

Patricia Johnston, ed. *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24188-6; ISBN-10: 0-520-24288-6

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In the most recent volume of *American Art*, editor Cynthia Mills reports that in assessing the state of the field of American art history, there are many reasons to celebrate. Citing evidence of growing academic programs, fellowship opportunities, and expanding publication venues, the study of American art is, in her words, “flourishing.”¹ But after reading *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, edited by Patricia Johnston, I am not so sure. To be clear, the collection is marvelous, pulling together smart, insightful essays that compliment each other. In many respects this book can be taken as further evidence of Mills’s point about the healthy state of American art history. Yet, that is just the problem; this collection sets out *not* to be an American art history text, but instead wants, as the title suggests, to be a *visual culture* book. About this I was left wondering: If it looks like art history and reads like art history, is it art history? Or, when did we all become visual culture scholars?

In her introduction Johnston writes that the collection seeks to “tackle how social tensions have been represented in both ‘high’ and ‘low’ media (1).” The problem, she argues, is “that too often studies of the high and studies of the low each set up the other as an absent straw man by which to define themselves. Instead we need to see the high and low as interlocking discourses (19).” Johnston looks to dismantle this binary of high and low so as to consider how they partner in the visual arena in creating “social values (3).” To this end the collection offers fifteen essays, case studies arranged chronologically that address a diverse array of objects from the fine arts, material culture, popular culture, and architecture.

One of the collection’s best features is Johnston’s very broad definitions of “high” and “low,” which allow her contributors latitude to interrogate and manipulate the terms even further. For example, Katharine Martinez’s essay “At Home with Mona Lisa: Consumers and Commercial Visual Culture, 1880-1920” examines the rise of the commercial photographic industry. This new technology allowed for the easy reproduction of canonical works of art and many reformers hoped to use these images to educate the working classes in aesthetics and taste. These efforts were met with mixed results by reformers’ interpretations; one was “aghast” that an image of the Mona Lisa was hung next to a picture of President Roosevelt and a picture from a calendar (167). Martinez nicely balances multiple layers of “high” and “low,” analyzing both the kinds of imagery this new technology allowed and the ways in which taste and class are embedded in the act of looking.

In “Handicraft, Native American Art, and Modern Indian Identity,” Elizabeth Hutchinson uses the “high” and “low” to highlight the myriad traps of racist ideology that Native American leaders, artists, and activists had to negotiate. Caught between notions of primitivism, modernism, and the desire to preserve their culture, some leaders struggled to translate a popular affection for Native American art objects into some kind of activated political policy while others argued that to tie artistic talent to racial identity was a dead-end. As said by Horton Elm, a moderate in the debate, “We as a race cannot all be artists (204).” Hutchinson poignantly argues the powers of the terms “high” and “low” in sustaining racial privilege, and this essay, along with others by Melissa Dabakis, Patricia Hills, and Patricia M. Burnham, foregrounds issues of race throughout the collection.

There are also several essays that reposition familiar artists and works of art. Patricia Johnston’s essay contribution places Samuel F.B. Morse’s canonical *Gallery of the Louvre* in relation to the comedic engravings of David Claypoole Johnston, ideas about democracy, and anti-Catholic sentiment in ways that made me look at the painting with fresh eyes. I likewise appreciated

Donna M. Cassidy's essay on Marsden Hartley. Cassidy argues that scholars of Hartley have been too focused on sexuality and spirituality when considering his images of North Atlantic Folk, but after reading her piece, it will be hard to look at Hartley's images without considering racial dialogues of the 1930s. Finally, Regina Lee Blaszczyk's essay on Georgia O'Keeffe and her relationship with the Cheney Brothers Silk Manufacturing Company is well-written and illuminating in regard to the relationship between capitalism and modernism.

In short, this is a wonderful collection that engages well the complexity of "high" and "low," and supports Johnston's call for a reassessment of the common binary. So why do I still feel so uneasy? so methodologically adrift? In her introduction, Johnston argues that the essays are "models of visual culture studies," in that they "are concerned deeply with central issues in American history" and "take up the challenge of analyzing and interpreting modes of visual representation (2)." She identifies her primary concern as mapping out "a critical history of images," while later reminding the reader that she "still insist[s] on analysis through a historical lens (3, 4)." Wait, isn't that what art historians do?

In fact, this is a highly selective model of visual culture studies, and one that ignores many of the primary divisions between art history and visual culture studies. Mieke Bal, for example, argues that art historians have failed to "deal with both the visibility of [...] objects—due to the dogmatic position of 'history'—and the openness of the collection of those objects—due to the established meaning of 'art.'"² Art historians are in this light *too* focused on the authority of history, the authority of the artist, and even the authority of the object. Others critique art history's methodological relationship to audience. How viewers use images, often counter to the very stated purpose and intent of the artist, against the grain of the object, or in tension with museum or gallery curators, is at the core of what visual culture studies looks to add to conversations about visual images.

In the context of these arguments about visual culture, Johnston's collection is not a model of visual culture studies but more in line with art history (albeit a contemporary and inclusive art history that asks critical questions and is responsive to changes in the field). Add to this the time period it covers, the late eighteenth century to the 1950s, and the book looks even more like a traditional American art history collection. And so what? In reading this collection what is in evidence is how much art history still has to contribute to the dialogue about images. The combination of close visual readings paired with historical context still has power; these essays prove that point.

A final example might be helpful. The collection ends with Alan Wallach's magnificent essay about the Norman Rockwell Museum. Wallach discusses not only the building itself and the curatorial decisions made, but also Rockwell's work more broadly. He gently jabs at art historians who have gone soft on Rockwell and who have failed to give weight to his nostalgic and conservative appeal. In considering the essay from a visual culture studies perspective, however, some issues remain unresolved. Wallach gives the architect, the patrons of the museum, and the curators primary roles in defining the space, but there is no evidence of how a museum visitor might subvert those intentions and create her or his own meanings in that space. Likewise, he assumes that only certain narratives can be culled from Rockwell's images and does not provide the space for considering how the images, independent of the historical moment they were created in, might have inherited other meanings which are more important to considering the museum in 2007. And yet I like the questions that Wallach *does* ask and find particular depth in his historically anchored analysis of Rockwell's works. I am not sure this is a satisfying visual culture studies essay, but it is a great American art history one. This brings me back to Mills's optimism about the state of the field. I think art history is stronger for the emergence of visual culture studies and I am certainly not advocating rigid disciplinary boundaries. But are we perhaps trying too hard to fit in with a visual culture model? There is great currency in visual culture studies to be sure, but I think in spite of itself this collection proves there is value and intellectual vigor in American art history yet.

¹ Cynthia Mills, "Emerging Themes, Emerging Voices," *American Art* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 2.

² Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture" *Journal of Visual Culture* 2 (April 2003): 5.