

Editor's Introduction: Essays toward a New Art History

Like most fields in the humanities, art history is caught up in what is sometimes called (melodramatically) a “crisis” or “revolution” in methods, aims, and theoretical foundations. Symptoms of this transformation are not difficult to see: an interest in subaesthetic, marginal, and noncanonical artifacts; skepticism and self-consciousness about the discourse of art history and its claim to be called a “history”; a questioning of the ontological and semiotic status of the objects of art history, particularly their relation to language; a reexamination of standard models of the “producer” and “beholder” that questions the cult of the artist as individual genius and the spectator as a finely tuned but passive sensorium; a reconsideration of the traditional divisions of labor between art historian and art critic, or between the silent visual artist and the loquacious commentator.

The following articles are best described as essays “in,” not “on,” the New Art History. They exemplify what we regard as some of the most interesting new directions in the practical understanding of art: the discourse of art historical description (David Summers); the materiality of the pictorial surface (Charles Harrison); the role of genre (Norman Bryson); the relation of visual representation and language (Robert Morris, Jan Baetens, and W. J. T. Mitchell); and the mediation of social and economic history through painting (Elizabeth Helsinger). These essays constitute a kind of first installment of work resulting from our call for papers on “The Disciplines of the Eye.” This call continues to go out, and we shall welcome contributions that attempt to take stock of current thinking in the visual arts in a more general way—essays “on” as well as “in” the patterns of thought emerging in the study of visual representation.

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