

## Chapter Thirty Visual Culture/Visual Studies

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"Visual culture" has emerged of late as a term meant to encompass all human products with a pronounced visual aspect—including those that do not, as a matter of social practice, carry the imprimatur of art. "Visual studies" (which I select from a number of cognate designations currently in use) serves as a convenient name for the academic discipline that takes visual culture as its object of study. The day has passed, however, when a nascent discipline such as visual studies can justify itself simply by gathering more goodies behind its disciplinary parapets: art . . . and much more! Practical considerations aside (and such considerations are far from trifling in the modern university), the exercise smacks of unreasonable acquisitiveness, of academic hubris. Visual studies, rather than engaging in the science of accounting for a massive collection of fresh data points, must embark on the historical and social analysis of the hierarchies whose formation and operation have generated—and will continue to generate, even under the aegis of visual studies—greater interest in some artifacts than in others. To enlarge the compass of the study of visual artifacts beyond art does not force scholars to homogenize away the differences between art (or other favored categories) and things not thus endowed. Visual studies, rather than leveling all artifacts into the meaningless commonality of "the visual," treats the field of the visual as a place to examine the social mechanisms of differentiation.

Let me, then, offer an abbreviated sketch of the expanded territory—the necessarily and self-consciously artificial territory—across which visual studies hopes to chart the production of hierarchies among artifacts. I will do this by plotting out the new discipline's moves in relation to the field of art history along three trajectories.

First, visual studies democratizes the community of visual artifacts. However defined and however assigned, the concept of art bestows a type of privilege on a select few objects. The great mass of common items that visually address real or potential viewers tend to attract attention from art historians only when they set

the context, in some fashion or another, for works of art. For the most part, humanists lack even a rudimentary system of classification to make sense of this bounteous supply of things (although James Elkins has ingeniously fashioned a preliminary typology for them, using semiotic categories derived in part from Nelson Goodman). Visual studies promises to pay heed to these relatively neglected objects. While not questioning the importance of art objects, the new discipline entertains the possibility that other visual artifacts may be equally capable of aesthetic and ideological complexity—and accordingly can reward scholarly investigators with nontrivial results. Visual studies, as it were, extends to this broad class of artifacts the franchise of scholarly analysis, welcoming them into the society of objects worthy of study.

To phrase it thus anthropomorphizes, and—realizing the metaphor—it is tempting to draw a rough parallel between social and aesthetic hierarchies. Historically, social elites do seem to have certain affinities with high art. Nevertheless, in terms of the rank of their creators, that which they depict, their intended audience, or the types of viewers that actually engage them, visual artifacts hardly need correlate with any given class in relatively similar position along the social scale. Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. Visual studies can make that ever changing interplay between social and aesthetic forces one of its principal concerns—without presupposing the placement of any privileged set of artifacts or class of people at the center of the discipline.

A curious by-product of this broadening of attention beyond the precincts of art is that visual studies in practice can take on a distinctly modern aspect. In part this is the result of the attraction exerted on the field by technologically advanced new media (about which more in a moment), which have not yet secured solid standing as works of art. But it also stems from the fact that simple, everyday objects that have survived from distant times tend to assume, in our own day, the mantle of high art. Any potsherd miraculously preserved from ancient Egypt or classical Greece, any fragment of medieval tapestry or even simple cloth not destroyed during the rugged course of intervening centuries, today receives royal curatorial treatment and elicits no clucking when displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or published in *The Art Bulletin*. In order to distinguish itself from a discipline that already claims most of the past as its own, visual studies often takes recourse to featuring objects of recent and abundant manufacture—films and photographs, advertisements and commercial goods—not yet valued for their rarity (with distressing regularity, a valuation confounded with aesthetic distinction). It is important to recognize that this tendency toward the modern is the result more of current academic jostling than of disciplinary imperatives internal to visual studies. Visual studies need not let go of the past.

Second, in addition to expanding the range of domestic visual artifacts un-

der consideration, visual studies also broadens the study of visual artifacts potentially to all corners of the world. Such global mindfulness is not without precedent: Euro-American art history departments in the postwar period have generally responded to the recognition (by Western scholars) of cultural activity in a previously underacknowledged part of the world by appointing a specialist to cover the area—or at least by bemoaning the lack of funds that prevents them from doing so. Nonetheless, the Eurocentric origins of that established discipline, emerging as it did in the Continental nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, has repeatedly raised the specter that the discovery of art in societies outside the Occident entails the projection of a concept of great cultural specificity and considerable political charge—namely “art”—onto distant peoples among whom that idea of art may hold little or no currency. Consequently, historians of that thing called “art” frequently find themselves in a double cul-de-sac of the discipline’s own making: no one would wish to insist that artifacts outside the Occident should conform to European aesthetic standards (that would be Eurocentric, if not indeed culturally imperialistic), yet neither would anyone want to suggest that such societies lack the capacity to perform at an aesthetic level comparable to the Occident (that would be condescending).

Visual studies somewhat sidesteps this sort of impasse by defining its scope not in terms of a loaded cultural concept but rather according to a physiological characteristic of seeming transcultural application: the fact that people from all parts of the world have eyes, and those eyes have the capacity to see. Not that visual studies would wish to assert some solid biological foundation to its activities. Different societies conceive of that basic ocular faculty—and use it as a metaphor for knowledge and other cultural practices—in radically different manners. For example, during European antiquity and the Middle Ages, sight frequently assumed the active character we now tend to associate with touch. Consequently, seeing and being seen frequently required strict social or religious regulation: fear of the piercing Evil Eye, for instance, prompted the wide dissemination of prophylactic talismans (a recent volume edited by Robert S. Nelson [2000] explores such variations in underlying assumptions about the visual). Nevertheless, the fact that any term used to designate a field of inquiry necessarily carries with it a certain cultural relativity hardly implies that all terms are culturally relative to an equal degree. And in some rather obvious sense the category of the visual breaks beyond the markedly Eurocentric—indeed postromantic—notion of art. Specifically, it opens up the field to a comparative study of the origins and functions of the aesthetic criteria of modern Euro-America—and also of other typologies and hierarchies generated by humans for the management of sight and of things seen.

To engage the material culture of distant cultures and to forsake the object-

privileging concept of art, however, may drive visual studies into the fold of yet another discipline, anthropology (or, earlier, ethnography), and more than one critic has faulted the initiative for thus selling its soul to the social sciences. Various complaints against visual studies may be hiding under this general accusation of anthropologizing (including the worry that the academic study of culture thereby loses its historical dimension, a misgiving only reinforced by the modernist tendencies of the practice). But it seems that a principal reservation held by a number of detractors concerns means and ends. Anthropology—literally, an “account” of “man”—regards material artifacts principally as supporting evidence contributing to an understanding of the varied ways of the human species. To thus regard the artifact as a sign of something else is to overlook its specificity as a material object, its brute recalcitrance to incorporation into some story about “man.”

The concern is justified, as far as it goes. To the extent that “art” history would like to use evidence of human social practice to understand the work of art rather than using the work of art as evidence of human social practice, the anthropologization of cultural analysis may well put the cart before the horse. Whereas anthropology treats “culture” as the totality of human activity in a given society (and would regard the art world as an elite subcultural practice), art history often would like to maintain the possibility that “culture” (as in the phrase “high culture”) operates somewhat independently of social practice broadly perceived—perhaps even serving as a point of material resistance to the sort of larger social forces that anthropology might call “culture.”

Yet visual studies cannot be so easily reduced to anthropology. Because visual studies suspends itself somewhere between art history and anthropology, it does not close down the question concerning the potential autonomy (or semi-autonomy) of the art object but rather props it permanently open. Is the work of art, when treated only in its signifying capacity with disregard to its material aspect, merely a means toward understanding the social sphere; or is the work of art an end in itself, which the social sphere may encounter as some indigestible kernel of material incongruity? Visual studies offers the possibility of maintaining an analytic balance between the primacy of social “man” and that of material “art,” examining the constant and productive tension (productive both for social practice and for aesthetic activity) between these two underlying, governing conceits.

Dematerialization may take other forms than reduction to the sign. Hence the third trajectory of visual studies: it frees the study of visual culture from the limitations imposed by the material object—and does so in two new senses. In the first sense, it can shift the focus of analysis away from things seen toward the process of seeing. Here the ideas of Michel Foucault on the panopticon and Jacques Lacan on the gaze and the screen have proved especially helpful in re-

casting vision primarily as an issue of identity formation and social interpolation. (Others, including Margaret Olin [chapter 22 in this volume], have explored these methodological developments in much greater depth; I give them only summary treatment here.) Generally, film studies has tended to tackle these issues earlier and with greater rigor than has art history; accordingly, that discipline has contributed enormously to the analytical tools available to visual studies.

In the second sense, visual studies happily embraces new forms of image production that, increasingly over time, no longer manifest themselves in material form: from photography (which can be treated principally as it materializes itself in the photograph), to film (the study of which has seldom fetishized the celluloid carrier of the image in the way that the study of photography has celebrated the precious print), to television and video (whose names abandon reference to the material carrier), to digitalized computer images (which reside in the material box of the computer but could never be mistaken for the computer itself), to digitalized images transmitted across the World Wide Web and other electronic networks (which cannot, in any meaningful sense, even be located in one material place). The last of these, abetted by hyperbolic claims and excitement circulating throughout the mass media over the past several years, has become a special darling of scholars in visual studies and serves well to exemplify the new discipline's enthusiasm for the disembodied image.

The Web, however, has changed its stripes in the several decades since its inception. What began as an esoteric electronic medium for the ostensibly disinterested transmittal of scientific information among researchers in universities and the national defense apparatus has evolved into a shining new vehicle for the rapid hawking of commodities to potentially just about everybody. Indeed, the further we work our way down the list above of disembodied media, the more the visual image appears caught up in the world of commerce. For some critics of visual studies, the terms "dematerialization" and "commodification" function as virtual synonyms. Mainstream Hollywood movies, the television networks, and now the Web all are tinctured by the making of big money.

And here we get to the crux of the matter, the point at which visual studies may most clearly distinguish itself from earlier forms of cultural analysis in the humanities. In one scenario, the scholar imagines that the world of commodity capitalism exists as a hegemonic behemoth busily striving to transform all concrete things into abstracted market values and any remaining traces of real life or experience into the superficialities of the mass spectacle (as characterized with great effect by Jean Baudrillard). In that case the responsible scholar—operating from either the political left or right, moreover—need search for some material practice, such as art, marginalized by or (even better) operating outside of the hegemony of commerce, which can therefore embody resistance to it.

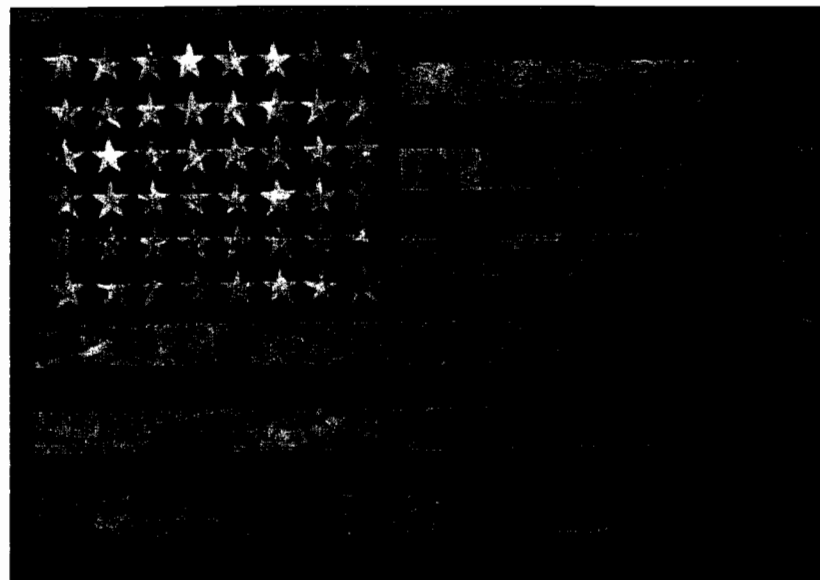
(Many arguments along these lines are really just extensions or permutations of Clement Greenberg's formulation, dating from the late 1930s, of the artistic avant-garde as a safe haven for the preservation of the last remnants of revolutionary consciousness in a reactionary age.) Alternatively, the scholar questions (explicitly or implicitly) the internal coherence and consistency of the capitalist hegemony and considers that meaningful—even progressive—cultural work can be performed from deep inside the machine, operating its devices to incongruent effect. Is it possible, for example, to watch television or surf the Web against the grain? More: could it be that the multiplicity of manners in which commodified imagery can be appropriated and redeployed by its users is such a decisive characteristic of cultural consumption that it doesn't even make sense to talk about operating "against the grain" (or, for that manner, about hegemonies) because commodities don't possess the power to carry the hegemonic "grain" along as part of their ideological baggage? Scholars who answer both questions in the negative (and subscribe to the first alternative above) will tend to emerge as defenders of the basic tenets of art history and insist on the special preserve and characteristics, such as materiality, of art. Scholars who answer both in the positive (and sympathize with the second alternative) may well find the area of scholarship laid out by visual studies to provide the more accommodating forum for the pursuit of their interests.

This third trajectory of dematerialization qua commodification inflects the first two, globalization and democratization. While art history may strive to study cultures from around the globe, it tends to shy away from cultural artifacts and activities from outside Euro-America that have been tainted by the capitalist markets. Japanists don't tend to analyze the Sanrio menagerie, and Indianists risk professional isolation (at least from art historians) if they study recent movie posters from the subcontinent. The concern seems, at least in part, to be that commodification, as an Occidental (and hegemonic) import, dilutes the cultural specificity—or perhaps the ostensibly pure, unchanging authenticity—of the region. Given the current ubiquity of commodity culture, an obvious consequence of this scholarly tendency is to render art history of the non-Occident as decidedly premodern in emphasis as visual studies appears rooted in the modern. In a similar fashion along the axis of class, much of the cultural activity of the mass audience—watching television and glimpsing billboards, visiting Disneyland and inhabiting the mall—takes place at the very heart of the markets that have triumphed in the commodification of the image. To dismiss the world of the commodity as unworthy of serious cultural analysis or to hand that realm of investigation over to the social scientists while the humanists study objects more pure in their construction is to forsake the study of most of the production and consumption of visual images around the globe and across the social spectrum.

Opening the floodgates to let in the vast sea of commodities, however, threatens visual studies with a peculiar problem: scholarship may become inundated by simply too much stuff to analyze. Not just too much stuff (art history has no shortage of unpublished paintings to uncover and minor artists to resuscitate); too many categories of stuff, too many genres of pictorial production, too many semiautonomous cultural communities trafficking in their own idiosyncratic images. To redirect scholarly analysis toward the formation of hierarchies provides only a partial solution to managing this unlimited abundance, both because it somewhat forces the issue of dematerialization (since one is principally studying dematerialized social categories rather than singular material things) and because it only postpones the moment of choice until one must select which of innumerable hierarchies to study and which specific items are thereby ranked. How then should visual studies, as an emerging discipline, attempt to make sense of this fantastic proliferation? How can a discipline predicated on a certain inclusiveness go about selecting from within its extensive field those exemplary objects, necessarily limited in number, that will, along with their social orderings, receive scholarly treatment?

These are questions that, much to the detriment of visual studies, have not been adequately addressed by its practitioners. Some tactics—the discipline lacks anything resembling a clear strategy—have emerged. One is to plunge to the deep center of commodity culture (to the extent that that center can be located) to demonstrate the presence even there of cultural complexity and conflicting agendas among actors. Expect a study of the new Las Vegas, perhaps, or of the variegated viewing habits of the habitués of *Friends*. Another is to seek out odd corners of the cultural landscape to locate places where groups on the underprivileged side of various categories of race, class, and gender use visual artifacts to formulate marginalized identities. Judith Butler's much-read essay on the film *Paris Is Burning*, which features "Voguing" in Harlem by impoverished black gays and transsexuals, well exemplifies this approach. Still another is to choose instances where established works of high art interact in interesting ways with visual artifacts of different (from the perspective of art, lower) standing. In essence, this final gambit rides the coattails of art history's already executed, though always evolving, processes for the selection of its objects of study.

These are divergent mandates, and no one object of analysis may succeed in satisfactorily exemplifying all three. Nonetheless, the American flag might serve our purposes. Certainly the bunting and banners of Independence Day circulate abundantly as commodities each early July, and more than one enthusiastic waver of the red, white, and blue would stoutly declare the celebration to be all about the political institutions that allow capitalism to flourish. The ubiquitous use of the flag following September 11 has only multiplied such com-



mercial opportunities. It is a greater stretch (again, especially after September 11) to cast patriotic Americans as a marginalized subculture, yet flag idolatry at its chauvinistic extremes does contribute to the self-definition of subgroups that are feared and despised as much as admired. And the American flag has repeatedly furnished the scenic backdrop for the stage of art, toward which a significant number of paintings and sculptures have made gestures of reference and against which they have struck their poses of difference. Perhaps the most famous of these artworks is Jasper Johns's *Flag* of 1954–55 (Plate 30.1). With a large debt to the perspicacious writing of Fred Orton on this painting, I will use *Flag* as a means of approaching the nonart objects, those banners of the masses, that it engages—and that engage it.

Johns's *Flag*, as Orton would have it, is a complex object indeed. With its ostensibly simple subject (an American flag) and its patently complex facture (bits of newsprint and other detritus embedded in tinted encaustic), *Flag* over and again confounds any proposition concerning its purport by immediately offering

**Plate 30.1**

Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954–55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, 42 1/4" × 60 3/4". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. "Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

evidence of its opposite. After exploring in rich detail each of the following antinomies, Orton concludes with the following explicitly Derridean set of formulations:

As an "undecidable" *Flag* . . . cannot be securely located within any of the oppositions or antinomies that make it and which are used in its accounting. . . . Neither original or unoriginal, it is both original and unoriginal; neither personal nor impersonal, it is both personal and impersonal; neither masculine nor not-masculine, it is both masculine and not-masculine; neither celebration nor criticism, it is both celebration and criticism; . . . neither simple-minded nor recondite, it is both simple-minded and recondite; neither patriotic nor unpatriotic, it is both patriotic and unpatriotic; neither ground nor figure, it is both ground and figure; neither collage nor painting, it is both collage and painting; neither texture nor textuality, it is both texture and textuality; neither subject nor surface, it is both subject and surface; . . . neither representation nor abstraction, it is both representation and abstraction; neither life nor art, it is both life and art; . . . neither sign nor referent, it is both sign and referent; neither flag (standard, colours or ensign) nor painting (or something that is neither painting nor collage but both painting and collage), it is both flag (standard, colours or ensign) and painting (or something which is neither painting nor collage but both painting and collage). Mute and eloquent, opaque and lucid, *Flag* works in the space of difference where it articulates well-rehearsed oppositions and disarticulates them. (Orton 1994, 145–46)

This is, as an account of Johns's singular object, brilliant and deeply satisfying. It is art history of the first order. And consequently it is also visual studies of the first order, to the extent that visual studies gladly accepts within its compass the analysis of that subset of artifacts that go by the name of art. But visual studies might push yet further in exploring the visual artifact, or rather multiply produced artifacts, to which *Flag* makes reference, namely, the Stars and Stripes (Orton's convenient manner of referring to that which in any other context would be referred to as "the flag").

To be sure, Orton does address the nature of that object. Twice, with exemplary thoroughness, Orton launches into the sort of contextual description that might be said to characterize the social history of art. He reports, for instance, that

it was not until an executive order of President William H. Taft, issued on 24 June 1912, that the design of the flag was laid down as a standard set of relative proportions. Taft's order made available a blueprint plan, obtainable on request from the Navy Department, which could be used to deter-

mine the precise location and size of the, by then, forty-eight stars for flags in any of the twelve official sizes whose dimensions were determined by the measure of the hoist, or vertical width, in relation to the fly, or horizontal length, in the ratio of 1:1.9. These specifications were, and still are, regularly ignored; the most common proportions used by manufacturers are not 1:1.9, which is mandatory for flags displayed by Government departments, but either 2:3 or 3:5. (Orton 1994, 90)

Or Orton connects the artist's interest in flags to the social setting of his southern origins: "[Johns] was . . . named for Sergeant William Jasper. . . . Jasper (1750–1779), who served in the 2nd South Carolina Infantry under William Moultrie, distinguished himself during the British bombardment of Fort Sullivan, Charleston—known afterwards as Fort Moultrie—on 26 June 1776 by recovering the fort's flag after it had been shot down and, under heavy fire, re-mounting it" (Orton 1994, 104, 106). Orton, then, does examine the cultural life—"cultural," this time, in the anthropological sense—both public and personal, of the Stars and Stripes.

Yet, like much art-historical analysis that sets its art objects into a context, the context assumes a certain stability that allows it to serve as the foundation for the historical placement of art. Johns's *Flag* may twist and turn against any possibility of historical determination: that is certainly part of Orton's point. Art has that capacity to trope. Art-historical analysis has a tendency to assume that art alone has that tropological capacity—or at least that analysis does not concern itself with the tropes executed within, as opposed to against, the context. We can see this clearly in the one formulation in Orton's list that requires the subordinating device of parentheses: "Neither flag (standard, colours or ensign) nor painting (or something that is neither painting nor collage but both painting and collage), it is both flag (standard, colours or ensign) and painting (or something which is neither painting nor collage but both painting and collage)." *Flag* as a painting is metadiscursively both "painting and collage," whereas the Stars and Stripes, lacking that metadiscursivity, is simply "standard, colours or ensign."

Orton is surely justified in this stabilization of the external referent: his task is to provide an account of *Flag*, not of the Stars and Stripes, and any tactical simplifications he may make in the description of the Stars and Stripes are legitimate as long as they do not distort his arguments about *Flag*. A practitioner of visual studies, however, might, place different emphasis. He or she might direct the analytical spotlight, usually reserved for the painting, onto the objects that make up its context.

Specifically, a visual studies approach could take Orton's insights about *Flag*'s undecidability and query the Stars and Stripes on similar lines. What after all,

does a flag mean? To whom does it belong? Does it appertain to the individual (like *Flag*, read in a certain manner, does to Jasper Johns) or to the collective (as again does *Flag*, read in relation to its historical context)? Consider the simple phrase, which could be voiced by many a patriotic citizen: "It's my flag." In an obvious sense, a flag signifies a nation, and a nation consists of an entity greater than any individual. We might say that the nation exists only to the extent that its citizens are willing to recognize it as the embodiment of a special supra-individual identity—despite its familiarity, quite an abstract notion—that unites a people. For someone to say "It's my flag," then, is actually a rather odd utterance, for it declares singular proprietary interest in a piece of cloth that can only represent a collectivity. The Stars and Stripes is neither singular nor collective, but both singular and collective. It performs, in a masterful ideological stroke, the suspension of that basic contradiction as a truth—a patriotic truth of such compelling force that a significant number of soldiers (including Sergeant Jasper, in a subsequent battle) have willingly died for it. We are now on a stage where the flag, more than simply serving as art's backdrop, becomes an upstage figure active in the formation of ideology—a role for it explored within a French context both by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* and by Raoul Girardet in Pierre Nora's monumental *Realms of Memory* (both publications, replete with essays that discern complexity in mundane visual artifacts, stand as useful precursors to, or participants in, the work of visual studies).

The flag then is as much an undecidable as is *Flag*. Yet this brief foray into the analysis of what had been the art-historical context for *Flag* and is now a text of visual studies has, in a sense, forced me to let go of the object. I have not been presenting an argument about a single flag, a specific scrap of cloth with a particular date of origin and a history of use and misuse that may register—spots, tears, and so forth—across its surface. I have been discussing flags as a class of things, that great collection of items manufactured and sold over the years at the improper ratio of 2:3 or 3:5. Without the individual object at hand, the analyst can hardly execute the careful and detailed visual analysis (beautifully exemplified by Orton's scrutiny of the minute material idiosyncrasies of *Flag*) that the discipline of art history can rightly claim as one of its proudest achievements. Art history is loath to abandon that commitment to the single object: even Orton, in order to dwell with precision on *Flag*, must play down that fact this singular painting was also a part of a large group of canvases that Johns painted of flags.

Must visual studies forsake the use of this particular tool for the analysis of particularities? (Accusations that visual studies may involve a "de-skilling" of its students may amount to this—although the indictment begs the question of how well traditional programs in art history have actually been in imparting this skill.) Not necessarily. Visual studies can recuperate it by choosing in-

stances where a single specimen from a class of things can be examined in its individual history as a means of illustrating a more generalized social use of that class: the flag salvaged by Sergeant Jasper in 1776, for example, had it survived. Or it may exercise the same degree of visual precision in analyzing characteristics shared by multiply produced items—the composition of a specific frame of a film, say—rather than the idiosyncrasies that distinguish the individual artifact—the visual scratches and aural pops on a given print of that film. Sentimental attachment to a given mode of analysis, in any case, should hardly be allowed to dictate the range of artifacts we select for study. If a certain manner of scholarly looking requires singularity and singularity remains an attribute more closely linked with objects of art than with mass-produced commodities, then to insist on the type of close visual analysis that focuses on individuating particularities would be to leave the discipline fundamentally blind to the social and aesthetic history and function of singularity itself. In an age when tension between unique items and reproducible types plays an integral part in many of our most important ideological struggles, that is no minor loss. Far from a settling of the question of what to analyze and what to analyze it with, visual studies—in recognition of new and newly rediscovered constellations of visual objects in use—proposes that we leave ourselves open to improvisation and surprise.

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## Thirty-one Social History of Art

Craig Clunas

What might a social history of the "Social History of Art" look like? What might be its concerns? A sort of fantastical parody of what it has come to stand for is easy to imagine: what did Arnold Hauser's father do; who sat on T. J. Clark's appointing committee; where did the first intake of the 1975 University of Leeds MA in the social history of art go to school; what does Craig Clunas get paid? The prospect has a certain prurient fascination, and indeed these very sorts of issues are what gets discussed when professional art historians forgather, although it does not feel like a realistic proposition for cold print. But what, on the other hand, might properly be excluded? Why do I, when writing about this topic, seem to feel the need to read every bit of methodology about everything? What should I leave out of writing about the "social history of art"? And where do these all-encompassing claims come from? At one level, they might simply reflect the possibility that, whether explicitly stated or not, a social history of art has become *le vrai* of the great majority of pedagogic practice and academic writing, the operating system inside of which a large proportion of salaried practitioners (the writer included) live and breathe and have their being. This is to take as uncontroversial Martin Jay's point, in the midst of a larger controversy to which I shall return, that "it is no longer possible to cling defensively to a belief in the irreducible specificity of the visual art that art history traditionally studied in isolation from its larger context" (*October* 1996, 44). Putting the work of art in "its larger context" is now what students are taught to do, it is what art history is, and an art history of the social, if not a social history of art, may arguably be what most of us are in fact writing much of the time.

Yet for some, the social history of art is dangerously dominant. Ian Heywood opens with the image of art as a city (Lorenzetti's Siena, no less) "under attack internally and externally." It is something called social theorizing that is so destructive, destructive of art and potentially of theory also (Heywood 1997, 5). In the entry "social history of art" in the 1996 *Dictionary of Art*,