

September 28, 2007

At the invitation of Hans van Miegroet I visited the Duke University Campus starting the evening of Sunday September, 23 and ending Tuesday September 25, 2007. My objective was to discuss the Visual Studies Initiative with a series of different parties including Hans van Miegroet; members of the Visual Studies Initiative Steering Committee including: Kristine Stiles, Victoria Szabo, Tim Lenoir, Rachael Brady, Tom Rankin, and Kim Rorschach; to visit with members of the faculty from the department of Art, Art History and Visual Studies; as well as meet with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dr. McLendon and Dean Davis, of the Humanities.

My first meeting was with Kristine Stiles. Over a working dinner we discussed the broad goals of the Visual Studies Initiative; the potential collaborating parties; differing structures and methodologies that the initiative might explore; and the broad history of interdisciplinary, crossdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration that had historically flourished at Duke. In particular, Stiles discussed the exciting paradigm shift that was planned in Duke's approach to Visual Studies. This shift included the potential of new curriculum that bridged the arts, the sciences and the humanities in a manner that fostered new forms of research collaboration; classes that intermingled theory and practice; new approaches to majors, minors and electives; the potential generation of a new masters degree; the attraction of top Ph.D. candidates and visiting artists, scientists and humanists; and the potential creation of a new technological research center. It was clear to me that Duke was well poised to become a world leader in this field, expanding the research base of the university in an exciting and intellectually stimulating manner.

On Monday morning I presented a talk entitled "Recombinant Poetics, Pattern Flows and Neosentience" for the "Tech and New Media Series" at the John Hope Franklin Center (coordinated by Isis). My research history is relevant to the Visual Studies Initiative in that I have collaborated with Scientists (a theoretical Biologist and Physicist), top Literary Theorists, Dancers, and Computer Scientists, and I have much to say about the potentials of such collaboration in terms of the pedagogical and research oriented goals of the Visual Studies Initiative.

I met with members of the art faculty over coffee and discussed the art department and its relation to the initiative. We talked about the potentials of specific hires that could facilitate the rich cross-disciplinary bridging that is the central focus of the new paradigm. We also discussed the potential of both long and short term visitors and how they would augment the curriculum (taking on a teaching role), work on special creative research projects that would be of value to them, as well as to the students and faculty collaborating with them. We also discussed the potential of adjunct faculty commuting from major cities to function within the initiative — New York City being quite close by plane. We also discussed how such hires and visitors might shift the critical mass of the department and function as an attractor for top theorists and practitioners, as well as a new breed of students who would see the great benefit of participating in such an exciting pedagogical paradigm. I was particularly excited by conversations with Pedro Lasch concerning the discussion of social and cultural issues that the Visual Studies Initiative would empower and embrace.

I had a wonderful and very long discussion at a working dinner with Hans van Miegroet. We spoke at length about the goals of the paradigm shift, the potential structuring of the initiative, possible new approaches to "Research Project" classes that would attract students and faculty from multiple disciplines, as well as relations with other functioning entities at the university like the Franklin Institute and ISIS.

I had previously toured the exciting research facilities — the Virtual Reality cave and “sensing” research room. Again, Duke is well positioned in terms of research support for such an initiative. One also imagines some new support positions that would be designed to serve the initiative, e.g. a programmer that might help work on the creation of new forms of database that could help facilitate new approaches to the computational humanities, art/science/humanities bridging, and the mapping of skill sets and potential collaborators across the campus. Although such a position is not common to the historical paradigm of Visual Studies, it is essential to the vision of this new set of approaches.

New kinds of labs that might house cross-disciplinary research projects should also go into the planning if they have not already been included in the new building.

Tuesday morning I spent talking to Visual Studies Initiative Steering Committee (listed above). I presented some of my own views on the topic that had been informed by the earlier discussions on the campus and material I had read on-line. I will include some of these views here:

Historically, vision has been isolated in its study. Any contemporary study of visual phenomena could potentially integrate knowledge related to the inter-functionality of the entire set of human senses and their relation to memory, association, and meaning production; the more general functionality of embodiment and its relation to “difference” across space and time; as well as the body's relationships to new technologies, society and culture. Thus, one seeks to posit an embodied study of meaning production in all of its complexity as it relates to visual studies, bridging the arts, the sciences and the humanities.

This concept opens out on different qualities of association:

- 1) The conceptual processes of association that go on when one examines a visual work, bringing multi-modal experience and memory into play
- 2) The examination of visual material within complex media-contexts that are inhabited by other media — sounds, still and time-based imagery, 3D images, virtual space, text as image, media behaviors, video and film, holography, as well as advanced technological imaging systems related to the sciences.
- 3) New complex structures enabled by digital technologies and spatial understandings — the digital potentials of interactive authorship, non-linear approaches to meaning production, the study of emergent meaning, inter-authorship, distributed authorship, locative media, and qualities of physical space etc.
- 4) The multiple histories that are enfolded and inform this approach

The study of the body, as nested within the environment and its bio-functionality, helps us to better understand meaning production. Biomimetics and bio-abstraction also contribute to the development of new technological systems that augment human potentials, contributing to the understanding of visual communication across multiple fields.

This study of bio-functionality and its abstraction, particularly relevant to Computer Science and the Computational Humanities, contributes to the authorship of new tools that enable us to map a multiplicity of relationships; visualize phenomena; articulate social interactions; and explore cultural change through dynamic visual representations. The creation, “reading” and understanding of these representations is central to new forms of visual studies.

I spoke at length about the model of Node Classes that I had initiated at RISD. These node classes present a new model for studio classes on the graduate level at RISD. The term “node” suggests one point on a non-linear trajectory. Websites are “nodes” on the internet.

The brief given to digital media was to create an interdisciplinary environment for graduate education. In order to create the greatest versatility for graduate education in terms of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary classes - the Node classes were articulated. Node classes intermingle theory and practice. These are 3 credit studio classes - 5 hours in length. Each class

represents a concentrated approach to creative digital media exploration. Often these classes bridge to other departments and/or disciplines. They enable the exploration of interdisciplinary production that is for the most part not covered within the normal departmental offerings here at RISD. Historically RISD has been very separate in terms of the disciplines. Digital+Media seeks to form a digital hub enabling intellectual growth and exchange between disciplines by forming a virtual set of bridges. Thus the node class model is very close in spirit to the Visual Studies Initiative as I understand it.

The committee seemed excited by the "Node" class model and the potentials of some of these classes.

During lunch I gave an artist talk to the students and faculty of the *Art, Art History and Visual Studies* department which was greeted warmly.

I later met with the two deans — from Arts and Sciences and the Humanities, along with Hans van Miegroet. We had an exiting discussion about the potentials of the initiative. Later I visited the wonderful Nasher Museum and had a discussion with Kim Rorschach about her curatorial approaches and potential new shows related to more experimental production. I finished the visit with a working dinner discussion with Hans van Miegroet, Pedro Lasch and Mark Olson.

Conclusion:

The visual studies initiative represents an exciting paradigm shift. The bridging of the arts, the sciences and humanities will open out rich new territories for research and pedagogy under the broad new rubric of Visual Studies. Duke is well poised to become a world leader in this contemporary re-definition of the field. I was deeply excited by the expansive plans at Duke to nurture this paradigm shift into existence. Given the history of interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary projects at Duke, the willingness of educators and researchers to talk across domains, and the stature of the institution as a Class 1 research University, the proposed Visual Studies Initiative has great potential for success.

Sincerely,

Professor Bill Seaman Ph.D.

Department Head and Graduate Program Director
 Digital+Media Department (Graduate Division)
 Rhode Island School of Design
 Two College St.
 Providence, R.I. 02903-4956
 401 277 4956
 fax 401 277 4966
 bseaman@risd.edu

<http://billseaman.com>
<http://digitalmedia.risd.edu>