The CAA is grateful for the Getty’s historic willingness to collaborate with us and other visual arts organizations on the fundamental issues that face us all – in this case, how to make the most of the digital revolution and militate for leadership in this domain. In this issue of the Art Bulletin of nine years ago [*now entirely available on JStor, images and all, one of CAA’s enormous successes in recent times*], under Nancy Troy’s editorship a number of scholars tackled the issue of digital culture and the practices of art and art history. It was both heartening to note in its pages that the Getty Research Institute and CAA’s foremost art history journal were actively involved in sponsoring scholarly exchange on the subject we’re addressing today, and yet also discouraging to realize that some very important problems have not been solved, such as making enough varied and excellent digital images available to all, developing collaborative models to share imagery central to the creation of art and scholarship, and imagining a use for digital imagery that moves beyond the Wölfflinian two-dimensional dual slide model. It may appear as if we’ve joined the digital revolution when we use PowerPoint presentations to replace our slide lectures, but most of us know we’re hardly even humming the Marseillaise, let alone storming the Bastille.

The CAA feels very keenly the responsibility to *lead*, as best we can. Sure, it’s not easy, given who we are. As most of those gathered here know, the ever more

anachronistically named College Art Association is an uncomfortably hybrid organization, part learned society furthering the exchange of knowledge through journals and conferences at hopefully the highest levels, yet as a membership organization also part old-fashioned professional guild, dealing with the most urgent and pragmatic professional needs of artists, art historians, and all other visual arts professionals: we enable job searches, codify professional standards and practices in the workplace, mentor our newest members, try to gather and analyze data on the life-and-death issues in our fields. But the CAA is also a political body profoundly committed to advocating for the place of art in our society. To this end, for example, we've been tackling intellectual property constraints head-on, since they are throttling the free exchange of ideas among art historians and inhibiting creative practice among artists, something you'll hear about on a later panel. But there is a lot more to be done. For I fear that what Barbara Stafford wrote in the Art Bulletin nine years ago is still true: "We have finally sailed into the imaging age and, strangely, art history is not at the helm."

I think we need to be at the helm. Let me extend what she wrote then: Do not art historians have the most profound abilities of professionals in any discipline to analyze and promote visual understanding? Is it not our job, as rhetoricians of the visual, to show how art does what Horace says it must do: to instruct, delight, and move? Visual imagery floods our world, but it is a good bet that only a very few out there know how to comprehend its import. I suspect that a popular view of art – that it is a pleasant but trivial and elitist pursuit, nice if you've got the time and money but otherwise not necessary to encounter (except as entertainment) – is a reason for it being slashed and cut from the curricula in many public elementary and secondary schools, via budget

constraints necessitated by the “No Child Left Behind” act that is institutionalizing a hierarchy of knowledge with the arts and other less-testable disciplines at the bottom. Aren’t *we* responsible to shout out how art is central to our society in the way it gives free rein to the human imagination, delineates and examines fundamental human convictions, discomfits us and makes us question what we believe? Is it not incumbent upon *us* to show how art breaks down barriers between disciplines and even classes, seeking consonance and dissonance with other ways of thinking and means of expression, so that it urges us out of our protected intellectual pods, just as all of the humanities do at their best?

Even at elite institutions priding themselves on their expansive humanities curricula, art history and studio art professors find themselves teaching students who are initially completely at a loss when confronted with the visual. Although high school students have all studied literature by the time they get to college, when you teach them art you need to start with the equivalent of articles, nouns, verbs. This visual property is “a,” this is “the,” this “cat,” this “dog.” We rejoice at the first conceptual linkage: “See Spot run.” It sometimes makes one despair about the future for art as a conveyer of meaning, for although many students in our elite institutions take studio art and art history and can begin to engage visual vocabulary, in the majority of institutions of higher learning students do not take these courses and cannot engage with art.

Despite this state of affairs, images – even those art historians don’t traditionally regard as “art” (and ever more of us are willing to expand our boundaries and take all visual culture seriously) – *all* images nevertheless have a great deal of impact in communicating ideas. It *is* important for all in our society to understand the power of

images and their potential for good or ill – to our peril if we do not, one might argue on the basis of seeing how compelling imagery has been misused by totalitarian regimes in all too recent memory. We art historians and the institutions we belong to should be at the helm.

For we must ask if we, ordinarily confined within our narrow disciplinary mores, have overlooked the potential for digital innovations to expand how we understand art and convey it to others. Have we pounded on enough doors to make partnerships with those who could expand our horizons and illustrate vividly the significance of the visual in our society, including scientific and commercial bodies? Technology now has the means, but only we art professionals have the vision to identify what the equivalent of the human genome project is for art and visual culture. I am looking forward to hearing a lot more brainstorming on these subjects today and tomorrow, with great thanks to the Getty for hosting us our discussions.

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