Postgraduate Symposium
Art History & Visual Culture

UCL · 11 June 2012
Postgraduate Symposium in History of Art and Visual Culture
UCL, 11 June 2012

Programme

9.30am   Registration

9.45am   Opening remarks from the Symposium Committee

10.00am  Session I: Migrations and Contaminations
         • Fiona Johnstone (Birkbeck) “Nicholas Nixon’s People with AIDS: Photography, Ethics, and the Other”
         • Amanda Sciampacone (Birkbeck) “Representing the Invisible: The ‘Blue Mist’ of Cholera and Meteorological Graphs”

11.00am  Session II: Print and Transmateriality
         • Carla Benzan (UCL) “Hanging on the Edge of Representation: The Veronica Veil at Varallo and the Problem of the Image in the Seventeenth Century”
         • Niccola Shearman (Courtauld) “Weimar in Black and White: Alternative Views of Contrast in the Post-Expressionist Woodcut”

12.00pm  Coffee break

12.30pm  Session III: Aesthetics and Possibilities
         • Tianshuang Liang (SOAS) “The Agency of Syncretism in Modern Chinese Art: Gao Qifeng and the New Republic”
         • Catherine Berger (UCL) “A Multifarious Modernist Project: Alfred Stieglitz’s Camera Work 1903-1907”

1.30pm   Lunch (not provided)

2:30pm   Session IV: Traces and Accumulations
         • Catherine Macaulay (UCL) “Filthy Feet: Dirt as Relic and Text in Seicento Rome”
         • Stephanie Straine (UCL) “Franz Erhard Walther’s Atlas of Drawing”

3:30pm   Session V: Histories and Hybridities
         • Daphne Ang (SOAS) “Cosmopolitan Representations: Peranakans and Image making in Colonial Singapore”
         • Emma Rogers (Courtauld) “Methods of Examining an Enigmatic Ivory: Historical and Contemporary Approaches”

4:30pm   Drinks reception

Registration is free and open to all
Please email UCLPostgraduateSymposium2012@gmail.com to RSVP

More information available at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/events
Abstracts

Session I: Migrations and Contaminations

Fiona Johnstone (Birkbeck) “Nicholas Nixon’s People with AIDS: Photography, Ethics, and the Other”
Fiona Johnstone’s doctoral research examines self-portraits by HIV-positive artists in the USA during the late 1980s and early 1990, aiming to situate the works in relation to the ‘corporeal turn’ that characterised critical discourse during the same period.
Providing context for the thesis, this paper considers the work of a non HIV-positive artist, the photographer Nicholas Nixon. Between January 1987 and February 1988, Nixon produced a series of photo-portraits that recorded the AIDS-related bodily deterioration of Tom Moran, a thirty-one year old physical therapist from the Boston suburbs. Exhibited at MOMA in 1988, Nixon’s images were denounced by AIDS activists who claimed that the photographs portrayed people with AIDS as emaciated sub-human creatures awaiting an immanent death. Implicit in this criticism was a notion of ‘otherness’ that not only referred to Nixon’s treatment of his subjects, but which also emphasised Nixon’s own problematic otherness as an outsider to the AIDS community. At the same time, curators and reviewers praised the images for ‘putting a face to AIDS’, suggesting that the very visibility rejected by activists might constitute an initial step towards agency and political representation. I argue that a consideration of the specifically visual quality of Nixon’s images is central to understanding their problematic reception, tracing a distrust of the visual through critical discourse during this period and back to earlier formulations of the visual construction of the subject and its ‘other’ as articulated by thinkers including Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

Amanda Sciampacone (Birkbeck) “Representing the Invisible: The ‘Blue Mist’ of Cholera and Meteorological Graphs”
During the nineteenth century the emergence of cholera in India in 1817, along with its mysterious epidemiology and its repeated outbreaks in Britain between 1831 and 1866, pushed British medics to find the cause of the disease. Since cholera originated in India, British medics blamed the tropical heat and jungle miasmas – a climate filled with pestilential matter – for creating the disease. Once it reached England, unusual meteorological phenomena such as a thick and stagnant atmosphere – weather seen as un-English – were identified as the cause of cholera’s morbidity and spread. While much of this discourse was textual, images were marshalled to support and visualize the arguments made about the disease and the conditions in which it propagated. British representations of India revealed the degrading effects of the tropical atmosphere. More significantly, medics and sanitarians produced images that mapped the disease to a certain type of ‘cholera’ weather in London characterized by a blue mist, the very colour victims turned once they contracted the disease, which settled over the city. These representations attempted to visualize cholera, but in doing so they also suggested that the disease had substance and agency. As my paper will demonstrate, the conflation of cholera with the climate of India, stagnant weather, and a heavy atmosphere powerfully evoked visual tropes of cholera as an elusive and malignant disease – a blue haze carried by the wind – that crept across boundaries and was contaminating the heart of the British Empire.

Session II: Print and Transmateriality

Carla Benzan (UCL) “Hanging on the Edge of Representation: The Veronica Veil at Varallo and the Problem of the Image in the Seventeenth Century”
An unprecedented depiction of the Veronica Veil was included in the Way to Calvary chapel at the Sacro Monte of Varallo in the early seventeenth century at a time when the early modern Italian pilgrimage site included increasingly virtuosic Christological chapels. Held suspended in the hands of the lifesize
polychromatic sculpture of Veronica, this Veil is simultaneously represented upon and presented by a piece of loose canvas. The veil is rendered with a gilded border, draped folds and curled edges on the hanging cloth whilst, between the threshold of this virtuosic trompe l’oeil image and the physical edge of the quasi-sculptural object, a border of untreated canvas remains.

In this paper I will argue that the Veronica Veil at Varallo produces a site of representational proliferation and semiotic uncertainty that disturbs Varallo’s seventeenth-century program of mimetic realism. The excessive doubling of the veil must be considered in light of the shifting status of the image in Catholic Europe during the seventeenth century and the role of acheiropoieta (images not made by human hands) in these debates. Building on the writings of Louis Marin and Georges Didi-Huberman on the semiotic and theological potency of the contact relic in the early modern period and Gerhard Wolf’s notion of “incarnational dialectics” I argue that the Veronica’s dual status as material presentation and mimetic representation produces a destabilizing hybrid ontology related to that of the contact relic itself.

Niccola Shearman (Courtauld) “Weimar in Black and White: Alternative Views of Contrast in the Post-Expressionist Woodcut”

The early years of the Weimar Republic appear to have been a bipolar age, riding alternate waves of utopia and despair. Reduced to stark contrasts and raw edges, it is fitting that the woodcut print should be regarded as ‘the emblem’ of those times. With their potent mix of political and religious imagery in bold modernist forms, there is no denying the impact of these images. However, their reception according to the dominant intellectual tradition of Geistesgeschichte poses a considerable problem for the scholar returning to the period. Regarding all cultural production as a direct expression of the Zeitgeist, this historical method that was at its height in the Expressionist period effectively declared the woodcut’s redemptive power to be over when the revolutionary innocence was superseded by the clinical eye of New Objectivity.

Drawing from research into three artists whose work extends the formal and aesthetic potential beyond the Expressionist paradigm, this paper will explore a close-up view of the woodcut as an alternative to the big picture. Asking if the medium did in fact succumb to compassion fatigue, it will question whether instead, released from its weighty ideological role, it experienced new freedoms as an independent art form. Equally, rather than remain fixed in a binary opposition, did it perform a more subtle role as a surface capable of containing contradictions? With reference to theories of Gestalt and visual perception, analysis will centre on the abstract functions of reduction and rhythm in both the print and its original block. In line with my overall thesis, the resulting insights will be considered in terms of an ordering of subjective and objective experience.

Session III: Aesthetics and Possibilities

Tianshuang Liang (SOAS) “The Agency of Syncretism in Modern Chinese Art: Gao Qifeng and the New Republic”

During the early twentieth century, China went through a huge upheaval in the context of political turmoil and cultural scepticism, to the extent that an anxiety of cultural renewal and revival was bubbling over among intelligentsia in China. Gao Qifeng (1889-1933) was an artist who had been active in this condition at the time, namely, the new Republic. This paper intends to look at Gao Qifeng who claims an aesthetic position entitled “Syncretism” (Zhezhong, 折衷) and uses it as an aspiration for his art practice and career. Gao Qifeng’s “syncretism” offered a way out in the artworld of China, which was thirst for new ideas reposing on cultural synthesis.

To avoid merely looking at the artistic development of Gao Qifeng, this paper employs the concept of “Art Nexus and the Indexes” proposed by Alfred Gell, and aims to place him in the context of a wider social and historical space of his time. That is to situate Gao Qifeng as an agent who creates works of art in which magnifies the dialectical relationship between the artist and his social vicinity. Thence, the
concept of “agency” used in this paper is not suggesting any direction of impact on the artist and the field he was working in. This paper instead emphasises on the reciprocal space between the artist, art works, aesthetics and viewers in the light of “agency”.

Catherine Berger (UCL) “A Multifarious Modernist Project: Alfred Stieglitz’s Camera Work 1903-1907”
From 1903 to 1917, Alfred Stieglitz edited, distributed and largely financed the quarterly Camera Work, a lavish publication aspiring to the highest aesthetic and intellectual standards. This magazine, which officially served as the organ of Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession, was crucial in the establishment of a modernist discourse in the United States. In this paper, focusing on the first years of the journal’s publication, I will analyse the visual and textual material in the pages of Camera Work, as well as the magazine itself as a document, a material object and a manifestation of a network of people. All these components are crucial for modernism, yet at the same time, there is a strong contradictory element present in Camera Work, not only the pictorial and symbolist style of the majority of the photographs, but also in the articles by various authors which enunciate a specific kind of cultural critique of modernity to be identified as romantic anti-capitalism. This type of critique is aesthetic, philosophical and sociological in nature, and is reminiscent of Georg Lukács’s problem with Aestheticism, while at the same time being indebted to Aestheticist principles. The writings of Lukács and other Central European aesthetic and social theories of the period serve as a model with which to critically examine Camera Work and Stieglitz and to identify the specifically American element in the situation.

Session IV: Traces and Accumulations

Catherine Macaulay (UCL) “Filthy Feet: Dirt as Relic and Text in Seicento Rome”
This paper will consider the controversial depiction of dirty feet in paintings by Caravaggio and other early modern painters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Commonly contextualised as indicators of Christian humility, the sole of the foot is a bodily surface that both leaves a mark and accumulates physical material in the act of walking and has a further potential to be read as a form of biographical, cartographic or other ‘text’. By considering alternative points of view to established scholarship that concerns walking such as Michel de Certeau’s argument that walking creates ‘invisible traces’ and Mary Douglas’ supposition that dirt is ‘matter out of place’, this paper will look at the potentiality of reading dirt on the sole of the foot in this period as a semantic field and the status of dirt as a relic. Works to be considered will include the relics of soil from Mount Calvary in S Croce in Gerusalemme and Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Pilgrims in S. Agostino.

Stephanie Straine (UCL) “Franz Erhard Walther’s Atlas of Drawing”
In 1967 the German artist Franz Erhard Walther arrived in New York to live and work, as a solution to his feelings of artistic isolation within the Düsseldorf scene. Across a practice of ten years’ standing that ranged freely between graphic typography, painting on paper, artist’s books, sculpture, photography, installation, actions and public demonstrations, the category of drawing had emerged as an insistent presence explored through the continually transferable concepts of line, frame and action. Over the course of his six years in New York, Walther produced over 10,000 drawings in a startling feat of accumulation. Not a single piece of paper was ever discarded. Each sheet of A4 was stored away, then reworked, painted, collaged or written over until a Werkzeichnung (work drawing) was produced. My paper will consider drawing’s strangely distended temporality for Walther at this time; how it provided an ever-collapsing and expanding framework, with the works on paper remaining both marginal to and constitutive of the artist’s practice as a whole. Reconfiguring and responding to the approaches to drawing’s expanded field seen in New York at this time, Walther’s idiosyncratic endeavour was to become an Atlas of drawing.
Daphne Ang (SOAS) “Cosmopolitan Representations: Peranakans and Image making in Colonial Singapore”

Painted portraits and photographs in late 19th to early 20th centuries in Singapore narrate the cultural fluorescence from approximately 1870-1930. This paper accesses the social motivations of commissioning portraits during the late 19th and early 20th century within the Peranakan community, as a method to claim and reify their social significance in Singapore. This paper charts the history and production of Singapore Peranakan1 (Straits Chinese) portraiture and its implications on or reflections of the social milieu of that era.

This paper will also shed light onto the commercial industry of image-making involving artists, photographers and studios. These proponents of ‘image-making’ and pictorial representation, together with their patrons, played vital roles as ‘cultural brokers’ who mediated global currents. In this process they reworked colonial conventions to develop localised aesthetic and visual idioms. I will explore the impetus behind the transition from oil and watercolour portraits into studio photography in context of the social climate of Singapore and the Straits Settlements in the turn of the twentieth century, pivotal changes driven by European colonialism, modern technology and migration.

The Peranakan ‘aesthetic’ was a peculiar fusion of Sino-Malay traditions punctuated with European elements, this trans-cultural amalgamation manifests in their portraiture. I will explore this notion of the syncretised yet eclectic Peranakan aesthetic through the paintings and photographs produced during this era.

Emma Rogers (Courtauld) “Methods of Examining an Enigmatic Ivory: Historical and Contemporary Approaches”

A whole corpus of carved and painted ivories exists in modern museum collections and church treasuries that have posed profoundly complex art-historical questions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, particularly regarding dating and the extent to which they might be seen as products of ‘Western’ or ‘Islamic’ manufacture. By focusing on one of the so-called ‘Charlemagne chess-men’, this paper will consider some of the medieval histories often attached to these objects and later modern and contemporary methodologies that have attempted to weave art-historical narratives around them and pin-point their source of production. From mythical associations to stylistic analysis and the mapping of influences and cultural associations, this paper will consider the ways in which these methods of historical study affect our perception of these ‘works of art’, and the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches of art-historical analysis in the understanding of culturally-complex early-medieval objects.

This paper will draw to light some of the complex issues and questions that are brought to light in my PhD research exploring medieval responses to imported objects in art, practice an re-use in Southern Italy in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries.