[This essay was originally published in 2001 in Circa, the Irish art magazine; it is a report on the 2001 conference at NYU on David Hockney's theories.
This version was posted on www.jameselkins.com; there are more texts on that site.
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On the 2001 Hockney Conference

James Elkins

It is important to try to understand why there is so much interest in David Hockney's book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (Thames and Hudson/ Viking) which claims that Western painters from the fifteenth century onward used optical devices to help them depict figures, drapery, still life arrangements, interiors, and difficult objects such as chandeliers and lutes.

In America and Europe the book has been widely covered in the press—twice in the *New Yorker*, which has a circulation of around 1,000,000, and several more times in *The New York Times* (e.g., December 4, 2001). David Hockney himself has appeared on television a number of times, and made a film with the BBC (so far shown only in Europe). By far the largest event connected with the book was a conference at New York University, called "Art and Optics." It was a who's who of American and European art historians, and was also attended by artists (Chuck Close, Philip Pearlstein) and scientists. I gave a talk at the conference's final session, on a panel with Richard Wollheim, Michael Fried, Svetlana Alpers,

and Rosalind Krauss. Lines went halfway around the block in Washington Square. There were ninety seats in the auditorium set aside just for journalists, and a second room with a CCTY feed, for part of the overflow crowd. The first day Susan Sontag spotted Leo Steinberg standing in the long queue, and got him a ticket—otherwise he would have been turned away with hundreds of others. People like Anthony Grafton and Martin Kemp were relegated to non-speaking roles as introducers.

Of all the speakers, audience members, and journalists, the only person who said that he wasn't interested (or "concerned") about the book was Jonathan Crary; that was because, he said, the narrowly optical definition of illusion and representation made Hockney's claims an unimportant, and undertheorized, portion of a much larger problem. The ingredients of illusion, he reminded the audience, are often contextual and non-optical; and he cited Géricault's many textual sources for the *Raft of the Medusa*.

But for everyone else, the issue seemed absolutely fraught: cathected, as Freud would have said. Hockney "bothered" some people (Sontag's word), and he certainly annoyed, mesmerized, and fascinated others. The conference was energetic, and the audience rapt, from start to finish. There are, in my count, three reasons for all the fuss—but before I list them, I need to recount the claim itself. Hockney and Charles Falco, his physicist collaborator, claim that three optical instruments aided painters: the camera lucida, the camera obscura, and the concave mirror. The three claims vary widely in plausibility and in application. Briefly: it is extremely likely that Ingres used a camera lucida (the Ingres specialist Gary Tinterow said as much, and Hockney's visual evidence is persuasive), but less sure

that any other major nineteenth-century artist did. It is absolutely proven that Vermeer used a camera obscura. Philip Steadman has written a book on the subject, virtually proving that at least six of Vermeer's canvases represent an actual room with mathematical precision. But who widely were camera obscuras used outside of *veduta* painting, Reynolds, and Vermeer? Falco presented new evidence at the conference that lenses of some sort were used in the *Mérode Altarpiece* and other paintings, so the question is open. The third hypothesis, the concave mirror, is the least likely. It is Falco's idea, not Hockney's. It's implausible for at least five reasons: (1) no concave mirrors silvered on the inside survive; (2) no written records mention the dark booth that would have had to house the mirror and artist, even though such a booth would have been absolutely remarkable for any witness; (3) the calculated radii of the mirrors might have posed problems for glassblowers; (4) the depth of field of the image is minuscule, necessitating planar objects and also much refocusing. That's the thesis, in brief. Needless to say there are several hundred thousand words more to say on the subject.

But now I want to turn to five reasons why Hockney's subject stirred up so much interest. They are:

1. Trivially, there's the avalanche of publicity that the book and conference received. People were primed by the media, and by Lawrence Weschler's skillfully written and enthusiastic pieces in the *New Yorker*.

2. The event pitted art history against popular understanding. From the beginning, Weschler has chided art history for not being open to Hockney's discoveries. Art historians, he has said, think that great artists have superlative skill and therefore no need for optical aids. The discipline has been painted as reactionary in

every single newspaper report I have seen. One *New York Times* article, which ran just before the conference, said that perhaps, if the skeptics prevail, Hockney's discoveries will be seen "in the receding perspective of art history" (*New York Times,* November 29, 1002, E4). It is no wonder, given that demonization—which was also softened, I should say, by a great deal of levity and many disclaimers—that Svetlana Alpers ended the conference by grabbing a microphone and saying, in a loud and exasperated tone, like a mother berating a ridiculous child, that she loved painting, and she wished people would start to talk about it just a little bit.

3. The event also pitted science against art. During the conference, Falco twice chided art historians for being inadequately educated. If they had better training in optics, he said (using Powerpoint to underline his claim), then the discoveries he and Hockney made would have been made long ago. Several journalists, who I will not name here, could not follow Falco's optical proofs and demonstrations, even though they involve only rudimentary geometrical optics. (Falco was held in a certain disrespectful awe, because he is an expert on quantum optics, of which geometrical optics is a simpleminded progenitor.) Non-scientists I talked to admitted Falco's claims, but said, openly or in effect, that they were not interested in them. That amused Falco, who pointed out how illogical it is to say, in response to a scientific proof about the use of optics in a given painting, "Yes, all right, but I have another theory." "There *is* no 'other theory,'" Falco said: "A proof is a proof." In short I did not see any substantial progress over C.P. Snow's standoff between science and the arts.

4. Most important, the conference played to the anxieties that many people feel when they go into museums and galleries. I'll divide this into two paragraphs:

anxiety about the Old Masters, and about contemporary art. Old Master painting is a mystery to millions of people, an arcane world guarded by a priesthood of professors and curators. How satisfying it would be if next time they visited a museum, they could say to their friends, "Look, here's the spot where the Master of Flémalle had to refocus his lens." How satisfying finally to know something definitive about the Old Master paintings: it would demystify the artists, wrest them from their academic priesthood, make them accessible. Needless to say a number of art historians at the conference (James Marrow, Walter Liedtke) resisted Hockney's argument just for that reason: because Hockney says nothing about the paintings' larger meanings, his book could (rather, it will be) used as a Baedecker for a new generation.

5. The final reason is also the one that prompted me to write this review: Hockney's book also holds the promise of explaining modernism, postmodernism, and contemporary art. It does that by implication, the same as it does for Old Master painting. Hockney nowhere says that his discoveries explain the Old Masters, but he implies as much on every page. Modernism has almost no role in the book—Warhol is presented as an artist who traced projected images—but the implication is all the stronger for it. People who are confounded and frustrated by modernism and postmodernism may well take the book as evidence that the non-optical and anti-optical tendencies of the last hundred years can be safely ignored. After all, Hockney ignores them, and has for most of his career. The book may serve as a kind of license to such people, saying in effect: If you don't understand conceptual art, minimalism, abstraction, and the rest, don't worry, because modern-

ism was an ephemeral episode and old-fashioned opticality is still with us. What a depressing moral, what an abysmal model for future scholarship and art.

As for my own talk at the conference, and the hundreds of detailed arguments I have omitted from this report: many are already online at www.artandoptics.com.