

Introduction to Issue 18

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As the first generation of PhDs trained in visual culture programs settles into tenured positions and important curatorships, our field continues to grow in ways that its founders hardly anticipated. An expanding institutional network encourages a rethinking of vision and visibility, two key terms in visual studies. In *The Right to Look*, Nicholas Mirzoeff reconfigures visibility.¹ Typically considered as a perceptual field, Mirzoeff describes visibility as the historically variable self-envisioning of authority. Taking a global and historical view, Mirzoeff identifies a series of countervisualities. As this issue of *InVisible Culture* demonstrates, the role of vision is changing, too. There are a number of elements affecting these movements, including the influence of materialist thinking, ebbing critiques of “hyper-reality,” and a burgeoning interest in relations between media (as opposed to the modernist emphasis on media specificity). Twenty-five years into our interdisciplinary venture, we can reconsider an early, important idea in visual studies: that vision is the primary way people make sense of the world. For better or worse, we can no longer understand vision as operating autonomously or hegemonically.²

This treatment of vision may seem to threaten the very basis of visual culture. But to those who diagnose the death of our field, we beg to differ. This issue of *InVisible Culture* presents a selection of papers from a conference the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies hosted at the University of Rochester in April, 2011. Over three days we engaged in roundtable discussions about the future of our field and attended presentations on sensory experience, visual perception, and the body. Presenters hailed from North America and Europe, and approached the topic from disciplinary perspectives across the humanities and social sciences. Many attendees voiced doubt about the desire—as young scholars in an interdisciplinary field—to police disciplinary or sensorial borders. We came to realize that instead of closing off investigation of other senses, visual studies can encourage a broader engagement with the sensorium.

“Making Sense of Visual Culture,” the eighteenth issue of *InVisible Culture*, presents articles that explore the porous boundaries of vision. We give pride of place to studies that draw on senses beside vision and essays that reposition foundational debates in our field. By recognizing vision’s sensory relations and its internal limits, we identify two ways our field continues to develop. First, new and familiar interdisciplinary approaches help revise our key terms. Like Mirzoeff, Łukasz Zaremba works in established interdisciplinary channels. Linking art history and literary studies, Zaremba rethinks the nature of vision. Jonathan Schroeder approaches visual culture from a marketing and communications background, demonstrating how scholars outside of the humanities create a dialogue with and around visual culture. Second, with Raysh Weiss’ and Lidia Klien’s contributions we advocate for a version of visual studies that engages a broad range of sensory experience. Weiss examines problems of depicting sound while Klein draws taste into architecture.

A commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship impels us to recognize vision as one sense among many in a broad *sensorium*. As Caroline Jones defines it, the sensorium is “the percipient centre to which sense impressions are transmitted by the nerves.”³ Which is to say that the sensorium comprises a series of “perceptual pathways” that regulate experience in historically specific ways. Those pathways include the olfactory, the auditory, the tactile and taste, in tandem with the optical. In other cultures, these

pathways unfold differently. Paul Stoller's description of the acoustic structure of the Songhay world is but one example of the anthropology of the senses.⁴

This conceptual rhyming between intersensorial analysis and interdisciplinary method is more than coincidental. It inverts deep-seated connections between specialization of knowledge and the supposed hegemony of vision. To be sure, the place of vision in academia today parallels its historical division from taste, touch, smell and aurality. That the eye was coupled with metaphysics in Platonic thought meant that it was simultaneously separated from the body's capacity to sense (and thus, to know) in other ways. The result, as aesthetic philosopher David Michael Levin writes, was an "ocularcentric metaphysics," that "would eventually turn all being into being-represented."⁵ If human consciousness was conceived strictly through visual representation, then the other senses assumed a more primal state located in the realm of the unthought.

In the fifteenth century the rise of illusionism and perspective in the graphic arts bound the eye with the mind's eye. To Leone Battista Alberti, the father of perspectivalism, the eye was the god of human parts, associated with elemental fire and metaphorical light. According to anthropologist David Howes, Alberti's perspectival grid screened out "smells and sounds, tastes and textures."⁶ In Alberti's schema vision reigned above other senses and their corresponding elements: hearing to air, smell to vapor, taste to water, and touch to earth.⁷ By aligning an organ, the eye, with light, Alberti drew a parallel between knowledge and the optical processes of seeing. As a metaphor for understanding, light was also the external agent that opened the world up to visibility. Making the eye akin to light implies that the organ stimulated its own conditions for seeing. This understanding helped give rise to the subject-centered world of the Enlightenment.⁸

Of course, the division of the senses—or the notion that the senses are divisible and require corresponding disciplinary attention—is a myth. Our primary experience of the world is an undifferentiated and simultaneous process of thinking, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching. Only later do we reconstruct, or make sense of, our experience. Nonetheless, vision stubbornly asserts a sense of independence, as if it were solely responsible for making our surroundings intelligible. In the mid-twentieth century, an artistic emphasis on opticality and medium specificity updated a centuries-long tradition of privileging vision. As Caroline Jones argues, the mid-century bureaucratization of the senses reinforced an alienated modern subjectivity born out of capitalism. With the senses easily distinguished came a call for disciplinarity. According to Clement Greenberg, disciplinarity was the means through which modern subjects could gain competence in unique and separate domains of experience.⁹ This disciplinarity functioned by disciplining the senses.

In "Making Sense of Visual Culture," we engage the undivided: the sensorium, the interdisciplinary and the ever-blurry ontological space between subjects and their surroundings. Recent writing on the history of the senses has also worked toward this end. In 2010, the journal *American Art* dedicated its "Commentaries" section to countering a monosensory approach to our national art history.¹⁰ Titled "Sensing America," the issue examines visual evidence of other senses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting and photography. This scholarship, of course, proposes an Americanist model for an engagement with the sensorium. While we draw from it, we also build upon frameworks that are less bound to a single nation, including: Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of Skin: Architecture and the Senses*; Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips' *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*; and David Howes' *Empire of the Senses*, to name a few foundational texts. We also take

inspiration from T'ai Smith's writing on touch and vision at the Bauhaus and James McHugh's research on the "period nose" of medieval South Asia.¹¹ These works recount sensory experience beyond the modernist Greenbergian paradigm. They also put forth a broader platform for thinking about how bodies interact with spaces and objects in ways that sometimes elude vision altogether.

In "Tasting Space," Lidia Klein writes of the "threshold of architecture." For Klein, that threshold is an ambiguous arena where ocularcentrism, defined as the primacy of vision in the history of architecture, begins to fail. The threshold is a liminal space where the boundaries of subjecthood are muddled by a corporeal imbrication within space. To chip away at subjective autonomy as well as architecture's discursive and material walls, she enlists the viscous and membrane-like structures of Zbigniew Oksiuta and his *Spatium Gelatum*, the malleable, shape-shifting designs of Greg Lynn's *Embryological House*, and the "culinary/pharmaceutical preparations" of Phillip Rahm's *Digestible Gulf Stream*.

Writing against the visual history of architecture, Klein briefly details a lesser-known past. That past is one in which architecture and the culinary arts were kin. Beginning in the eighteenth century architectural maquettes were edible and architects composed treatises like recipes. Klein's "Tasting Space," links this minor architectural history to an international and contemporary architectural practice of the body. Each project Klein details is modeled to trigger physiological effects associated with palatal pleasure or unease. Each is also modeled after a host of other bodily and biological processes. In Klein's reading, architectural spaces and designs are themselves mutable bodies—in one example gelatinous masses, in another vegetable polymers—that have no discernible inside or outside. And so while Klein posits the possibility of tasting space, she simultaneously situates taste within a spectrum of other sensible and physiological processes that are each bound to one another.

Much like the authors in "Sensing America," Raysh Weiss' method is one of looking for traces of the acoustical in the textual and the visual. In "Seeing the Sounds: Exceeding the Frame through the Acoustical Sublime in the Revelation at Sinai," Weiss turns to a series of illuminated manuscripts that attempt to depict one of the most definitive moments of the Bible: the revelation at Sinai. This is no straightforward account as the *Haggadot*, or Rabbinical texts, reveal discrepancies between the narration of the revelation in the books of Deuteronomy and Exodus. Various textual and pictorial descriptions of the revelation try to convey the overwhelming trans-sensorial experience of encountering the divine at Sinai. Differences in accounts and portrayals gesture toward the gulf between representation and the ineffable. How have artists pictured the supernatural or the supra visual? How have they pictured synaesthetic experience on the two-dimensional picture plane?

By looking at several illuminated manuscripts from across Europe, Weiss indicates the historically contingent nature of sensory experience as she questions the possibility of accurately transposing that experience. Weiss also posits a broad question that is at the heart of structuralism and post-structuralism alike: Is it possible to pinpoint and capture an originary event's sensorial reverberations, supernatural or terrestrial, through textual or pictorial representation?

In "Mediating Visual Experience: Zbigniew Libera's Photographic Works and Google Street View Imagery," Łukasz Zaremba argues that landscape pictures help formalize active processes of perception. Through analysis of a few landscape photographs and early twentieth-century thinker Raymond Roussel's method of automatic writing, Zaremba demonstrates how pictures conflate representation

and perception to “show seeing.” Zaremba analyzes two recent photographic projects. The first is comprised of a group of photographs by Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, whose work was inspired by French writer Raymond Roussel’s experiments. For *La Vue*, Libera takes photographs of photographs. In some instances he uses a macro lens to capture details of printed magazines. Blown up, these samplings appear as otherworldly landscapes. In other instances, Libera photographs images of temples from oblique viewpoints. The resultant image fosters a “technical, ‘nonhuman’ gaze” of mechanical reproduction. Zaremba’s second example is the ever-expanding panorama of Google Street View. Zaremba shows how techniques of observation continue to shift, develop and change today.

Jonathan E. Schroeder’s “Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination” looks at the use of snapshot photography in twenty-first-century advertising. Schroeder’s approach is grounded in the field of marketing and communications. He describes how pictorial style—a key term for visual studies—informs corporate communication strategy. One tenet of Schroeder’s essay is that snapshots as advertisements belong in a “broader trajectory of visual culture.” Schroeder places photography from Marc Jacobs campaign in the same context as Robert Frank’s work, to give an example. “This contextualization, which may be typical in visual culture,” Schroeder explains, “is rather rare within management research on marketing communication.” The result is a nuanced appreciation for how advertisers have mobilized the snapshot aesthetic. Schroeder’s analysis benefits discourses of marketing. But how might the article reflect the shifting terrain of visual culture?

We tend to think of visual studies as a place to bring together previously disconnected, though related, conversations. At the intersections of discourse, we can address material that eludes disciplinary study, on the one hand, and shed new light on canonical objects, on the other. Our work extends beyond the compiling and comparison of pre-existing scholarship. When we organized the “Making Sense of Visual Culture” conference over the winter of 2011 we turned to the metaphor of the clearinghouse to describe visual studies. This comparison is instructive. The clearinghouse accumulates information, but it also distributes those data and perspectives. Schroeder’s article demonstrates how scholars outside of the humanities borrow some key terms and frameworks from visual studies for their own use. Our field expands continuously. An awareness of how this expansion takes shape, accompanied with a cautious eagerness to engage other disciplines, can aid in the development of our field.

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1. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). ↩
2. Leo G. Mazow recently articulated the slow-dawning truism that “it is probably impossible to isolate one sense—even vision itself—at the expense of others in our approaches to American and other visual cultures.” Mazow, “Introduction,” in “Sensing America,” special issue, *American Art* 24, no. 3 (2010), 2. ↩
3. Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 389-90. ↩
4. Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). ↩
5. David Michael Levin, “Introduction,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6. ↩

6. David Howes, "To Summon All the Senses," in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, ed. David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 5. ↵
7. David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of the Senses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38; Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 283. ↵
8. Since the Alberti's Renaissance and the ensuing Enlightenment, scholars such as Foucault have been more critical of vision. Yet even critical accounts run the risk of endowing vision with autonomy. ↵
9. Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 389-90. ↵
10. Mazow, "Sensing America," 6. Also see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7-8. ↵
11. T'ai Smith, "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography," *Grey Room* 25, (Fall 2006): 6-31; James McHugh, "Seeing Scents: Methodological Reflections on the Intersensory Perception of Aromatics in South Asian Religions," *History of Religions* 51, no. 2 (2011): 156-177. McHugh's description of the "period nose" plays on Michael Baxandall's formulation of the "period eye" in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer on the Social History of a Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). ↵