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Acknowledgments

Many colleagues at institutions and organizations have assisted me as I prepared this manuscript. Thanks go to Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, who organized, directed, and taught the 1999 Getty Summer Institute in Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Rochester, where I was exposed to new ways of thinking about visual culture. I am also grateful to Douglas Crimp and Janet Wolff who helped shape this study. A special debt of gratitude goes to Keith Moxey, my dissertation advisor at Columbia University, whose unceasing guidance and generous support were vital to bringing the genesis of the initial concept into a completed work. I will also never forget the extreme kindness of Mark A. Cheetham at the University of Toronto, whose invaluable feedback was essential to the metamorphosis of this work into book form.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to my "subjects of visual culture" at the University of Chicago, the University of Rochester, the University of California at Irvine, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook: Francesca Bavuso, Joanna Bouldin, Lisa Cartwright, Thomas Conley, Douglas Crimp, George Dimock, Paul Duro, Anne Friedberg, Brian Goldfarb, Thomas Gunning, James D. Herbert, Judy Ho, Michael Ann Holly, Martin Jay, David Joselit, Laura U. Marks, Lianne McTavish, Stephen Melville, Nicholas Mirzoeff, W. J. T. Mitchell, Sheila C. Murphy, Janice Neri, David Rodowick, Fatimah Tobing Rony, Howard Singerman,
and Janet Wolff. My research would not have been realized without their genuine interest in this topic and their generous contributions.

Research for this book was funded in part by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The Izaak Walton Killam Trusts also provided a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship to support the writing of this manuscript. In particular, I would like to thank Maureen P. Ryan of the Department of Art History and Angela Kaija of the Killam Office, both at the University of British Columbia.

My appreciation goes to Colette Stoeber at the University of Toronto and Robert Burns at York University, who read early drafts of this manuscript and made important editorial comments. Many thanks to Roger Conover, Lisa Reeve, and Judith Feldmann at The MIT Press. Their encouragement, assistance, and editorial advice were indispensable.

The Central European University (Soros Foundation) gave me the unique opportunity to design and develop a summer institute on visual culture over the course of three summers. I would like to thank my colleagues and students at the institute for their enthusiasm and inspiration.

Frequent discussions with Allan Antliff of the University of Victoria provided invaluable insights. I have also been fortunate to become part of a vibrant academic community and wish to acknowledge the concern that the Senior and Junior Fellows at St. John's College, University of British Columbia have shown for my work.
Introduction

About This Book

*Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* explores the history, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and pedagogy of visual culture in the United States. Visual culture, also known as visual studies, is a new field for the study of the cultural construction of the visual in arts, media, and everyday life. It is a research area and a curricular initiative that regards the visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context.

An interdisciplinary field, visual studies came together in the late 1980s after the disciplines of art history, anthropology, film studies, linguistics, and comparative literature encountered poststructuralist theory and cultural studies. Deconstructionist criticism showed that the academic humanities were as much artifacts of language as they were outcomes of the pursuit of truth. The inclusive concept of culture as “a whole way of life” (Raymond Williams) became the object of inquiry of cultural studies, which encompassed the “high” arts and literature without giving them any privileged status. As a result of the cultural turn, the status of culture has been revised in the humanities: It is currently seen as a cause of—rather than merely a reflection of or response to—social, political, and economic processes. The importance of the concept of cultural context in the
humanities has added further momentum to the rise of visual studies. Perception has come to be understood as a product of experience and acculturation, and representations are now studied as one among the other signifying systems that make up culture.

Although the new field of visual studies has enjoyed a proliferation in the Anglo-American academy over the past decade, there is no consensus among its adepts with regard to its scope and objectives, definitions, and methods. Recent introductions to and readers of visual culture have spelled out a variety of conceptual perspectives (Bryson, Holly, and Moxey 1994; Jenks 1995; Burgin 1996; Walker and Chaplin 1997; Barnard 1998; Mirzoeff 1998a, 1999, 2002; Evans and Hall 1999; Heywood and Sandywell 1999; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn endeavors to answer the fundamental question of how to conciliate diverse theoretical positions in order to develop a common ground for working in the field of the visual. This book focuses on both the theoretical underpinnings of visual studies and the institutional implications of establishing a new area of inquiry.

In the summer of 1999, Michael Ann Holly and Douglas Crimp suggested to me the possibility of conducting a study of visual culture, a study that might be described by the Foucaultian term “archaeology.” As a result, I began an examination of the fracturing of the discipline of art history and the subsequent emergence of visual studies—a new intellectual formation that has distinct purposes and methodology. My project provides a new perspective on the interdisciplinary nature of visual studies through its interrogation of how art history and cultural studies intersect as they are practiced and taught in academic communities in the United States.²

Lately, visual culture has become the center of various concerns. At the May 2001 Clark Conference, “Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies,” the question was posed as to whether this new field had reached a state of inconsistency by subsuming everything related to the cultural and the visual. Matthew Rampley, participant in the fourth international Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference, is of the opinion that visual culture has no object of study since it commenced with a disapproval of the “traditional histories of art, film, photography . . . [and] their positivist attachment to their object as a discrete given” (2002, p. 3). I envision my task to be to show how visual studies avoids these two ontological perils and negoti-
mates between the Scylla—the lack of a specific object of study—and the Charybdis—the expansion of the field to the point of incoherence. This study takes on a comparative perspective from which it asks the following questions: What is visual studies and what is its object? What is the relevance of visual culture for art historians? What attitudes do art historians adopt toward visual studies today? What is the relationship between the study of the history of art and the study of the visual and the cultural? Does visual culture require interpretative methodologies that are distinctive from those employed by art history and cultural studies?

In order to understand the interplay between art history, cultural studies, and visual studies, it is crucial to examine a range of theoretical standpoints. In 2001, I approached and interviewed the academics who had responded to the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” (October 77, 1996) and faculty members from a number of American universities. Historically, the use of conversation—the basis of an interview—as a systematic tool for the creation of knowledge can be traced to Thucydides and Socrates. Today’s social research emphasizes local context and the linguistic construction of a perspectival reality where knowledge is validated through practice. In this framework, the interview is considered a construction site of knowledge (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Kvale 1996). Approaching research questions from different angles and bringing together a range of views has the potential to generate explanations that capture the complexity of theories and debates better than other research procedures. The depth, detail, and richness one seeks in interviews is what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) called “thick description” in his path-breaking arguments on anthropological method.

My aim in the interviews was both to solicit a reflection on issues whose coverage in the existing literature seemed either insufficient or vague and to reveal how the interviewees’ thoughts were related to other statements in the field. I also strove to explore with “the subjects of visual culture” their experiences in the changing academic environment. Three clusters of scholars are represented: The first sees visual studies as an appropriate expansion of art history; the second group views the new focus as independent of art history and more appropriately studied with technologies of vision related to the digital and virtual era; and, finally, the third cluster considers visual studies a field that threatens and self-consciously challenges the traditional discipline of art history.
Visual Culture is based on the findings of this study comprising interviews, oral histories, and written responses to questionnaires. I have read, analyzed, and interpreted these materials and have categorized them according to content. The interviewees are quoted at considerable length throughout the text. Hans Belting noted that our entire culture has adopted the strategy of statement by quotation (1987 [1983], p. 51). The purpose behind the use of quotations in this text, however, has not been to disguise my position by recalling “another who has spoken with more authority,” but rather to avoid missing points that the interview questions were designed to capture in order to produce an analysis that adheres closely to the subjects’ original presentation of their concepts. The quotations are grouped to create a “polylogue,” in which thoughts are communicated, positions are counterpoised, and meanings are created. I convened this virtual panel hoping not only to make explicit the implicit differences in the views on and approaches to visual studies of its advocates, but also to illustrate how their ideas and arguments may complement each other—in other words, to find points of convergence and productive disagreement. Thus, rather than showing a consensus, such a design allows for a revelation of the subtle aspects of the complex debate and fashions a space where the exchange of opinions on the field’s agenda(s) unfolds.

This endeavor was indirectly inspired by the imagined debate between philosopher Martin Heidegger and art historian Meyer Schapiro narrated by Jacques Derrida in “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing” (1978), and by David Carrier’s pairing of art history texts written at different times but dealing with the same art objects or problems in Principles of Art History Writing (1991). Unlike these studies, however, the material for this book was gathered through interviews with conversational partners who are my contemporaries and who are and were aware of my goals. They also knew about the other protagonists, so that they could foresee, address, and actively engage with any likely criticism. Dialogical in its nature, the interviewing process took place over a short period of time to ensure a synchronism of responses.

This book is a pioneering attempt to present a historiographic account of visual studies entwined with a current polemic of its possible directions. An academic field is defined by three criteria: the object of study, the basic assumptions that underpin the methods of approach to the object, and the history of the discipline itself. Since there are two dimensions
to this study—disciplinary and institutional—it is arranged in two chapters. Chapter 1 offers a historical overview, discusses the object(s) of visual studies, its assumptions and methods, and evaluates the status of the new field as seen by both faculty and students in American universities. Through its diverse reflections, it brings together the spheres of theory—the methodology of research area—and practice—the experiences of working in the field of the visual.

Another innovation in this book is that it answers the need for a discussion of pedagogic practices that has frequently been overlooked in contemporary literature on visual and cultural studies (Striphas 1998). Questions have been raised by the launching of new college and university programs in visual culture and visual studies: Does the appearance of such programs indicate a move from art to visual and from history to culture? Is it a trend that reflects what is going on outside of the ivory tower, or is it internally motivated by the desire to rejuvenate the specialty by linking academic studies with practice? What can one learn from the experience of these programs? While these questions are still being answered through practice, a close examination of the four existing courses and programs in the institutions where they were first designed and implemented in the United States may reveal the complexity of these issues.

Chapter 2 exposes and specifies the implications of related theoretical challenges to current developments in higher educational policy and practice through a discussion of the undergraduate courses and graduate programs at the University of Rochester, New York; the University of Chicago; the University of California at Irvine (UCI); and the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. An analysis of the goals, organization, and curricula of two graduate programs in visual studies, enhanced by an examination and comparison of the objectives and contents of two undergraduate courses, illuminates essential characteristics of visual studies pedagogy that would otherwise remain obscure. This book associates differences in the pedagogy of these programs with the differences in the theoretical positions professed by their founders and instructors, as well as with the institutional nature of these settings. My study makes public a variety of theoretical standpoints and corresponding curricula initiatives, and embarks on a search for criteria by which an interdisciplinary visual culture program might be designed in the twenty-first century.
The term “visual culture” first appeared on the covers of books whose topics were neither Western art nor—in the spirit of their time—art with a capital “A”: Towards a Visual Culture: Educating through Television (1969), by Caleb Gattegno; Comics and Visual Culture: Research Studies from Ten Countries (1986), edited by Alphons Silbermann and H.-D. Dyroff; and The Way It Happened: A Visual Culture History of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa (1991), by James McClurken. Before he acquired a black-and-white television set in 1966, Gattegno had studied the imagery of children’s drawings and worked on films for teachers’ education. Marveling at the efficacy of knowing through sight, in his book he distinguished between “the clumsiness of speech” as a means of expression and “the powers of vision.” “With sight,” Gattegno states, “infinities are given at once; wealth is its description. In contrast to the speed of light, we need time to talk and express what we want to say. The inertia of photons is nil compared to the inertia of our muscles and chains of bones” (1969, p. 4).

This position reflects a utopian spirit: Gattegno posits that television would make the greatest contribution in the area of education by “casting away our preconceptions, our prejudices made explicit by the shock of the encounter of a true image and presumably true belief.” As such, it is obviously vulnerable to criticism from all quarters of contemporary scholarship (we need time to see what we gaze upon, and this meaning-making process is unthinkable without language, after all). But Gattegno’s text was among the first that emphasized the formation of subjectivity: “To talk of the medium of television is a way to talk of man the perceiver, the responder, the expander, and the processor of messages” (1969, p. 15). Silbermann and Dyroff, preoccupied with a comparative analysis of how comics were functioning in the United States, the U.S.S.R., the U.K., Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, France, Kenya, and India in both the pretelevision and television eras, advanced the thesis that their contemporaries, both adults and children, learned “more relevant things about culture via comics and comic films than by pure seeing with their eyes” (1986, p. 22).

James McClurken’s The Way It Happened used a wealth of visual material—historical photographs, drawings, and paintings—preserved by both individual families and institutions to restore to the written record