

*This was originally posted on [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com). Please see that site for the context. This essay also appears in *Re-Enchantment*, co-edited with David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008).*

### Editor's Afterword to the *Art Seminar* Series

It isn't customary for series editors to write something at the end of the series, but in this case the temptation is overwhelming. This series has been a fascinating experience. The idea was to invite a wider range of contributors on each subject than had been assembled in the past, in order to reveal the new diversity of art discourse. I was impelled in the first instance by a growing sense that certain models of poststructuralist criticism were no longer making headway with some of the crucial concepts of art. In particular I wanted to move away from the kind of art theory that has been practiced since the 1960s, in which the contributors to conferences and edited volumes are all roughly agreed on the protocols of interpretation, so that despite appearances of dialectic and disagreement, all that actually remains is to investigate agreed-upon problems in an increasingly formulaic manner. I wanted to open the way to a more divergent and flexible discourse.

The structure of the series was intended to maximize open-endedness: my role in these volumes has been to help pick the panelists in the roundtables, and to try to moderate in such a way that the panelists' concepts, methodologies, and purposes are as clear as possible. Preparing the transcribed Art Seminars was an excruciating process. I did all the transcriptions myself, and then each panelist was invited to edit his or her

own contributions and add new comments, resulting in multiple drafts and revisions. But when the Art Seminar transcripts were complete, my involvement effectively ended. I chose some of the people who wrote Assessments and Afterwords, but my co-editors and the panelists themselves came up with most of the names. No one edited what the Assessors wrote, so there was no way to control the form or direction of the books. Each book was meant to reflect the disarray of its subject as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

When the series was planned, I imagined that the books would be full of concerted critical encounters in the manner of, say, *Critical Inquiry*, but more wide-ranging. I expected contributors to argue with the panelists' positions, developing and extending the conversation. I thought the panelists' questions would be sharpened, their assumptions undermined, their frames broken, their ideologies revealed—all the usual elements of intellectual discourse.

What happened was of a different order. Instead of disagreements, these volumes are full of contributions that choose to ignore not only specific claims and influential scholars, but also entire disciplines and schools of interpretation. The Assessors talk past one another, and past the panelists, carrying on different conversations and creating divergent discourses that cannot be compared or adjudicated.

Here are examples from each volume. (The descriptions of volumes 1 through 4 are paraphrased from an exchange published at the end of volume 4; these comments do not reflect the opinions of my co-editors in these books.)

Volume 1, *Art History versus Aesthetics*, has a particularly wild roundtable conversation. Afterward, Arthur Danto said it was like herding cats. Yet the sources of that wildness, and the kinds of misunderstandings between art history and aesthetics, were clearly articulated. In that respect the book is very arguable; it is largely possible to compare the different positions its contributors take. Danto, Jay Bernstein, Thierry de Duve, and many others in that book argue very sharply and it is not hard to discover productive points of disagreement. Of the books it is the least like the model I am proposing.

Volume 2, *Photography Theory*, has deep disagreements about what a theory of photography might be, and some pitched arguments between Joel Snyder and Rosalind Krauss about Peirce's concept of the indexical sign. Some people who wrote Assessments for that book seemed completely to miss the point of trying to articulate a theory of photography at all. They talk about other things instead, and there's the argument—which Walter Benn Michaels dismisses in a footnote—that you shouldn't try for a theory of something like photography that isn't a single subject. (Michaels says of course you should.) Other contributors misunderstand the claims about indexicality in often definable ways. But most contributors choose not to join the debate except in passing, and a number do not say why they do not have a position on indexicality, and also do not say why they think it is unimportant that they do not have a position.

Vol. 3, *Is Art History Global?* raises some very serious questions to do with whether art history is Western, and how one might think outside the boundaries of Western historical thinking. As in volume 1, the species of disagreements in volume 3 are themselves well defined. For instance there is David Summers's position that Western

concepts can be made capacious enough to address experiences of art across many cultures. Against that there are doubts about how universal art experiences are, how limiting Western languages and metaphysics might be, and how blinding Western institutions might be. As in the first volume, the problematic is not about to be resolved, but the species of disagreement are themselves agreed upon. A deeper disagreement, however, is scarcely broached: it would be between those who think that local ways of writing art history are helpfully diverse but potentially legible as art history, so that local practices will appear as contrasts within a larger discursive field; and those who feel, or hope, that no such legibility exists. That divergence of opinion is implicit in contrasts between people's arguments, but the book does not directly provide material that would allow the question to be developed.

Volume 4 (*The State of Art Criticism*) is incoherent in a different way. For example there is an enormous range of ideas here about whether art criticism has a history. For some people, like Dave Hickey, art criticism's history is comprised of whatever creative writers the critic likes. (Hickey names Hazlitt, DeQuincey, Dickens, Wilde, and others.) For others, like Steve Melville, by its very nature art criticism doesn't have a history, because it depends on the individual act of judging. The range of ideas about whether art criticism has a history is itself much broader than the range of opinion about, say, the index in photography, or aesthetic terms in art history. It is a deeper incoherence. And *The State of Art Criticism* harbors an even more difficult difference, which most every contributor notices but hardly any think is worth pursuing: the difference between critics who see their purpose as rendering judgment, and those who take art criticism as a

place to meditate on the conditions under which critical judgments might be made. To me that is an astonishing gulf, and it is not bridged by anyone in the book.

Volume 5, *Renaissance Theory*, had an compact seminar conversation, which elicited Assessments that have a wide range of elisions. In the panel discussion, a principal theme was the lack of engagement of modernist art historians with possible Renaissance precedents, and the complementary lack of interest, on the part of Renaissance scholars, in modern artists' responses to Renaissance art. That issue was hardly addressed in the Assessments, leaving the impression that a conceptual and institutional gulf might separate modernist from Renaissance art history. On a smaller scale, Georges Didi-Huberman was brought up in the Art Seminar, but scarcely mentioned in the Assessments. (Excepting one Assessment, which was intended as an embodiment of Didi-Huberman's approach.) A number of the Assessments keep closely to the contributors' own specialties, so that their responses to the Art Seminar are often only implicit. There is relatively little direct engagement with the Art Seminar in the book. My feeling, overall, is that Renaissance studies is somewhat isolated from other branches of art history, and that its isolation is not comparable to the relations between other specialties: the Renaissance has an inbuilt reason for its disconnections.

Volume 6, *Landscape Theory*, sports a mass of disagreements and indecisions on fundamental issues. At the beginning of our panel discussion, we quickly agreed that landscape is not *only* ideological. But that led us immediately into a wonderful confusion. What is landscape, aside from ideology? There were as many answers as there were panelists in the Art Seminar. The same thing happened when we talked about the role of aesthetics, and again when the subject was space and time in landscape, the connection

of landscape and representation, landscape and subjectivity, and landscape and place. I counted seventeen terms, any of which could be regarded as fundamental, on which there was little agreement. Of the volumes in the series, *Landscape Theory* is the most like a contestation of philosophies built on incompatible premises.

Volume 7, *Re-Enchantment*, is potentially the widest-ranging of the series, and that is why it is last. As you will have discovered reading this book, the fundamental issues at stake, such as the presence or absence of religious meaning and the very definitions of fine art, are contested among an unusual range of writers, scholars, and artists inside and outside academia. Despite David Morgan's and my best efforts, several scholars refused to participate in the book under any terms: the sign of a field where dialectic exchange seems so remote a possibility that only refusal remains.

What conclusions might be drawn from this? If the *Art Seminar* series is an indication, pluralism is not an adequate way to characterize the way art is currently conceptualized. What happens in these books is more like a mixture of several kinds of encounters: dialectic exchanges, *Critical Inquiry*-style, in which the operative terms are shared and there is broad agreement about what constitutes the terms' problematic or undefined elements; persistent misunderstandings that are not corrected or meliorated by professional exchanges such as conferences or reviews; and many individual refusals to come to terms with other people's positions. Let me call those three possibilities critical discussions, misunderstandings, and refusals. The *Art Seminar* series suggests that critical discussions are not the bread and butter of professional academic exchanges, as I think they are assumed to be: instead they are the exception, and in some instances they

are rare. The series also shows, I think, that misunderstandings (the second kind of encounter) are more persistent than they might be thought to be. A number of writers in the series show evidence of misreadings that have not been effectively challenged, and are not likely to be adequately addressed in the future—either because scholars lack the time for the kind of extended engagements could disabuse others of long-held interpretations, or because it can come to seem that entire interpretive projects and careers are founded on formative misreadings, which then become unrewarding topics of discussion. And the series shows, I think unarguably, that what I am calling refusals (the third kind of encounter) are very common, and in some cases the most prevalent sort of academic exchange.

I am not criticizing these phenomena. For some contributors to this series, a state of affairs like the one I have sketched would call for concerted critical work. The idea would be to try to disentangle critical discussions, meliorate misreadings, and challenge refusals. But I think the art world is more or less immune to that kind of effort. That also means that art theory can no longer hope to produce the kind of loose critical consensus that surrounds the reaction to modernism epitomized by poststructuralism and *October*. It is a truism of poststructural criticism that the search for overarching theories should be abandoned, and at any rate consensus wasn't one of the purposes of the *Art Seminar*. But the disarray I am describing here is different from the pluralism and anti-hegemonic interests associated with poststructuralism: this disarray is caused by *lack of interest* in sustained critical discussions. For me one of the discoveries of this series is an agnosticism in relation to argument, enabled by the

conviction that critical discussion is always available, prevalent, potentially effective for anyone who might want it.

As I write this, I am beginning a five book series based on events called the Stone Summer Theory Institutes at the Art Institute of Chicago. I hope to refine the *Art Seminar* model so that it can handle even more complex species of critical discussions, misunderstandings, and refusals. What matters is to continue trying to understand what art theory might mean today, and what kinds of work we want our leading theories to accomplish.