

## Raiford Guins, Joanne Morra, Marquard Smith and Omayra Cruz

### CONVERSATIONS IN VISUAL CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

#### Questioning the question: What is it?

**W**HAT IS VISUAL CULTURE? Such a question is complicated by the enormity of what visual culture can be understood to entail. After all, both the terms 'visual' and 'culture' have the potential to cover an already broad and extending diversity of experiences. In this instance, it is neither inappropriate to cite Martin Jay's observation that: 'Anything that can imprint itself on the retina has seemed fair game for the new paradigm, which prides itself on its democratic inclusivity' (1996: 42); nor is it inappropriate to cite Raymond Williams' renowned maxim that: 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (1976: 87). The expansiveness of these two terms is testament to the dynamics that have come to characterize two major conversations that we perceive to currently dominate the discourse of visual culture. For both proponents of and antagonists towards visual culture, these conversations revolve around the ontology of visual culture. The first conversation pertains to its definition. The second concerns its status.

With regards to the question 'What is it?' – on which the first conversation hinges – a series of questions have been asked: Is it a subject? Is it a discipline? Is it an object? Is it a field? Is visual culture an arena or an area? These questions are born of the necessary but dubious pleasures of definition, of staking a claim to knowledge patterned after the drive to classify. Invoking the question, 'What is it?' may be thought of in at least three ways. First, it may simply express a practical interest which asks: How is visual culture to be identified? What are its composite parts? How does it account for itself? It says: I am interested in this thing called visual culture. Second, the question 'What is it?' resonates with a more sinister tone. It plays a notable part in the historical treatment of persons who have not conformed to sexual or gender normative standards, as well as racialized discourses that have

called the humanity of various individuals into question. For example, according to James W. Cook Jr's analysis of P.T. Barnum's 'What Is It?' exhibition, Barnum used the term 'nondescript' to advertise his infamously dehumanizing display of an African American man marketed as a missing link. William Henry Johnson, who for decades played Barnum's 'What Is It?', was offered up as a liminal space over which the nation's conflicting ideologies during the late antebellum and Reconstruction eras could be voiced without any clear reference to US slavery. In short, 'What is it?' is, in this second sense, hardly an innocent question. It can either point to an entity, that has not yet been classified, that fails to confirm existent categorizing impulses, or that achieves 'the most liminal sense of *resisting* classification, or *straddling* descriptive boundaries' (1996: 147). This last point offers something other than the delimiting restrictions that one might first expect from the practice of classification. As Michel Foucault pointed out long ago in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as well as elsewhere, it is the clashing practice of organizing knowledge itself that puts the structure of knowledge under pressure.

This leads us to our third engagement with the question, 'What is it?', which is where we would like to begin our intervention into these debates. Specifically, how ought we to extricate ourselves from a potentially counterproductive ontological colossus while maintaining its myriad possibilities? Simply stated, we would like to pose the question 'What is it?' differently. We propose that the question may be asked from an epistemological rather than an ontological perspective. Such a shift involves drawing on the conversations surrounding visual culture's ontology to create an opening, an engagement with the question as a mode of speculative, self-reflective epistemology. As an epistemological question, 'What is it?' involves not an answer, but an interrogation of the query itself as it pertains to the formation of visual culture.<sup>2</sup>

To a certain extent, the work of delimiting visual culture has long been under way since the expansiveness associated with the term exerts a generative influence on the second conversation we have identified: its status. This second, more practical and institutionally minded conversation asks: Where does it go? Or more specifically, where is the study of visual culture to be housed, and how? From a different angle, where ought not and is not visual culture being allowed to dwell? The conversation around visual culture's status is primarily a matter of disciplinarity, of location – that is, of belonging. So where does visual culture belong given that the disciplines with which it has been associated – such as art history, media, film, architecture, and cultural studies – entail distinct histories, methodologies, formal interests, archives, and modalities of engagement? In addition, materially speaking, these disciplines do not generally share funding, space in the university, or even publication forums.

Where visual culture is located institutionally has been and arguably will continue to form the basis of its constitution as an academic discipline or field of study – which does not limit what visual culture might be able to *do*. People in the disciplines with which visual culture is associated do not always see eye to eye either with each other or with it. Indeed, they need not. Rather than accepting this potential impasse, perhaps visual culture can best be conceived of as a *district* within which, currently, a number of disciplinary interests reside. Anyone familiar with the workings of US and UK education or voting districts (or boroughs) is aware of their

frequently shifting parameters.<sup>3</sup> Formed for various political purposes, districts are a means of managing the administration of groups that may be, though are often not, homogenous. Although such groupings may coincide with established communities, and may from time to time promote the emergence of community, they need not be based on community. In the district of visual culture, we are neighbors. Some neighbors are friends, and to the rest it is worthwhile to be civil. Within this metaphoric, visual culture can be considered an epistemological district. An epistemological district would be an approach to the production of *relational* visual knowledges brought together to meet the needs of its disciplinary constituents. It is thus not based on an attempt to classify objects that are properly the domain of visual culture.

One might be inclined to argue that the last thing visual culture requires is additions to the fray of terms that are being contested under its name. However, following Williams's trajectory in *Keywords*, one is confronted with the question of what, more than vocabulary, can we bring to the practice of defining anything, much less so slippery and seductive an entity as visual culture. This said, our additions to the strategic vocabulary currently in place to address visual culture are the aforementioned use of the term district, and the forthcoming discussions of articulation and archives as a means of considering some of the circumstances that inform the complex constitution of visual culture today.

### District, articulation and archives

A suggestion: visual culture can at this tumultuous moment in its history and ever-increasing institutionalization and formalization, continue to learn a great deal from other cross-disciplinary programs and fields currently districted within the Western academy. Ethnic, disability, African-American, queer, gender, and especially cultural studies offer visual culture ways (read epistemologies), in addition to those already historically specific to it, to critique the disparate range of subjects related to, emanating from, and working through the broadest possible notions of visibility and visual culture.

Cultural studies is privileged here because of its pronounced position as one of the main disciplines against which visual culture is being defined – art history being another (and this too will soon be discussed). Cultural studies is called upon to highlight the emergence of visual culture as a site for cross-disciplinary analysis. This has recently been noted in texts by Mirzoeff (1999), Evans and Hall (1999), and Sturken and Cartwright (2001). Our understanding of visual culture is to some extent contingent upon this relationship with cultural studies, and it is one from which we draw freely.

To this end, Stuart Hall's interpretation of 'articulation' is employed in a consideration of how and what visual culture can learn from cultural studies. In our attempt to articulate visual culture we proceed not to ask how visual culture *resembles* cultural studies, but rather how visual culture *articulates* its many diversified fields of vision and visual worlds. In examining this, we only ever suggest that different ideas, objects, and practices can be utilized to make connections within visual culture. Hall adopts the process of articulation to enable a complex discussion of the dynamic

between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic structuring of ideology that neither reduces the socio-political sphere to the level of discourse nor subsumes it to the banality of economic overdetermination. Epistemologically, articulation diverges from the bias that privileges the lasting as somehow more important and more real than transitory or ephemeral unities. Hall most clearly demonstrates this is in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg entitled 'On Postmodernism and Articulation.' He suggests that the English meanings of the term 'articulation' refer to both a practice of uttering or speaking something, and a very material form of connection – as in an articulated lorry (the relationship between a truck and its detachable load). The concept thus involves a sense of the productivity of language as related to material circumstance – and the agility and fleetingness of both. As Hall states:

An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? [. . .] Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together with a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to political subjects.

(Grossberg 1996: 142–3)

By taking Hall's approach to articulation and translating it into a discussion of visual culture, it becomes possible to maintain that visual culture ought not be understood as merely an arbitrary formation. Visual culture is in large part a discursive construct, yet its discursive parameters have a complex history that is based on more than the material circumstances of its existence within institutions organized along strict rather than fluidic disciplinary lines. In terms of a discussion of visual culture, articulation provides a way of acknowledging the consequences of what are often strategic and transient interdisciplinary alliances and cross-identifications.

Articulation is a concept that we consider to be particularly suitable, perhaps necessary, to a discussion of visual culture. Our suggestion is not unique. Articulation is a word already used to discuss visual culture. For example, Irit Rogoff writes: 'If feminist deconstructive writing has long held the place of writing as the endless displacement of meaning, then visual culture provides the *visual articulation* of the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible' (1998: 15, italics added). Hall also takes great care to explicate his use of articulation as a process of linkage, wherein the connections made are historically located, transitory, and non-essentialist. The epistemological tools offered by Hall's 'articulation' and 'linkage' and Rogoff's 'displacement of meaning' can lead to an interrogation of the ways in which new knowledges are formed for visual culture. As a prelude to such a step, one should ask if the conjoining of these tools is viable and useful. If so, then what are the effects of these linkages and displacements in the practice of articulating visual culture's epistemological districts? One possible effect is the way in which the concept of linkage allows us to transform the question which haunts the present debates on visual culture from, What elements are enveloped

under the auspices of visual culture? to the discursive question of, What allows for a sense of heterogeneous unities to be achieved from such an articulation?

Hall purports that in order to make an articulation, one has to ask 'under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?' (Grossberg 1996: 142). Within the academy, the conditions affecting visual culture result from its location and the rubric under which it is welcomed. We have put forward the 'district' metaphor rather than 'arena' or 'housing' because a district is neither lasting nor consistent. Moreover, it does not intrinsically posit a community. A district is not impermeable and concrete, but loosely organized according to various ideological shifts. Earlier we suggested that the broadest possible notion of the visual be implemented when districting visual culture; and it is now time for that earlier proposition to be transposed into this present discussion of articulation.

On the one hand, we are left to consider how investigations of visual culture and inquiries into the visual ought not to function in a limiting capacity; one that returns to the habitual act of a bounded and finite field. (Although, it must be noted that the 'disciplining' of visual culture will inevitably lead to such demarcations, even within an interdisciplinary framework.) To conceive of visual culture as confined to a static disciplinary regime is to impose restrictions. To district visual culture according to a specific medium or to center it exclusively on a thematics, such as a concern for consumption over production of the image, circumscribes certain possibilities. On the other hand, one has no difficulty expanding even Jay's elastic, 'Anything that can imprint itself on the retina,' to include the more abstract and metaphorical uses of the visual and its related historical concept of vision, as well as their impact upon social and subjective formations. The possible benefits of a broad usage of 'the visual' are not *a priori* determined by what already counts as visual culture, but by *how* something becomes, and is articulated as visual culture.

On this question of history, the *October* 'Questionnaire' on visual culture, for example, worries over an elision of 'the model of history' within visual culture, and its replacement with 'the model of anthropology' (*October* 1996: 25). The 'Questionnaire' warns against this shift from an historical to a more cultural model of understanding social and subjective formation largely derived from the perspective of anthropology. The most important stake in such a shift, one that is not necessarily rendered apparent in the questions, is the relationship of culture to history. To return to Williams's definition of 'culture' in *Keywords*, our contemporary use of the term is a modern invention of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. If we recognize Williams's historicization of culture, and relationship to history, then the name of visual culture already speaks its reliance on history. However, if history is not acknowledged as an integral component of any discussion of culture, visual or otherwise, then it would be invaluable for visual culture to put forth a concept of history that precedes and parallels the modern construction of the notion of culture, as well as any investigation of culture. Here, art history, with its reliance on history, and its interrogation of its own understanding of history, becomes a toolbox from which to borrow concepts of history and historiography for visual culture. Depending on where one wishes to borrow, history is of utmost importance and necessary to visual culture. It allows fertile analysis of vision and visual representation within an historical framework. The districting,

articulation and archives of visual culture depend upon historical investigation for epistemological, and by extension, ontological renegotiation.

To develop this suggestion, a discussion of archive is required. Jacques Derrida, for instance, and Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Aby Warburg and Michel Foucault before him, have considered the problematic of the archive in ways that can enable an articulation of the districts of visual culture, its linkages and displacements. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida formulates the duality of the archive as both a commencement in 'the physical, historical or ontological sense,' and the place of order and jurisprudence in which laws find 'consignation' in a heterogeneous 'topology' (1996: 2-3). For our purposes, the archive becomes a strategy for recognizing the mobile structures of visual culture as possibility. If visual culture functions as an archive, heterogeneous visual consignations are structurally, discursively, legally, historically, materially, and ontologically determined and overdetermined. They adhere to and resist their disciplinary habitats, thereby articulating and districting new knowledges. Each encounter with an archive reanimates it differently.

To unify according to the structure of archives and articulation forces a plurality of linkages across disciplinary boundaries. This does not entail a 'free-for-all.' Visual culture's propensity to form links across these boundaries raises the following questions: What happens to the boundaries crossed? Relatedly, can they be maintained? At another level, what happens to the knowledges and methodologies within those boundaries? Borders that are traversed are transformed. The intersection of boundaries constitutes a form of union, which as Hall suggests, reconfigures how the disparate elements can be known. Knowledges may be lost; new knowledge may be created. What warrants an articulation is the recognized, if not habitual boundaries, that are discomfited, overcome, and transformed anew. Therefore, visual culture is concerned with districting and archiving contingent and heterogeneous gatherings, and the mutations resulting from such consignations. Visual culture has the capacity to be articulated and practiced within and between existing disciplinary boundaries.

Visual culture exists. We speak of it. We participate in it. To articulate, district and archive visual culture is to enunciate the connections that it has generated and generates, with an eye towards the contingency that was and is both its limitation and its condition of possibility. Surely for the moment, it is not so much what visual culture is, but rather what it can be enabled to do that matters.

## Notes

- 1 The four of us come from a film studies program; a school of art, publishing and music; a school of art, film and visual media; and a department of literature with a cultural studies component. It is in bringing together these fairly diverse fields of study that we suggest visual culture may be considered via the conversations that take place around it, and that it can generate between and within disciplines.
- 2 Prior to answering the question 'What is visual culture?', it is useful to note the problems associated with its naming. The difficulties in naming are illustrated by two very different takes on it: Michael Ann Holly's interrogation 'What does visual culture study?' (1996: 40); and Geoff Waite's separation of 'visual studies (our subject) [and] visual culture (our object)' (1996: 63). One of the interesting

points about this example is the fact that visual culture is being used both as a noun – an object of study – and as a verb – the practice of studying. This careful and intentional use of the term visual culture is testament to the problematic of naming a difference. Often this difference appears as a slippage and interchangeability between the names visual culture, visual studies, and visual cultural studies (which may also be included in this grouping). Both of these situations highlight an ontological crisis of nomenclature associated with visual culture.

- 3 We acknowledge the danger of comparing a suspect political process to the workings of the academy. However, a sensitive use of districting and its practices may still produce worthwhile if unexpected epistemological gains.

### References

- Cook, James W. Jr. (1996) 'Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum's "What Is It?" Exhibition' in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, New York: New York University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1996) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Evans, Jessica and Hall, Stuart (1999) *Visual Culture: A Reader*, London: Sage.
- Grossberg, Lawrence (1996) 'On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Holly, Michael Ann (1996) 'Saints and Sinners,' *October 77*, Summer: 39–41.
- Jay, Martin (1996) 'Visual Culture and Its Vicissitudes,' *October 77*, Summer: 43–4.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas (1999) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London: Routledge.
- October* (1996), 'Visual Culture Questionnaire,' *October 77*, Summer: 25–70.
- Rogoff, Irit (1998) 'Studying Visual Culture' in N. Mirzoeff (ed.) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London; Routledge.
- Sturken, Marita, and Cartwright, Lisa (2001) *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Waite, Geoff (1996) 'The Paradoxical Task . . . (Six Thoughts),' *October 77*, Summer: 63–7.
- Williams, Raymond (1976) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana Press.

## Plug-in theory