
2 April, 2007

At the invitation of Hans van Miegroet, Michael Ann Holly and I visited the Duke campus on March 21st, 2007, to talk to faculty and administrators involved in the Visual Studies Initiative proposed by the Department of Art History. After a working supper with Hans following our arrival, during which he told us about the scope and structure of the plans, we met the next morning with Tim Lenoir, a historian of scientific imaging, Deborah Jakubs, Duke University Librarian, and Kim Rorschach, head of the Nasher Museum of Art.

The ensuing conversation allowed the two of us to grasp the difference that distinguishes this initiative from that with which we are familiar from our experience at the University of Rochester, initiated in the early 1990's. Whereas the impetus to the creation of visual studies at that time lay in the theoretical initiatives associated with poststructuralism, the way in which theory enabled one to rethink art history so as to allow it to expand beyond the traditional parameters imposed by a cultural canon, the Duke proposal is animated by a radically different set of considerations. It rapidly became apparent that what was being proposed was not just a collaboration among departments in the humanities, such as literature, anthropology and film (as had been the case at Rochester or the University of California at Irvine), but rather a conception of visual studies that transcended the humanities altogether and sought to take advantage of Duke's strength in the sciences, particularly its well developed facilities for virtual imaging. Virtual realities, so central to the development of video games and computer graphics, have great potential as pedagogical tools in art history and any other field that thinks critically about the mechanisms with which we understand and employ perception.. Tim Lenoir's expertise in the history of scientific imaging seemed especially important to this aspect of the project.

After lunch at the Nasher, where we had an opportunity to learn of Kim Rorschach's interest in making the museum a site for the learning and research potential of the new project, we were taken to a science center where we had an opportunity to experience the world of virtual realities enabled by a "black box" or "cave," as it is called. Images are projected on all four walls of such a room, so that with the use of three-dimensional glasses, the illusion of occupying a virtual space is complete. We were shown a visualization of the Colosseum in Rome that allowed us to walk about the arena, as well as to examine the building so as to understand its construction. The kind of illusion provided by this example has obvious application to the teaching of art history in which some of the most common problems are the representation of scale and dimensionality. Slides, and even powerpoint, remain two-dimensional media and do not

allow an instructor to convey the scale of buildings, the way in which they surround us, nearly as forcibly as this exercise in virtual reality.

Following this demonstration we met with Rachael Brady and Victoria Szabo to discuss the applications of virtual reality in visual studies courses. During the conversation we dwelt on the reciprocal relationship between images and spectators, the means by which images shape us and our culture as well as the myriad way in which we shape and manipulate them. One of the most important goals of a visual studies program might be to de-naturalize the idea of vision so as to make students aware of the historical malleability of the techniques that constitute our ideas of the visual world.

We then met with Gregson Davis, Dean of Humanities, and George McLendon, Dean of Arts and Sciences. At both of these meetings we were impressed by the level of support and understanding that the visual studies project enjoyed at the highest levels of the administration. There appeared to be no limits on the type of interaction that might be envisioned among departments and no hindrance to collaborations across the traditional humanities/sciences divide. It is also evident that those involved in the planning, the team assembled by Hans van Miegroet, have enjoyed logistical and administrative help from the very beginning.

Conclusion: The Duke visual studies initiative is perhaps the most imaginative enterprise of which we are aware. During the day we had several opportunities to discuss the organization of the project with Hans. It is possible that the undergraduate program might be best organized under the leadership of the Art History Department which already has an undergraduate track in the subject, not to mention an historical tradition of visual analysis. An undergraduate major in visual studies might have several tracks: for example, students might be encouraged to study the history of representational devices from the camera obscura to the web, or the ideological purposes to which images have been put from antiquity to the present, including representational forms such as paintings, graphics, and moving images, or the history of the idea of mimesis, and how and why have illusionistic images played such an important role in Western culture. On the graduate level, on the other hand, it might be advisable to organize degrees in visual studies around a core of expertise in a particular field with a home in any one of a number of departments. Students at this level can be encouraged to explore the interstices between disciplines without foregoing identification with one of them.

We thoroughly enjoyed our visit, look forward to learning more about how your plans progress, and wish all those involved every success.

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