

SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT

Submitted by

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To

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SUMMARY OF SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT

First, I would like to express my gratitude for being granted a sabbatical leave at El Camino College for the fall semester of 2015. Although I missed my students and colleagues, I realized that the past five months represent one of the most meaningful, exciting and pivotal adventures of my professional career. Reading and researching on a regular daily basis has been rejuvenating for me and has allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my past and future academic life. The sabbatical leave gave me the opportunity to develop plans that will benefit our students and the campus. I believe as an institution of higher learning we should provide more opportunities for our faculty to concentrate and contemplate studies and research relevant to their teaching interests. Nurturing an environment of contemplation and inquiry will increase faculty efficiency, versatility, and productivity. In addition, faculty productivity can strengthen institutional programs, enhance the learning environment and ultimately enhances faculty loyalty to our institution. Moreover, improving the intellectual climate and academic reputation of our institution has benefits to our society at large. In the text that follows, I will report on the sabbatical activities through an assemblage of disparate but connecting research and thematic materials in the field of visual culture. I draw on these materials to illustrate how my sabbatical, study of museum's collections and street arts abroad and ethnographic observations has allowed me to expand the scope of my scholarly and teaching activities. I plan to fine tune my research findings and implementing them the next several years.

PURPOSE OF THE SABBATICAL STUDY

My sabbatical research project afforded me the opportunity to vigorously delve into several topics of inquiry and to utilize the materials in several Art and Visual Culture repositories for the purpose of clarifying the ambiguities and disputed issues concerning “Visual Culture Studies” (VCS). This allowed me to build upon a foundation of experience and knowledge I had already acquired over the past decade through my participation in College Art Association annual conference. In addition, I was able to draw upon my professional and intellectual interaction with my colleagues (Professor and now dean Connie Fitzsimons, Lucy Alamillo, and Karen Whitney) at El Camino Art department. Finally, I consulted with many scholars and friends from different universities from the areas of art, art history and visual culture.

During the past twelve years of my teaching at El Comino College, many important art historical and pedagogical topics related to the topic of Visual Culture have attracted much-needed attention. “Visual Culture emerged at a certain moment of twentieth century as an urgent matter for scholars with a new consideration of the role of visual, of perception, of images, and of the technologies and subjectivities and their relations. Based on the orientation and emphasis this moment has been called different thing by different scholars from post-structuralism, the information age, media society, postindustrial society, postmodernism, post-colonialism, or globalization. What really distinguishes this period from before is a new degree of saturation of social space by visual technologies, and, one must assume, a related shift in their social function and significance.”¹ To understand the fundamental concerns or problems that

contributed to the interpretation of the traditional art history and initiation of new field of study I focused on the question of what is the position of Visual Culture Studies within the existing academic institutional framework. I also examined the relationship between visual culture and art history to see how dependent or independent they are from each other. I sought to understand whether Visual Culture Studies is a complementary practice to art history or is it something more? To deal with above concerns in the course of my research, I first looked into some of the most authoritative and iconic sources and in particular read several different articles written by Nicholas Mirzoeff, James Elkins, and W.J.T. Mitchell.² These three scholars have all been instrumental in the emergence and progression of the Visual Culture Studies (CVS) movement and I have been honor to meet two of them personally. As the result of my preliminary study I realized that in the last three decades art educators (nationally and internationally) have begun to move away from the emphasis on traditional fine arts disciplines toward a broader range of visual arts and cultural issues. Scholarly contributors to the field have argued for a transformation of art education in response to changing conditions in the contemporary world. Many scholars argue “that the institutional control of Art History, nominally administered by the triple alliances of art history disciplinary professionals, art museum professionals, and an affiliated network of connoisseur patrons and collectors, began to fragment after the rise of Pop culture, globalized art production, and art markets.”³ These concerns and problems vary among scholars. The differences in perspectives and approaches to Visual Culture relate to interpretive differences. Some look deeply into politics of

globalization and its impact on our visual perception. “With globalization steadily reshaping the cultural landscape, scholars have long called for a full-scale reassessment of art history's largely Eurocentric framework.”⁴ Thousands of images from around the world defy notions of traditional categories such as low and “high” visual arts. Therefore, their marginal, uncertain, or hybrid status calls into question many of the long standing assumptions about the so-called fine arts and calls attention to those spaces of visual experience that more traditional approaches have tended to ignore. For example, the introduction of photos or films of the beheading of a human being by a member of ISIL right in our living room on national TV which will have a lasting in our collective subconscious should not be treated less than let’s say the creation of Adam by Michelangelo? Nicholas Mirzoeff, a leading figure in the interdisciplinary field of visual cultural studies who examines these types of imageries writes: “Visual culture is a tactic for those who do not control such dominant means of visual production to negotiate the hypervisuality of everyday life in a digitized global culture.”⁵ This quote demonstrates that in effect Visual Culture Studies legitimizes all visual objects as equally worthy of study from newspapers to the Web, from the sciences to the humanities, to advertisements, television, movies, and electronic media.

Another impetus for the examination of the impact of Visual Cultural Studies is its interpretive value in regards to heterogeneity and multiplicity of meaning. William Washabaugh, an advocate for visual multiculturalism, explains: “Visual multiculturalism is the task of exposing the ground on which modern identities are constructed. This racialized and gendered ground is established in

the course of living everyday life under the influence of institutional constraints that simultaneously shapes aesthetic judgements and confirm their importance.”⁶ Thus, Visual Culture Studies also can be understood as a new set of tools with which to analyze images and representational objects that embody identities, social bodies and communities.

Technological innovation (in most cases) is the single most important source of social change. Increasing reliance on new forms of technology to convey meaning is another important factor which affected Visual Culture Studies. The “Visual Turn” as opposed to “Textual Turn” which W.J.T. Mitchell advocates corresponds to the fact that we are living in a world of saturated imagery where “The hegemony of vision (**Ocularcentrism**) has been reinforced in our times by a multitude of technological inventions and the endless multiplication and production of images.”⁷ According to a new report from the International Telecommunication Union and United Nation the number of Internet users has increased from 738 million in 2000 to 3.2 billion in 2015; that is almost 43% of the global population. A great portion of this crowd are getting their information almost exclusively via digital media. From Plato to Descartes to Foucault, many philosophers have contemplated the relationship between what we see and what we know. Visual Culture Studies moves beyond traditional art inquiries and ask why do we know what we know? For example, as Heidegger noted, ‘The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as a picture.’ ‘The philosopher’s speculation has certainly materialized in our age of the fabricated, mass-produced and manipulated image’.”⁸ Visual Culture Studies

as a field critically examines the process of and politics of “looking.”

Overall, as the purposes and production of culture become ever more in debate, art history scholars should consider drawing on the intellectual currents occurring in Visual Culture Studies. Furthermore, VCS respects the dynamic between object and its viewer and it even gravitates towards anthropology, sociology and other disciplines. “It has been suggested that the interdisciplinary project of “Visual Culture” is no longer organized on the model of art history (as were the disciplines of art history, architectural history, film history, etc.) but on the model of anthropology. Hence, it is argued by some that “visual culture” is in an eccentric (even, at times, antagonistic) position with regard to the “new art history” with its social-historical and semiotic imperatives and models of “context” and “text.””⁹

W.J.T Mitchell also indicates that Visual Culture “is certainly not the province of art history. On the contrary, it has emerged primarily because that discipline has largely failed to deal with both the visibility of its objects – due to the dogmatic position of ‘history’ – and the openness of the collection of those objects – due to the established meaning of ‘art’. To take visual culture as art history with a cultural studies perspective (Mirzoeff, 1999: 12) is to condemn it to repeating the same failure.”¹⁰

In addition, as the result of my study I encounter so many vital and theoretically challenging topics which require further study in near future. The following topics are some of the most important theoretical highlights of Visual

Culture Studies that I need to systematically study and will discuss with my colleagues as a part of our professional regular discourse.

- Sight is imbricated in the history of thinking and in terms of building knowledge about the world, sight has been crucial: ‘seeing comes before words’¹¹.
- Visual Culture Studies operate as a practice that critically examines the process of looking.
- “A dialogic interplay of high and low cultural forms, cross-media interventions”¹²
- The visual has been appropriated as the mode of analysis for the information age.
- Ideas of voyeurism, surveillance, and the gaze are vital components of Visual Culture Studies.
- Visual Culture Studies is an “interdisciplinary study consists of creating a new object that belongs to no-one.”¹³
- “modern life takes place on screen”¹⁴
- “The ‘Visual Culture’ approach acknowledges the reality of living in a world of *cross-mediation*.”¹⁵
- “Expansion of global communications in the 1990s brought forth questions of personal, political, cultural, and national identity and inspired postcolonial artists to explore issues of contested identity and the identity struggle of postcolonial peoples.” In his definition of Visual Culture Mirzoeff offers tactics to “negotiate the hypervisuality of everyday life in a digitized global culture.”¹⁶

HOW THE SABBATICAL BENEFITTED FACULTY MEMBER AND STUDENTS?
&
HOW THE SABBATICAL INCREASED FACULTY MEMBER'S PROFICIENCY?

As the result of my studies during my sabbatical leave I managed to clarify some of the most important theoretical and practical aspects of Visual Culture for myself and learned about its place in academy. Although, I had a strong tendency to view this new discipline from its inception, I could not apply any of its theoretical guidelines with confidence or certainty to my practice of teaching. The benefits of this study to me and my students are incalculable and long lasting. I can now implement what I learned with certainty in my Art 101 classes and support my lectures and instruction with an abundance of references to scholarly documents. However, I intend to continue this endeavor and keep up with important trends and to update my own lesson plans for Art 101. In addition, I will revise the course outline when needed.

Visual culture is inherently interdisciplinary and many aspects of it should be thought of as crossing histories of cultures and technologies. Therefore, art historians who have been trained with traditional tools of art history with strong Eurocentric affinity should seek out new paradigms and cultural approaches. I feel strongly that in order to sustain academic legitimacy, my use and application of visual culture in my classes should be accompanied by a study of visual theories. The trans-institutional and cross-media aspects of visual culture make it a large site for contested views of identity, power, and control. For example James Elkin argues that “Non-Western cultures are drastically understudied even within art history, where they remain a minority interest. An expanded visual studies needs to approach this problem differently.”¹⁷ Therefore since our Art 101 is both global

and thematic and does not exclusively depend on fine arts discourse a new language and approach is necessary to teach this course. Ideally, it should involve discourses on all the visual arts, such as media studies, design education, cultural critique, and visual anthropology and not only art history. Importantly, my sabbatical leave allowed me to expand my theoretical understandings but it also gave me a great opportunity to collect materials and resources which I need to pursue these tasks.

I utilized my new awareness of theories and methods in the Art 102 C course as well. I look forward to developing specific curriculum and lesson plans that take into account the aforementioned related and relevant materials. I made some changes to both my curriculum and lesson plans for this current semester and looking forward to implementing more changes in the near future that take into consideration the fact that digital technology has revolutionized the way we produce and experience art today. Not only have traditional forms of art been transformed by digital techniques and media, but entirely new forms such as digital installation, net art, software art, and virtual reality have emerged as recognized artistic practices, collected by major institutions, museums, and private collectors around the world. To make a good and effective use of technology and to compensate for what our textbook lacks I managed to collect scholarly visual culture supplemental materials for both Art 101 and Art 102 C (articles, videos, documentaries, images, primarily documents, etc.,) which are available on line by some of the most authoritative institutions of learning (Such as: The Getty Research Institute, British Museum, Metropolitan Museum, Khan

Academy, Columbia University, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Web Gallery of Art, Art Project by Google, Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, Smart Art History, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Internet Archive, etc.). I will use them with my students via *MyECC –Team Site*. I have been sharing some of my new assignments and ideas for Art 101 with my full time and part time colleagues and later on toward the end of the semester I am planning to interact with my colleagues and share my findings and collection of images and other materials.

In addition, I study and photographed over one thousand pictures relevant to Art and Popular Culture which are suitable for use in our Art 101 classes and, in addition, I photographed key iconic imagery for our survey courses. Most of these pictures belong to public domain in several different metropolises here in America and other countries. (I should mention that I invested my own free time and money to fulfil this task.) I am the author of these pictures and there is no copy right attached to any of it. I also participated in an educational tour of “street” and “underground” art, which are important components of visual culture in our time.

To complement my primary and secondary research, I carefully studied curriculum of different Art History and Visual Culture departments as it pertains to Art 101. I did this in order to have a better understanding of the dominant trends across America and to be aware of new and relevant changes that are being applied in visual culture courses both theoretically and pedagogically. The passionate and responsible scholars of visual culture studies have been advocating for a more inclusive, fair, and effective courses regarding, gender, race, and

ethnicity to respond to diverse group of students which we encounter in a daily basis in our classrooms. This is an equity-minded approach which will not alienate any of our students. “University education is meant to enable students to think, not to give them answers. They need to learn to argue well, through working on what you like and what you think is relevant, ethically significant, and able to help them, as young people living in the early twenty-first century, think seriously about the role of visual representation.”¹⁸ Currently a great number of colleges and universities in North America both at graduate and undergraduate level either having or developing programs in visual culture studies and most of them apply an interdisciplinary approach to visual aesthetic. They include: University of Chicago, Brown University, University of California, Irvine, Columbia University, University of California, Santa Cruz, University of Southern California, Duke University, University of Wisconsin, Madison, University of California, San Diego, State University of New York, Buffalo, University of Rochester, New York University, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and many more. Also a great number of colleges and universities changed the name of their respective departments from Art History (AH) to Art History and Visual Culture (AHVC) and I am very convinced that we should do the same and therefore I have been advocating for this change to take place in our department since my return from sabbatical leave. Furthermore, as the result of my study I think our Art 101 which is a visual culture course with some necessary modification has the potential to be offered as a great informative and core class to bridge our students to outside world locally and globally. James Elkin in his preface to Visual Literacy indicates

that “the central premise is that theorizing on images, which currently take place mainly in graduate studies in the humanities and in cognitive science, needs to move downward, toward first-year education, where it can begin to directly intervene in the ordinary education of everyday college students.”¹⁹

As a department in the last several years we have been trying to identify a textbook for Art 101 that is more relevant to our course outline and that addresses the most important issues in thinking about visual form and interdisciplinary perspective. The book we are currently using is *Exploring Art: A Global and Thematic Approach* by: M Lazzari and Dona Schlesier. To find a solution to this problem I paid close attention to many syllabi and textbooks which were being used by universities that have played a pioneering role on launching and expanding visual culture programs. After careful research and review of this matter among several different textbooks, I selected one book (*Practice of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*; by Marita sturken and Lis Cartwright, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press) which has been written from visual culture and not art appreciation perspective. I plan to carefully study and even implement certain parts of it during this ongoing semester to see how it works. I think this textbook approaches visual culture from a non-traditional perspective and deals with subject matters that are relevant to our time. Furthermore, I believe that this book covers a great portion of the materials that we teach in our course and is intelligently written. The authors convey respect for the intelligence of their readers. By the end of this semester I will do an assessment of its effectiveness and develop recommendations for its use. I will

call for a meeting and propose to my department that we adopt this textbook.

Aside from collecting and reading a good number of the most current books, articles, and other related materials on the subject of my inquiry I also highlighted some of the most important books on the topic of Visual Culture to be used by my colleagues or anyone else who wants to research this topic. (See the attachment).

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At the end of the sabbatical, I returned to my teaching job revitalized, refreshed and ready to take new responsibilities to enhance and strengthen teaching and learning in my department. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the sabbatical committee, the vice president of academic affairs, the board of trustees, and to my dear colleagues in my department who had to take more responsibilities in my absence.

Endnotes:

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