

[This is the Series Preface to the book series The Art Seminar (2005-2008). It was posted on www.jameselkins.com, and reprinted in each of the seven volumes of that series. See the website for context and contact information for the author. (August 2009)]

SERIES PREFACE

It has been said and said that there is too much theorizing in the visual arts. Contemporary writing seems like a trackless thicket, tangled with unanswered questions. Yet it is not a wilderness; in fact it is well posted with signs and directions. Want to find Lacan? Read him through Macey, Silverman, Borch-Jakobsen, Žižek, Nancy, Leclaire, Derrida, Laplanche, Lecercle, or even Klossowski, but not — so it might be said — through Abraham, Miller, Pontalis, Rosaloto, Safouan, Roudinesco, Schneiderman, or Mounin, and of course never through Dalí.

People who would rather avoid problems of interpretation, at least in their more difficult forms, have sometimes hoped that “theory” would prove to be a passing fad. A simple test shows that is not the case. The table below shows the number of art historical essays that have terms like “psychoanalysis” as keywords, according to the *Bibliography of the History of Art*. The increase is steep after 1980, and in three cases — the gaze, psychoanalysis, and feminism — the rise is exponential.

Another sampling shows that citations of some of the more influential art historians of the mid-twentieth century, writers who came before the current proliferation of theories, are waning.

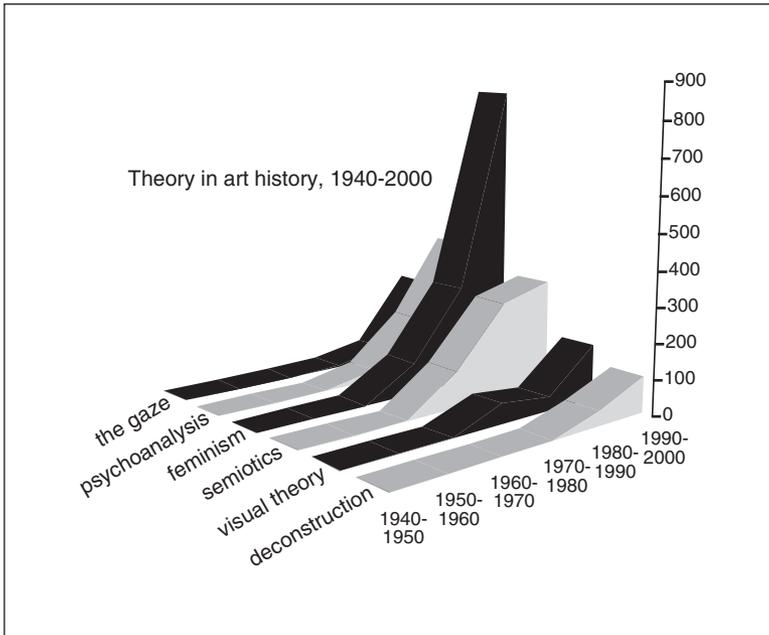


Figure 1 Theory in art history, 1940–2000.

In this second graph there is a slight rise in the number of references to Warburg and Riegl, reflecting the interest they have had for the current generation of art historians, but the graph's surprise is the precipitous decline in citations of Panofsky and Gombrich.

Most of art history is not driven by named theories or individual historians, and these graphs are also limited by the terms that can be meaningfully searched in the *Bibliography of the History of Art*. Even so, the graphs suggest that the landscape of interpretive strategies is changing rapidly. Many subjects crucial to the interpretation of art are too new, ill-theorized, or unfocused to be addressed in monographs or textbooks. The purpose of *The Art Seminar* is to address some of the most challenging subjects in current writing on art: those that are not unencompassably large (such as the state of painting), or not yet adequately posed (such

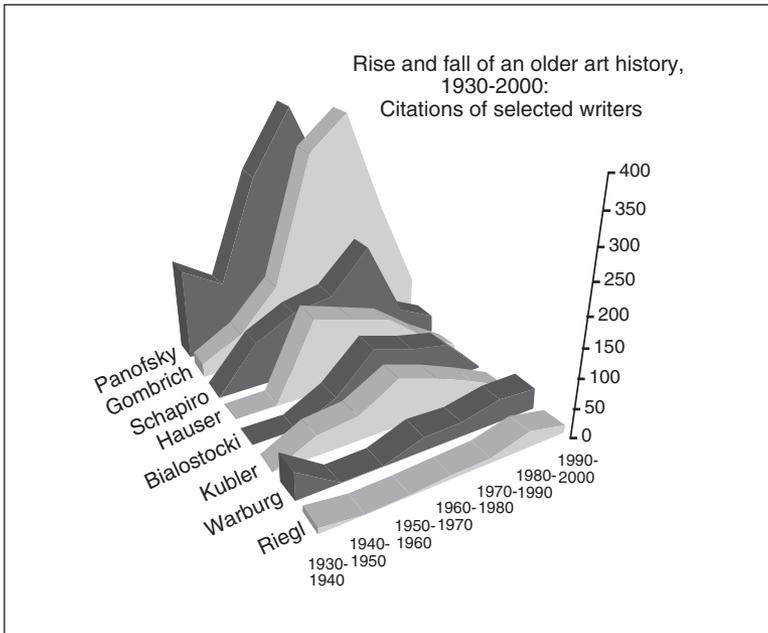


Figure 2 Rise and fall of an older art history, 1930–2000: Citations of selected writers.

as the space between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic), or so well known that they can be written up in critical dictionaries (the theory of deconstruction). The subjects chosen for *The Art Seminar* are poised, ready to be articulated and argued.

Each volume in the series began as a roundtable conversation, held in front of an audience at one of the three sponsoring institutions — the University College Cork, the Burren College of Art (both in Ireland), and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The conversations were then transcribed, and edited by the participants. The idea was to edit in such a way as to minimize the correctable faults of grammar, repetitions, and lapses that mark any conversation, while preserving the momentary disagreements, confusions, and dead ends that could be attributed to the articulation of the subject itself.

In each volume of *The Art Seminar*, the conversation itself is preceded by a general introduction to the subject and one or more “Starting Points,” previously published essays that were distributed to participants before the roundtable. Together the Introductions and “Starting Points” are meant to provide the essential background for the conversation. A number of scholars who did not attend the events were then asked to write “Assessments”; their brief was to consider the conversation from a distance, noting its strengths and its blind spots. The “Assessments” vary widely in style and length: some are highly structured, and others are impressionistic; some are under a page, and others the length of a commissioned essay. Contributors were just asked to let their form fit their content, with no limitations. Each volume then concludes with one or more “Afterwords,” longer critical essays written by scholars who had access to all the material including the “Assessments.”

In that way *The Art Seminar* attempts to cast as wide, as fine, and as strong a net as possible, to capture the limit of theorizing on each subject at the particular moment represented by each book. Perhaps in the future the subjects treated here will be colonized, and become part of the standard pedagogy of art: but by that time they may be on the downward slide, away from the centers of conversation and into the history of disciplines.