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Networks

Technology, Mobility, and Mediation in Visual Culture

It is not enough to shift the terrain of American art by enlarging its geospatial framework. Like many trendy and overused terms, "networks" can be employed to focus interrogations that connect the recent reconsideration of the field of American art beyond the traditional borders of the nation-state to reimagine one of the things for which the old American art history has already made a singular disciplinary contribution, namely, looking beyond conventional objects of fine art to a broader field of visual materials. To the established and rich literature regarding the production and reception of American vernacular and commercial culture, the idea of networked objects can globalize what otherwise stubbornly remains local while also foregrounding the role of technology, mobility, and mediation. This may additionally allow us to question certain recent returns to materiality and objecthood in favor of prioritizing visual culture more broadly considered as a system of meaning and communication in which objects are a necessary but hardly sufficient framework in and of themselves.

American art's spatial reconfiguration has produced a field that is more internationalized than it once was. Scholars living both inside and outside the United States are now engaged in generating rigorous new work that has made the field less nationalistic and also more oriented to the frequent exchanges of ideas, images, people, and objects across national boundaries; to the history of Americans making and studying art abroad; and to non-Americans who made art while living or working in the United States.[1] Such research underscores transnational connections and helps move the field away from its earlier focus on what is exceptionally American, following broader trends across the humanities in which the United States is increasingly understood in a more global context.[2] By emphasizing links—personal, professional, and material—we have also been able to liberate American art history from its singular burden of negative American exceptionalism based on cultural inferiority derived from its isolation from European centers of fine art. That's certainly been a boon to the field.

"Shifting Terrain: Mapping a Transnational American Art History," the title of the symposium from which this group of essays emerged, participates in these recent trends, abounding in geographic metaphors of connection, but does not, I would suggest, put enough pressure on the term "art history." Imagining a transnational American art history also means reimagining the borders between cultural forms as being equally porous as the geopolitical ones at the heart of so much of the important new research.

At the core of any spatialized framework (whether across geography or representational form) is the need to interrogate different kinds of mobility. The nature and definition of mobility have underwritten a great many of the questions regarding the history of the globalization of culture, resting as it has on the analysis of the large-scale circulation of people and goods, the bedrock on which capitalism's history sits. Historians of globalization have turned to such topics as trade, migration, and transport.[3] In art history, that impulse has translated into work on imperial iconography (especially in the realms of scientific knowledge), plantation culture, human rights, and even transport itself.[4] We have also studied such movement socially—in order to consider migration in art, trade's influence on style, and the rise of the art market.[5]

The geographic expansion and reconfiguration of the subject of American art have enriched our histories at the descriptive level, but we have yet to consolidate what new arguments we seek to make with this new information and whether they will be about

America or even about art at all. Forms of physical mobility can equally undermine the centrality of the borders, boundaries, frontiers, and their alleged breach and transgression on which a geopolitical framework depends, in favor of a more fluid and hybrid object field derived from the experience of transit itself. While Jennifer L. Roberts has considered how visual materials in early America intersected with communities in being shaped, tested, and limited by physical distance, such questions extend well into other periods and places. For example, one could equally examine what happens when distances are easily bridged with the introduction of speedy transport like the jet airplane.[6] Perhaps this might seem too deterministic for students of visual culture, but putting systems of transport technology into dialogue with image production and reception may give us new insights about the particular role played by aesthetic experience in fabricating communities and social formations that technology remade, even before the Internet came along to usher in the network and information society.

Thinking about networks invites us to consider the spatial reorientation of the study of American art as part of an assemblage of technologically mediated visual forms and experiences within a broader system of communication. One of the potential consequences of looking/thinking across media might be to awaken us from the field's slumber regarding the vast literature on the powerhouse of American vernacular visual culture: Hollywood cinema, defined in no small measure by its global cultural circulation. Although studies of film exhibition, markets, and festivals closely parallel the same subjects in art history, the interpretations regarding the studio aesthetic are especially instructive. Hollywood movies, as Miriam Hansen argued, managed to become one of the first truly global visual vernaculars by aestheticizing the experience of modernity itself and universalizing what had begun as a particular historical experience that amalgamated diverse cultural traditions.[7] Underlying Hansen's interpretation is the important role technology played in the globalization of aesthetic experience. Although she did not write about networks specifically, Hansen's emphasis on technological mediation is part and parcel of what defines networks as something that goes beyond simply being either a "system" or a "habitus," to use Pierre Bourdieu's word.[8]

By now the term "the network society" has become fairly commonplace among sociologists and has been incorporated into most fields in the qualitative social sciences and the humanities. Derived as the concept may well be from the work of such turn-of-the-twentieth-century sociologists of modernity as Georg Simmel, art historians may also associate it with Howard Becker's "art worlds" model, in which art can be understood as the product of the collective actions of a variety of individuals working in a coordinated fashion.[9] Beyond the emphasis on how a social context determines the production and reception of art objects, Manuel Castells has identified not just the fact of connectedness but also certain key connections such as those made by technology, especially mass media and telecommunications, as the basis for contemporary social interaction and organization. The concept of the network society potentially shifts us away from the centrality of physical co-presence and in this way differs from work that focuses on the material and geographic proximity that characterizes studies devoted to expanding terrains, thus challenging the recent art-historical response to the advent of digital culture in the form of its current reinvigorated "material turn." In Castells's rendition, virtuality stands in for materiality. A decentered geography, based in hubs and flows, becomes a prominent feature of the modern social order as he describes it.[10] Whether this accurately describes our present condition or not, examining the central role played by mass media is important because it bridges geospatial distance. Simultaneously, the technological mediation of form moves us toward the condition that media theorists describe as intermediality and "convergence culture"—in which content flows across media platforms.[11]

Nadya Bair's essay in this issue describes how images travel across material supports such as magazines, corporate annual reports, and exhibitions in ways that suggest that the same photos can be used as news, advertising, art, and documentation. She shows that the impact and meaning of photographs derive as much from the methods that reproduce and disseminate them as from the content of the representations themselves. By studying the convergence of content across viewing platforms, we can simultaneously reframe well-known and influential images as part of groups while also denaturalizing categories such as commercial, vernacular, and fine art photography. Photography, plentiful in its examples and circulated in multiple formats, has always been a networked form of visual communication. What remains largely unexamined is whether convergence culture (like the transnational and the global, both terms borrowed from present conditions) would offer a productive methodological frame for the history of visual culture of other times and places, or whether convergence really is a modern phenomenon.

Sociologically oriented scholarship has not been effective in accounting for globalization and the mobility it engendered at the level of the individual, even though this is where its impact has been decisive and ubiquitous. How do we get at globalization at the level of sensory experience—as an aesthetic, rather than as an economic or political process or condition materialized in representation? These are the kinds of questions that the study of visual culture in an expanded field is well suited to address. Media, since the mid-nineteenth century, have played an incontrovertible role in shaping how subjects come to know themselves and the world around them. By understanding that modern media are also technologies, we can traverse the art and technology divide that separates the history of technology from media studies and art history, as well as art history from a subfield such as design history and a more general one such as cultural history. Rethinking these divisions may also result in a limited meaning of American art as the fine art actually produced in the United States while simultaneously creating new kinds of transnational and transmedial inquiry. That inquiry, however, can no longer go by the field name of an expanded "American art history." Why would it?

Connecting rather than dividing seemingly disparate fields makes a term such as "techno-aesthetics," which I propose here, especially useful. The continued suspicion of the value of mass media, combined with the persistent nostalgia for an authentic popular culture, have for too long bolstered the "two cultures" debate opposing art and science (and technology).[12] Techno-aesthetics places the human-machine continuum at the center of inquiry, whether by treating technology as an extension of human creation, which remakes what it means to be human as much as humans tinker to expand and depend further on such technology, or by relying more squarely on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, whose formulation gives greater agency to technology itself.[13] Techno-aesthetics can open us to prioritizing redefinitions of vision as well as to the general reorganization of the senses. Such scholarship examines the conditioning of attention and experience through representation and media.[14] Techno-aesthetics also considers the role played by technology in matters of visibility and invisibility. For example, forces such as electricity have been discussed as both—as a grid that is underground on the one hand but also one that is rendered visible and even spectacular through the creation of a technological sublime.[15]

While the fields of design and architecture long ago took up the study of functional aesthetics, thinking about techno-aesthetics as part of the framework of networks also demands we take up objects of different scales—from large systems to individual persons and objects. Art history has been much better at grappling with singular representative objects and slow looking than at understanding overproduction and glancing. Orit Halpern's book *Beautiful Data* reminds us that the Eames Office, for example, embraced

a pedagogical principle of excess of data and information inundation that would produce learning through distraction and overstimulation. These are the kinds of fundamental viewing cultures that have been mostly disregarded and certainly undertheorized by art historians. The Eames Office is only one useful example here. Studies of cybernetics and the construction of viewing positions such as Fred Turner's identification of the "democratic surround," as well as new research regarding the Hungarian-born founder of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, György Kepes, and his interest in the experiences of vision as conceived within information and communications systems, suggest that the period after World War II can offer new conceptual and methodological possibilities for the study of looking and viewing.[16]

David Joselit proposed in *After Art* that we back-burner the emphasis on discrete objects and medium itself. As he put it, "In economies of image overproduction connectivity is key." But observations like this one are not as new as they might seem and even predate the pioneering outlook of Andy Warhol to which Joselit points.[17] In the mid- to late 1950s Lawrence Alloway, dubbed by Clement Greenberg as a "sectarian champion of most things American," a key figure belonging to the Independent Group at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, articulated an approach to culture as a network.[18] He eradicated formal hierarchies in favor of intermedial connections and trained a keen and even favorable eye on the way technology shaped aesthetic experience.[19] Alloway wrote in 1959, "One reason for the failure of the humanists to keep their grip on public values . . . is their failure to handle technology, which is both transforming our environment and, through its product the mass media, our ideas about the world and about ourselves."[20] Alloway embraced culture that moved fast, and he identified a cultural continuum, which he called "an expendable multitude of signs."[21] Art, for Alloway, could not be separated from other visual means of communication; instead, it became part of a nonhierarchical system of public information. The continuum, in other words, was a network. Although Alloway is well known among those who study Pop art and architecture and design, it seems essential to resituate his work in the context of other important twentieth-century media theories such as those of the Frankfurt School, French semiotics, the Birmingham School, and American cultural studies precisely because his particular concerns are especially relevant as we rethink the spaces of American art, as we investigate cultural networks, and as we give attention to networks of media culture.

Alloway was living in a period of remarkable geographic mobility, due in no small measure to the expansion of air travel facilitated by the arrival of the jet. In 1958 he hopped a jet plane and visited the United States for the first time, and would settle there in 1961.[22] Alloway redefined culture across space, beyond national borders, and traversing media forms because he was literally more mobile by virtue of living in the jet age. This development made it easier to reimagine the operations of visual media as part of a global network, and this moment has shaped not only mass media but also our study of it ever since. He envisioned a system of hubs with resonant points of connection that characterize what we think of today as global culture by initially embracing America not as particular and provincial but as the harbinger of a new universal—which is not necessarily to say homogeneous—culture. With more credence given to such an orientation as Alloway's, art history can find within its own recent past thoughtful considerations of networks. I suggest we turn back to such jet-age theorists as Alloway and others whose own life experience motivated their devotion and insights into the remaking of aesthetics through technology as we forge our current remappings. They offer excellent guidance as we move from terrains to networks, out of American art and into global visual culture, where connections and systems rather than distinction and singularity underlie our principal frames of interrogation.

Notes

1   François Brunet, *L'Amérique des images: Histoire et culture visuelles des États-Unis* (Paris: Hazan/ Paris Diderot, 2013); Stephanie Barron, *Exiles & Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997); T. J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007); and Jean-Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America* (London: Verso, 2006).

2   Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002); Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); and C. A. Bayly et al., "On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–64.

3   The literature on this subject is vast. See, among others, Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Round about the Earth: Circumnavigation from Magellan to Orbit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012); Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement: Transports et perception de l'espace, XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009); and Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

4   Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012); Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700–1840* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2008); Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011); Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010); James H. Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape: Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008); and Adnan Morshed, *Impossible Heights: Skyscrapers, Flight, and the Master Builder* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015). For a local-culture version of transport aesthetics, see Jason Weems, *Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Midwest* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015).

5   Megan Luke, *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014); Nancy J. Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013); and Debora L. Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part 1," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2011): 139–81.

6   Bleichmar, *Visible Empire*; Joanne Mancini, "Pedro Cambon's Asian Objects: A Transpacific Approach to Eighteenth-Century California," *American Art* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 28–51; and Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014). The title of my current book project is "Jet-Age Aesthetics: The Glamour of Media in Motion."

7   Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77; and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).

8   Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).

9   The body of Simmel's writing is relevant, but see especially "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409–24; and Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982).

10 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010).

11 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006).

12 This refers to C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959).

13 John Harwood's book *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945–1976* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011) not only is a model of the study of techno-aesthetics but also has an important discussion of the history of ergonomics, a key articulation of the human-machine continuum. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

14 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999); and Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013).

15 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

16 Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2015); Turner, *Democratic Surround*; and John Blakinger, "Artist under Technocracy: György Kepes and the Cold War Avant-Garde" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford Univ., 2016).

17 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013), 19 (on Warhol), 56.

18 Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name [1962]," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 137.

19 Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945–59* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995); Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody, *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015); and Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). See also Lawrence Alloway, "Network: The Art World Described as a System," in *Network: Art and the Complex Present* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984), 3–15.

20 Lawrence Alloway, "The Long Front of Culture," *Cambridge Opinion* 17 (1959): 24–26, at 25; reprinted in Alloway, "The Long Front of Culture (1959)," in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Pop*, ed. Alloway et al. (New York: Institute for Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 31–33, at 32–33.

21 Quoted in Ben Highmore, "Brutalist Wallpaper and the Independent Group," *Journal of Visual Culture* 12 (August 2013): 205–21.

22 For a recent important biography of Alloway, see Lucy Bradnock et al., *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015).

Nadya Bair

Their Daily Bread
American Sponsorship and Magnum Photos' Global Network

In the spring of 1947 the British photographer George Rodger returned to his temporary home in Cyprus to find a letter from Rita Vandivert, the wife of *Life* photographer William Vandivert. She informed Rodger that he had just become a vice president of a new international, cooperative picture agency called Magnum Photos, Inc., whose other founders included Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Magnum hoped to station five photographers around the world while staff in its New York and Paris offices would sell their images to as many clients as possible.[1] Vandivert, who served as Magnum's first president, quickly jumped into details of how each photographer, and the operation as a whole, would make money. Photographers would secure an assignment from such publications as *Life*, *Holiday*, or *Fortune* in order to cover their travel expenses to a specific location. After the photographer "does the agreed number of stories or pages for them . . . he shoots as much material as he can on the side, keeping closely in touch with both Paris & New York offices so that we know what he can get . . . the photographer must know what the magazines are interested in, what they are hoping to get, and the agency girls must know at all times what the photographers are up to."[2]

Rodger and many other Magnum members worked on editorial and industrial assignments simultaneously for much of their careers, coordinating their international projects through weekly, and sometimes daily, letters. Their correspondence shows a

Part II, which will appear in the next issue of West 86th, focuses on the history, visual culture, and ongoing renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (originally opened in 1910), highlighting new research on expressive forms of violence, past and present, within Belgium and outside it. View. Start studying Understanding Visual Culture. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. -"Scientific images and looking practices are as dependent on cultural context and culturally informed interpretations as images from popular culture, art and the news." (Sturken and Cartwright, p.347) - Doctors gain power through the 'medical gaze' - Status/power/knowledge/ - Patients experience less important than doctor's judgement. While visual culture has certainly been around as long as culture itself, the phrase visual culture used to denote a specific component of culture in general, a set of visual practices, or an academic discipline is quite recent. The emergence of an idea called visual culture surely implies the emergence of a set of urgent problems for which the idea should enable some kind of answers. While Foucault notes the efficient advance in disciplinary technology marked by the panopticon (it is much cheaper to have people police themselves than to have to continuously beat them into submission), what is at least as important here is that the visual is explicitly grasped as a medium of organization and social control, and that the visual field can be structured.