Visual Studies 1

Understanding Visual Culture
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Introduction to the course

As you glance at the above headings you may feel a little daunted at the prospect of understanding visual culture. Unlike most art history courses that build on an already familiar structure, and with some names and pictures already seen – Impressionism, Michelangelo, Baroque – many of the terms used in this subject will either be new to you or have unfamiliar meanings. This is because visual culture is driven by theory rather than history, and theory tends to find problems in common sense situations – ‘what do we mean by “medium”?’; ‘how does time appear in an image?’; ‘what is the effect of the copy on the original?’; These are the kinds of questions you would rarely find asked in art historical circles simply because they would soon undermine the fundamentals of history and leave a project in ruins. Theory doesn’t lend itself to certainties, it questions them. For this reason you should aim to be fluent with a problem rather than aim for a definitive answer.

The different parts of the course reflect this problematizing approach by addressing the concepts that have driven debate in the recent past. It pays to be alert to the pitfalls this creates since the language of theory is itself also theorized. When this happens you will probably get a sense of vertigo and begin to think you don’t understand what is being said. But this will be simply an effect of language brought to bear on itself rather than your failure to grasp something overly complex. In the end you should see the course as an invitation to think critically. If that thinking is grounded in research, shaped by your growing understanding, then the content of the course will serve you well for years to come.

We hope you will recognize that the material presented here has a good deal of practical potential and that some of the theories discussed might prompt you to explore them in visual form. ‘Practicing theory’ is in this way the flip-side of ‘theorizing practice’ and whilst you are not required to do the former you would find it gave you valuable insights into the latter.
Before you start

Welcome to *Understanding Visual Culture*.

If you haven’t already done so, now is a good time to work through the free introductory course *An Introduction to Studying in HE*. This is available on the OCA student website.

Don’t be tempted to skip this introductory course as it contains valuable advice on study skills (e.g. reading, note-taking), research methods and academic conventions which will stand you in good stead throughout your studies.

The OCA website will be a key resource for you during your studies with OCA, so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log onto the OCA student website and find the video guide to using the website. Watch the video and take some notes.

Remember, there are other students following this course, so you are not on your own. Use the online forums to reflect on your findings and discuss issues with other students.

**Course aims**

The aim of this course is to help you:
- Gain a working knowledge of key terms of theory
- Understand the relationship between art and visual culture
- Debate critical issues around Modernism
- Research and communicate relevant topics
- Evaluate arguments in light of selected theories

**Learning outcomes**

On successful completion of this course, you’ll be able to:
- Demonstrate a degree of fluency with selected theories
- Debate the autonomy of art
- Explain the concept of ‘difference’ in contemporary theory
- Exercise critical thinking across a range of arguments
- Research and discuss key examples of visual culture
Your tutor
Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you’re clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven’t already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of visual culture so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you’ll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you’re waiting.

Note that you’re encouraged to reflect carefully on feedback and, if appropriate, to go back to the assignment you submitted and make adjustments to it based on your tutor’s comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark.

Course Support
Course support are able to assist with things that you may find unclear in the exercises, projects and assignments and technical issues such as locating course resources etc. They can act as a point of contact in between tutor communications. Please email coursesupport@oca.ac.uk
Formal assessment
Read the section on assessment in your Student Handbook at an early stage in the course. See also the study guide on assessment and getting qualified for detailed information about assessment and accreditation. You’ll find this on the OCA student website.

For assessment you’ll need to submit a cross-section of the work you’ve done on the course:
• the output of the final four assignments including annotations and copies of images referred to
• your blog url
• your tutor report forms.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Pre-assessment review
If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you’ll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark. Because of this your tutor is available to guide you on presenting your work.
Assessment criteria
The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you’re going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you’ve completed in your writing diary, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment. The five assessment criteria are evenly weighted and are listed below.

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<td><strong>Demonstration of subject based knowledge and understanding</strong></td>
<td>Broad and comparative understanding of subject content, knowledge of the appropriate historical, intellectual, cultural or institutional contexts.</td>
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<td><strong>Demonstration of research skills</strong></td>
<td>Information retrieval and organisation, use of IT to assist research, ability to evaluate IT sources, the ability to design and carry out a research project, locate and evaluate evidence from a wide range of primary and secondary sources (visual, oral, aural or textual).</td>
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<td><strong>Demonstration of critical and evaluation skills</strong></td>
<td>Engagement with concepts, values and debates, evidence of analysis, reflection, critical thinking, synthesis, interpretation in relation to relevant issues and enquiries.</td>
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<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>The ability to communicate ideas and knowledge in written and spoken form, including presentation skills.</td>
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Your learning log
The learning log is an integral element of every OCA course. If this is your first course with OCA, you’ll find guidance on what to include in a learning log and how to set up an online learning log/blog on the OCA student website.

You’re strongly recommended to use an online log or blog instead of (or in addition to) a physical learning log. A blog is a great way to consolidate and present your work, findings, observations and reflections for your tutor and peers to review. You can also include links to new research sources you’ve found so that these are available to your fellow students.

Setting up a blog is free and can be done through websites such as Blogger, Tumblr or Wordpress. Alternatively you can set up a blog within the OCA student website.

Plan ahead
This Level 1 course represents 400 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and keeping your writing diary. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 12 hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You’ll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

*Understanding Visual Culture* is divided into five parts, corresponding to the five course assignments. The first assignment will enable your tutor to get to know you, review your work so far and decide how best to help you in future.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into a series of exercises designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each exercise requires research and reading to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up into the assignments that you’ll send to your tutor.

The assignments offer flexibility as to style and content and are designed to help you develop your own creative style and voice.
Reading
A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. The reading list recommends key texts and gives suggestions for further reading. Record your thoughts, reactions and critical reflections on your reading in your learning log; this will be helpful when you come to work on your critical review. The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

Referencing your reading
Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing – see the Harvard referencing system guide on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people’s work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.
Glossaries
The following sources will be very useful in helping you grasp the meaning of new and unfamiliar terms. There are many other sources online but you should make sure they are well regarded.

Tate Gallery
www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary

Chicago Glossary of Media Theory
http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/navigation.htm

Part one
Theory, Art and Visual Culture

Use the grid below to keep track of your progress throughout Part One.

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Introduction

In this chapter we aim to understand a handful of terms concerned with the arts. The terms are few – ‘art’, ‘culture’, ‘theory’ and ‘visual’ – and on the whole quite familiar. Clearly they have something to do with each other. If we began a conversation on culture it would probably turn to art. If we began a conversation on art we would discuss things according to their visual interest. But why do we find ‘theory’ here? Surely theory belongs with the sciences – quantum theory, big bang theory or the theory of relativity. Scientific theories often yield surprising developments in a field of research when specialized knowledge is used to explain new data, bringing it into line with what is already understood. The theoretical physicist is therefore looking for a convincing fit between established knowledge and information. In this way science abides by the more rigorous definition of theory as a, ‘supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained…’ (Oxford Dictionaries). As we will see, theory in the realm of art and visual culture makes no such claims to rigor, nor does it necessarily offer explanations.
Art Theories

Theory in the human sciences
Such a definition of theory seems alien to art insofar as we think of art in terms of appreciation rather than explanation. If a work of art could be exhaustively explained we would surely lose interest in it. But how would this definition fare in the human sciences - sociology, psychology, or anthropology – where observation is shaped by interests and subjective judgements? In these disciplines theory is concerned less with knowledge of a thing and more with understanding meanings; less with observation and more with interpretation. In this way observation and knowledge are judged according to their relevance – what matters to us. To that extent it may be said that theory becomes rather fuzzy when it finds itself outside of science. But there's more at stake here than a simple loss of clarity since the 'thing to be explained' in the human sciences includes the language of the discipline itself.

Talk about talk
Natural science can tell us how much dark matter there is in the universe by having a rigorous definition of the thing to be measured and a rigorous means of its measurement. By contrast, human science may provide an explanation of the phenomenon of false memory syndrome, but different meanings of the word ‘memory’ will make the explanation partial. So not only do the human sciences have always to accommodate different meanings, those meanings are among the things to be explained. For example, describing the loss of integration between individuals or groups and society, the sociologist Emile Durkheim uses the term ‘anomie’ - the loss of social norms or values. The revolutionary socialist Karl Marx will view the same phenomenon as ‘alienation’ – a sense of estrangement. Neither can claim to be rigorous because ‘loss of integration’ is itself open to debate. Is it a question of cultural integration, or psychological, or demographic or all three? And if all three how should they be weighted? In spite of these difficulties both Durkheim and Marx will have to show how their concepts fit their respective systems if their arguments are to remain persuasive. Where science examines and explains things of a natural kind the human sciences study things of a social kind. Rocks, clouds and fish on the one hand, and anxiety, debt and justice on the other. The latter are brought into existence through social interaction, namely through language, and therefore cannot be understood independently of discourse about them. The former do not owe their existence to human kind and remain to that extent independent of the language used to explain them. The distinction is roughly that between nature and culture. As features of culture, Durkheim’s ‘anomie’ and Marx’s ‘alienation’ are the products of talk.
The reflexive nature of art-writing

Following Searle’s distinction we can see that theory in the human sciences is quite different to theory in the natural sciences – so much so, that ‘theory’ may be deemed a genre of writing rather than a rigorous method of inquiry. In this sense theory is more a matter of ongoing debate – and something like this characterizes theory in art. But where ‘loss of integration’ was both imprecise and something in need of further theorizing it nonetheless had the advantage of naming objective conditions of modern life. When we talk about pictures and other kinds of representation we are bound to talk in figural or metaphorical terms. This is Michael Podro describing Raphael’s drawing Virgin and Child with Book: ‘… the spiralling rhythm registers and connects the complex forms of the Virgin’s turning body, her foreshortened arm, the articulation of her wrist, and the torsion of the reaching child, and it does all this without loss of its own graphic impulse.’ (Bryson, 1991, 163)

Clearly Podro is not offering a literal description of the drawing which would be limited to the variety of marks on the surface. Nor is he describing the subject matter alone as if a woman and child were actually present. Rather his description brings the two elements together. For Podro this concerns the ‘way that the drawing or painting directs itself to the mind of the perceiver, who sees the subject remade within it…’ (Bryson, 1991, 163). In a comparable discussion Michael Baxandall tells us that a description refers, ‘first not to the physical picture itself but to the effect the picture has on us.’ (Baxandall, 1985, 11)

Exercise 1.0

In his book, The Construction of Social Reality, John Searle writes ‘There are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist… things like money, property, governments, and marriages. Yet many facts regarding these things are ‘objective’ facts in the sense that they are not a matter of [our] preferences, evaluations, or moral attitudes. (Searle, 1995, 1)

Make a list of 10 such ‘things that exist only because we believe them to exist.’

In approximately 150 words say how these things differ from e.g. mountains and forests.

Why do you think Searle puts the word ‘objective’ in inverted commas?
Picturing

In both cases we can see that anything going by the name of theory will have to deal, not simply with a degree of ambiguity in the thing to be explained but a thoroughly reflexive description that includes its own point of view. This is hardly surprising when we realize that pictures only appear to us when we picture them. Leonardo da Vinci famously observed that, ‘If you look upon an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, etc.’ (Leonardo, 2005, 86)

Whether it is an old wall or carefully painted scene, we do the same thing by picturing what we see. This sounds odd at first because an old wall is not intended to be a picture but a painted scene is. Even if the subject of the scene remains unclear we can easily recognize the look of deliberate and purposeful marks on a surface. But without the faculty of picturing or ‘seeing as’ we would either see only the marks or we would be deluded into seeing the subject as if it were real. The Surrealist painter Max Ernst used a technique – ‘decalcomania’ – to exploit the difference between intended and unintended images. Beginning with accidental marks on a canvas he followed Leonardo’s advice, seeing figures and faces in the surface. To emphasize the pictured image Ernst added shadows and highlights thus making the subject matter appear deliberate.

Leonardo da Vinci, Sketches for the Battle of Anghiari (1503-04)

Leonardo da Vinci, Group of Riders in the Battle of Anghiari (1505)
Exercise 1.1

Look at the painting *The Eye of Silence* and see whether you can distinguish the intended from unintended faces. Which seem most ambiguous?

Look up the term ‘pareidolia.’ Find and record three examples, at least one of which should be seen in nature.
Social theories as art theories

The arguments of Podro and Baxandall are very persuasive but it is worth remembering that they are about pictures in general and not just about those we call art. In other words they might just as easily have been illustrations. Whenever we speak of pictures we should bear in mind that not all pictures are works of art and not all works of art are pictures. As a high status form of representation, and one that has the potential to isolate itself from wider concerns, art attracts the attention of theorists intent on maintaining its participation in the world at large. Thus there are social art theories, feminist art theories and psycho-analytic art theories all of which have a purchase on most other aspects of culture and society. To that extent theories of this kind have their feet in two camps. The interests brought to bear on art by such theories determine what counts as evidence in any particular case. In other words, recalling the definition of theory above, the object of inquiry is not independent of the general principles that are supposed to accommodate it if those principles have been used to pick out the object to begin with. Thus, the general principles of Marxism can be brought to bear on a work of art, distinguishing features that will confirm those principles the interpretation began with. Feminist art theory seizes on images of women according to a range of interests that the work reflects.

Hybrid disciplines: the Carlstrom case

An extreme example of this kind of projection or reading-in can be seen in the writing of a Danish art historian Birger Carlstrom, who submitted paintings by Renoir to exceptionally close attention. As James Elkins explains, in doing so Carlstrom finds cryptic messages, maps and images in a few square inches of brushwork that reveal Renoir’s views on, among other things, the British control of the Suez and Panama canals. In Renoir’s Umbrellas.

‘…Carlstrom zeroes in on the ruffled hem of the girl’s skirt, which looks to him like another map of the Canal. As he puts it, “the little girl with her rolling hoop has the constructing in Panama.” She holds her stick at an angle, and Carlstrom sees it as a pointer, “showing us the Suez-canal which is the blue field on the dress of the bigger girl” next to her.’

(Elkins, 2005, 2-3)
Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Umbrellas*, 1886 (oil on canvas)

© Bridgeman Images
If we could ascribe a theory to Carlstrom’s endeavours it might best be a species of conspiracy theory, not merely because it is a crackpot idea to begin with but because the sheer idiosyncrasy of his method voids any credible alternative. Proper art historians would have no hesitation in dismissing it. But Elkins concludes that Carlstrom’s, ‘extremity can be used to point up problems in the discipline as a whole.’ (Elkins, 2005, 10) One of the problems Elkins identifies is the tendency for art historians to combine methods of interpretation and so abandon the checks and balances that a single discipline brings. Against the accusation that Carlstrom has no clear method, Elkins argues that,

‘…art historical texts are typically mixtures of methods, and that the transition from one method to the next is normally made fairly quickly and without explanation. It is common to find art historical essays that depend on a succession of formal analysis, psychoanalysis, feminism, and social art history, and often enough the methods are mixed together.
(Elkins, 2005, 9)

Elkins is surely being provocative, but he nonetheless points up a weakness in interpretive methods by showing that they differ from Carlstrom’s only in degree rather than kind. As with the human sciences this means debates can never finally be settled, rather one theory, or combination of theories, will prevail for some time until another, more persuasive one, takes its place. If Elkins is right about art history in this respect perhaps there is nothing really at stake.
Subject and surface govern practice
Moreover there is a general tendency among theories to which Elkins refers to see a painting as an image - to see the subject at the expense of the surface. Where complex figure painting provides much material for social, feminist or psychoanalytic interpretation, impasto, scumbling, hatching and unmodulated colour do not. To illustrate this in opposition to the theories just described we will consider a theory that reverses the priorities of subject and surface – one that devalues the role of the subject in favour of the effects of the surface, most apparent in abstract painting. The theory in question here is Modernism and we will consider it in detail in the next chapter, but for now we need only note a distinction made by Clement Greenberg: ‘Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture as a picture first.’ (Greenberg, 1995, 87) This inversion was a cornerstone of Greenberg’s theory and he certainly encouraged others to see things the same way. And yet he was of the view that theorizing was inimical to the proper pursuit of art.

‘…Modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations. It can be said, rather, that it happens to convert theoretical possibilities into empirical ones, in doing which it tests many theories about art for their relevance to the actual practice and actual experience of art.’
(Greenberg, 1995, 92)

Greenberg’s ‘Modernist art’ is very selective. It includes Cézanne, Matisse and Pollock, and excludes Duchamp, Dali and Warhol. The point he makes here is that Modernists achieve everything they do achieve through practice alone. They don’t make pictures from theories though they may test a theory through practice. A painter like Mondrian may find through practice that repeating the shape of the canvas strengthens the look of the painting, but had he understood this before painting it the result would have been a theoretical demonstration at odds with the central tenets of Modernism.
Jackson Pollock, *Silver over Black, White, Yellow and Red*, 1948 (oil & enamel on paper laid on canvas), © Bridgeman Images

Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, (Magenta, Red, Muted Yellow, Orange, Black, White) (screenprint), (1928-87) Indianapolis Museum of Art, USA, © Bridgeman Images
Exercise 1.2
Identify three works of art in which theory plays a decisive role, and three works of art in which theory seems absent. In 100-150 words reflect on the distinction between them.

Theories of Art

Theories of art
Art theories are in many ways unlike scientific theories, though some kinds of systematic ideas and general principles are common to both. The differences lie between objectivity and subjectivity and the question of independence, distance or detachment of the observer from the observed. In this section we see the return of that independence when we answer the question – what, then, is a ‘theory of art’.

Theories of art: understanding art as such
No doubt among the vast number of views available on the internet you will find that some say ‘art theory’ when they mean ‘theory of art’ and vice-versa. But the accepted usage is to say ‘art theory’ when we want to refer to a theory within art, such as modernism or a theory of the avant-garde, and to say ‘theory of art’ when referring to art as such, as in the institutional theory of art, or the expressive theory of art. Art theories are generally regarded as aesthetic theories insofar as they are concerned with how art is judged rather than what it is. To help clarify this distinction we might imagine a piece of paper on which is drawn a circle representing all that we call ‘art’. Seen from the outside the circle appears as an uninterrupted whole, but from the inside we can see only some of the circle at any given moment. A theory of art is a theory about the whole, but an art theory is about only a part of that whole. To see art from the outside is to see it from the perspective of a different discipline, in this case philosophy. Theories of art then are philosophical theories. In wanting to know what art is philosophers must see it from the distance of another discipline. Art theories, by contrast, are the concern of artists, critics, and spectators, all of whom take the realm of art for granted when they observe works of art from a position inside the circle.
Necessary and sufficient conditions of art

We should make a distinction at this point concerning the way we use the word ‘art’. On the one hand it may be thought that art is just all of those things that have gone by that name, and that a definition of art could be determined by whatever properties all known works of art share. But, to remain valid, a definition must include all possible instances of art not just actual ones. In pulling this off it will be necessary to show that all known works of art, whether we like them or not, are covered by the definition but that the definition doesn’t derive from them. In other words we won’t arrive at a definition of art through observation, only reason. By this means we should be able to weigh up competing claims. In doing so it will help to apply a simple distinction. Most theories of art only tell us what property something must possess if it is to be a work of art. For example, it seems reasonable to say art must express an emotion of some kind. But this doesn’t amount to saying that all things expressing emotion are works of art. A speech at a funeral, a letter to a friend, a soap opera or birthday card can be expressions of emotion, but they would not be considered works of art. In this case we should conclude that emotion is necessary for something to be a work of art, but, because we find it elsewhere, emotion isn’t sufficient.

Other necessary conditions may come to mind: representation, beauty, form. It may be said that any one of these is necessary if something is to be a work of art, but we would surely find it elsewhere, so it wouldn’t be sufficient. To improve the odds it should help to have a pair of conditions rather than just one. Perhaps ‘representation’ and ‘beauty’ will do. That would exclude beautiful people and beautiful sunsets on the one hand, and cartoons and adverts on the other. But saying Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* is beautiful doesn’t seem convincing, so we would be obliged to discount it, or revise the definition.

Art defined by context?
Perhaps what is needed is not a property or attribute of a work of art, but something to do with its circumstances or context. For example, something may be a work of art merely because it has a connection with things that are art already. Or perhaps an appropriate intention is enough for something to be a work of art. Both of these beg a question – what is meant by a ‘connection’ and how do we decide what is ‘appropriate’? If I photograph some sunflowers for a calendar does the ‘connection’ with van Gogh’s painting make my picture a work of art – surely not. Can I intend my trimmed hedge to be a work of art if I haven’t so far expressed an interest in art? Such contextual theories seem to require a lot of amendments to begin to sound plausible. Nonetheless, one such theory has risen above the others – the institutional theory of art.

The Institutional Theory of Art
‘Institution’ here means the ‘artworld’ – artists, critics, curators, and indeed anyone with comparable authority. This, now familiar term, was coined by Arthur Danto in his 1964 essay ‘The Artworld’ which aims to understand Warhol’s Brillo Boxes as exact copies of their commercial model. For Danto the two – model and copy – are ‘indiscernible’; thus raising the question why the copy is a work of art when the model is not? If the difference cannot be seen, then observation has no place in a definition of art that rests on observation. From this Danto concludes that Warhol’s Brillo Boxes are works of art only when understood according to an art theory. In this way perception gives way to conception – an idea has to be in place for something to be seen as art. Such ideas are generally recognized by those who constitute the artworld and therefore have the power to confer art status on a ‘candidate’ work. This is George Dickie’s institutional theory of art. It doesn’t require a work of art to have any specific features or properties, merely that someone should offer a thing as a candidate art work. One of the problems here is that whilst we see works submitted for entry in an exhibition and judged accordingly, no such judgments are made with respect to their art status. No one, individually or collectively, makes that call. Dickie is surely right to say something would not be art if the right people didn’t agree, but to agree is to accept a prior judgement, and that takes us back to square one. How does something become a ‘candidate’ work?
The question ‘what is art?’ belongs to the modern period. Only when artists begin to challenge assumptions about art does it become necessary to say what it is and the institutional theory recognizes this difficulty. Nonetheless many conclude, or concede, that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art. We just don’t know.
Exercise 1.3

In what sense could
1. A Dyson vacuum cleaner
2. Tenniel's illustrations of Alice in Wonderland
3. The Nazca lines
...be works of art.

Take a speculative approach to this question. Don't say whether you think they are, or should be, considered as art. Rather say how someone might see them that way.
Visual Culture

The ‘visual’ in culture
I said at the beginning of the chapter that of the four terms up for discussion ‘theory’ was the odd one out, though I might instead have said ‘visual’, or rather ‘the visual’. I concealed the problem by using ‘visual’ as an adjective, as in ‘visual interest’, rather than as a noun – ‘the visual’. Much of the controversy that dogs visual culture lies in this use of ‘visual’ as a noun, and the more we think about it the more obscure this everyday word becomes. Evidently ‘the visual’ isn’t intended to be so inclusive as to refer to anything we can see, rather, as my substitute phrase indicates, it refers to visual interest. But we then want to know what counts as interest and whether it is exclusively or only partially visual – whether text, dialogue, music, taste or touch are part of the object of study. And, if they are, how can the visual aspect be singled out for scrutiny?

The visual as a form of power
One of the issues in the on-going attempt to define visual culture lies in the concern over essentialism – the tendency to treat something as ‘purely’ visual (objections to Greenberg’s Modernism often focus on his efforts to isolate optical effects at the expense of all others). Visual culture is an interdisciplinary field of study, a hybrid of art historical practices and cultural studies, so it would seem inconsistent to pick out visual aspects for special attention. However, attention has shifted in recent years from what is seen to how it is seen – from perceived to perceiver, flagged in the critical vocabulary of ‘the gaze’, ‘scopophilia’ and the ‘scopic regime’. These terms are concerned with looking as a form of power succinctly expressed by John Berger in his remark, ‘Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.’ (Berger, 1972, 47) The kind of interest under discussion then is that which expresses relations of power, typically in the areas of gender, race and class. Nicolas Mirzeoff’s widely recognized definition of visual culture establishes the field of study.

Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology, I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the internet. Such criticism takes account of the importance of image making, the formal components of a given image, and the crucial completion of that work by its cultural reception. (Mirzeoff, 1998, 3)
Image or picture?
Berger was one of the first to bring visual culture’s aims to bear on art and one might suppose they would have had a lasting effect there. Certainly the concept of the gaze has proven especially fruitful in studies of Manet and Degas. But there are significant limits on what these terms can yield in the study of art. We get a sense of this from the frequent appearance of certain words in visual culture studies: image, screen, and mirror. For the student of visual culture works of art are images rather than things, which is to say the tangible properties of paint or stone and the procedures they undergo in the making of a work have little to do with relations of power. In spite of the reference to oil painting above, Mirzeoff puts the emphasis on modern technology when he says, ‘Modern life takes place on screen.’ (Mirzeoff, 1999, 1) If the screen erases the physical properties of works of art, it also erases size. Seen on a computer screen one might think paintings by Caspar David Friedrich would be quite large as if to accommodate the sublime effect of the landscape. To see that they are small is recognize the pictorial irony the artist submits us to.

Screen
Visual culture struggles to accommodate these aspects of artworks but it has no such problem with the photographic image in all its forms because the photograph has no surface that provides the basis of the subject. Thus, that aspect of a picture that would over complicate a visual culture interpretation is overlooked. The screen – computer screen, television screen, cinema screen – trades the physicality of a work for the temporality of the moving image. How we think about time in art and culture will be crucial to understanding not only the technology of the screen but also the inert or immobilized subject matter of pictures at large.
Exercise 1.4
What do you understand by the phrase ‘digital art’? List the possible meanings and indicate the one that you consider most viable.

Barthes: visual rhetoric
The homogenizing effect of the screen bears comparison with the early writing of Roland Barthes which established semiotics (a.k.a. semiology) as the principle tool of analysis. Taken to be a science of signs, the aim of semiotics, as demonstrated by Barthes in his Mythologies, was to show that anything could be understood as a sign, thus making the world suddenly seem legible. The old division of word and image could now be unified as types of ‘sign’ – symbolic and iconic respectively. Barthes was a remarkably astute reader of the popular culture of post-war France. For all the dense theory he produced his method evolved around a keen grasp of the difference between literal and rhetorical readings of the same thing. In the late 50s an American photographic exhibition, The Family of Man, was making its way around the world. By their nature photographs have a literal, documentary quality and the themes in the exhibition were Likewise of an everyday kind – work, leisure, family. Barthes seized on the metaphor ‘family of man’ to challenge the myth of unity in the wake of the Second World War, and at the height of the Cold War. In effect, he showed that a figure of speech had been grafted onto a literal image, such as only happens with photography.
Construction
Barthes’ wider aim was to reveal the way visual rhetoric functioned in a bourgeois culture to naturalize and normalize beliefs and thereby maintain the status quo of power. His studies are largely compatible with the aims of visual culture in that they seek to reveal the covert mechanisms of representation as a form of power, but by contrast, he doesn’t set his sights on the marginalized, oppressed or subordinate. Visual culture avowedly does, thereby raising the stakes of its own raison d’être. Its methods rest on the premise that we construct the world through representations. In other words, it is as if the phenomenon of pareidolia applied to the world rather than the details within it. In some ways this will sound bizarre. In an everyday context when we say something is constructed the idea that it was constructed in a conscious and deliberate way is generally assumed. But ‘constructed’ here is an involuntary act and therefore inaccessible to me—something that just goes on whether we know it or like it or not. In some ways the claim sounds true. I have a concept of rain which, I believe, my cat doesn’t. So whilst he is evidently unhappy at getting wet it seems he doesn’t know that it is raining.

Sturken and Cartwright agree with this view when they write, ‘…we construct the world and its meaning through the systems of representation we deploy…the material world only has meaning and only can be ‘seen’ by us, through these systems of representation.’ (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, 12). Sturken and Cartwright clearly take this philosophical idea as the underpinning of a social one, the implication being that the latter is true if it is a consequence of the former. The point is illustrated with a still life painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Claez that, like so many paintings, can be seen as highly realistic and also highly symbolic. There’s nothing surprising about that as any art historian will know. But, in drawing the conclusion that, ‘…this painting produces meaning about these objects rather than reflecting some meaning that is already within them,’ (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, 13) the authors mean to suggest that because we necessarily ‘represent’ the world to ourselves rather than experience it directly we are therefore in a position to change it.
Visual Culture Studies make much of Barthes and other French writers - Foucault and Lacan as well as Derrida and Lyotard. They also combine elements from the writing of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, shaping these sources to the projects of feminism, post colonialism and queer theory. Here then is a crucial distinction: Barthes was an assiduous student of linguistics and he tried consistently to apply rigorous methods of analysis from that discipline to other features of the cultural landscape. By such means his work could be tested, but having such a varied list of theorists available to Visual Culture Studies makes any such testing a non-starter. This, we will recall, was the point Elkins made about the theories that inform art history.

This may sound like a plea for scientific rigour of the kind that says nothing can be true unless it can pass the test of falsifiability. But we have already seen that such a test would render claims in the human sciences void. Thus we legitimize a degree of subjectivity in interpretation if the outcome is persuasive. Isn’t Visual Culture Studies like that? Certainly articles written in the name of visual culture can be very persuasive in themselves, leaving the suspicion that it is merely the elusive coherence of the ‘discipline’ that is problematic. But doesn’t the absence of agreed methods, competencies and general principles serve as quality control in a given quasi-science by recognizing shared judgements even where they conflict?

**Exercise 1.5**
Reflecting on Searle’s observation at the beginning of this chapter, how would you explain the difference between the construction of social reality and the social construction of reality?
Reading and references

References

Further reading
Assignment one

Part A
Look at the painting *The Innocent Eye Test* by Mark Tansey (below). The phrase ‘the innocence of the eye’ was coined by the British critic John Ruskin in 1857: 

*The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify,-as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.*

Consider what Ruskin is saying and give an interpretation of Tansey’s painting in light of this. (1,000 words)

Before addressing the painting consider carefully what Ruskin has to say, and bear in mind he was writing in the Victorian era. Consider what the painting as a whole suggests. Is it making a point or posing a problem?

Part B
What are the implications of saying perspective was invented, and what are the implications of saying it was discovered. Assess these two possibilities and give reasons for the one you believe is correct. (800 words)

Make a list of things you know to be invented and things you know to be discovered. Consider what distinguishes them and where perspective is best placed. Try to be attentive to counterarguments.
Reflection
Revisit the assessment criteria listed at the start of this course guide and carefully consider how well you’ve done against the criteria and make some notes in your learning log.

Reworking your assignment
Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment, especially if you are ultimately submitting your work for formal assessment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you have done, and why, in your learning log.