

Interview with James Elkins

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Carlo A. Célius, Sophie Raux, Riccardo Venturi et James Elkins

Interview with James Elkins

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Interview with James Elkins

Traduction de Géraldine Bretault, Deke Dusinberre et Olga Grlic

1 *James Elkins should need no introduction, for he is one of the most prolific and influential art historians of the past twenty years. Yet he is certainly not as familiar to French readers as his international popularity would suggest. A professor at the Art Institute of Chicago since 1989, Elkins has written or edited twenty-five books and more than 120 articles and essays. Several books have been translated into Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Korean and Czech, while anthologies of his writing already or will soon exist in German, Russian, Spanish, and Estonian. Nothing of the sort, however, is available to the French-speaking public.*

2 *Born in Ithaca, New York, in 1955, Elkins studied art history at Cornell University. He then earned a fine art degree at the University of Chicago, where he later completed a PhD in art history with a dissertation on Perspective in Renaissance Art and in Modern Scholarship. His centers of interest have constantly expanded and evolved since that time, testifying to his insatiable curiosity about every aspect of the visual world. His major fields of research range from the historiography of art history to the theory of images*[1]

3 *His research, informed by an original critical perspective that willingly crosses the boundaries between fields, has always been on the cutting edge of the new art history. Although a great promoter of visual studies, Elkins has never disguised his "skepticism" with regard to the difficult task of developing a visual science that places equal interest in a painting by Rembrandt and a microscopic image of paramecia.*[2] *His deconstruction of the canons of academic art history has extended in two directions. The first concerns debate over the development of the field in a global context: how can a global art history be conceptualized and written today without falling into ethnocentrism?*[3] *The second addresses what Elkins considers to be a major untheorized dimension of art history: writing. Art-historical writing merits a self-reflexive examination of its practices because it can never be a neutral vehicle of ideas, and because its forms are conditioned by well-defined academic and professional expectations. Elkins's forthcoming publications on this issue (*What Is Interesting Writing in Art History? *and* Writing with Images*) seek to break with academic formalism, ivory-tower isolation, and sacrosanct scholarly "authorship." He now develops his manuscripts in real time on the internet ("live writing") and invites interactive contributions from readers.*

4 *This year, at the height of his fame, the ever-surprising Elkins announced on social media that he would cease publishing in the fields of art history, visual studies, and the theory of art in order to devote himself to other intellectual projects. Between now and 2020 he will be preparing* A Journey*, a work of fiction that will represent the culmination of his experimental exploration of the ways that texts emerge in the face of images.* [Sophie Raux]

***

Carlo A. Célius. ***Statistical documents, textual analysis, various discussions, consideration of the academic world... everything allows you to draw a firm conclusion: the history of art is and remains a Western-centric discourse. Furthermore, you do not seem to perceive any possibility of transcending this within the framework of a global art history, especially since you do not see the potential approaches alternative (postcolonial theory, theories of the image, studies of visual culture, etc.) as offering satisfactory points of view. The type of history that needs to be written – apparent from the number of publications devoted to the subject – seems to be primarily that of an "art" that has reached the "global age," coinciding with what we call "contemporary art" in its various forms. Upon closer examination, however, these creations pertain to a specific system. We find ourselves in an extension of the fine-arts model (even as it is undergoing transformation); that is to say, a type of organization, of institutionalization of the visual arts – among others – of a specific form of creation, established in the sixteenth century and disseminated outside Europe, which has enjoyed a long-lasting hegemony. The history of art is a discourse generated by this model, to which it remains strongly attached. Its Western-centrism is therefore not at all surprising. It is possible that "global art" is simply the last phase of the maximal expansion of a model, or scholarly field (which is perpetuated through transformation), and history that we wish to see***

as global: that is, a search for an appropriate accompanying discourse. Now, isn't the challenge – revealed by the anthropology of images and visual studies – to achieve a conceptualization of the visual arts (the focus of image production, among others, in a given society) in their various forms of organization, of crystallization, in time and space?

James Elkins. Thank you for the question. It is a pleasure to "meet" you, even if it is only in this digital forum. I hope we have the opportunity to talk face to face sometime soon.

I agree it is not surprising that the discourse of global art is "Western." I agree, too, with Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, who emphasizes that the twentieth century was not the first moment of global art – he points, for example, to Spanish expansion during the Renaissance. And I agree with Susan Buck-Morss that Haiti, for example, needs to be seen in a much more complex and global interaction not only with slavery, but with the history of German philosophy.[4]

For me there is a difference between global art and the writing that describes global art. Global art sometimes resists capitalism, but, as we know, much contemporary art does not offer a political critique. Global art has evolved quickly in the last ten years into a complex series of practices that refer to what is local, glocal, provincial, regional, and national in many ways. The "Westerness" of the entire contemporary art world may not be in doubt, but there are many ongoing "forms of organization," as you say.

Writing on global art is, I think, partly distinct from these issues. In the last generation, the different ways of writing the history of art worldwide have shrunk. Writing has become more uniform. Serious scholarly writing on art history, in particular, has developed a certain style, certain protocols, rules, and habits that have made it quite uniform. It is not possible for a young scholar from China, for example, to be offered a teaching position in a university in Western Europe or North America unless that scholar practices this kind of writing.

And yet the difference between global art and writing on global art remains largely invisible. The wonderful art historian Piotr Piotrowski, who died in spring 2015, once wrote on "horizontal art history": he was interested in ways of writing art history that could do justice to marginal or belated traditions. It is an excellent analysis, which I use in my own work; but Piotrowski does not notice that the book *Art Since 1900*, which he critiques, is written in a certain style, with rules of argument, sanctioned theorists, customary methodologies, and expected narratives: he only says in passing that the book is written very well.[5] *Art Since 1900* is a good example of the currently acceptable style of writing about art: it exhibits the mixture of *October*, French poststructuralism, and Frankfurt School theory that have become the standard way to narrate the history, theory, and criticism of art. What Piotrowski wants is different valuations of art, different subjects to write about, but not different ways of writing. This is what concerns me. There is a creeping uniformity in the ways art history is written, even while there is a tremendous expansion in the *subjects* of art and art history.

I am writing from Schiphol airport near Amsterdam (one of my homes away from home). Just before I opened this correspondence, I emailed the editor of Singapore University Press to offer him my book *The Impending Single History of Art: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives.* That book will have all my thoughts on this topic, which I think is the most important one facing the next generation of writers on art. I hope to publish it with Singapore University Press as a gesture against the increasing homogeneity of art writing printed by Western European and North American university presses.

Sophie Raux. ***In your seminal book,* Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction *(2003)[6], you already looked critically at the practice of visual studies, too often centered on "high art" and contemporary images and media. You called for the development of a more theoretically and epistemologically ambitious project, one that would expand the questioning to historic images or non-artistic, and non-Western images in order to lead to the development of a field open to more comprehensive approaches to the image and the visual. You are currently publishing the texts of the international workshop you led in 2011 at the Stone Summer Theory Institute at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, under the title* Farewell to Visual Studies.*[7] How are we to understand this "farewell" to visual studies? Is this a confession of your renunciation of a project that failed to develop conceptual frameworks and theoretical tools necessary to its ambitious scope? Or, is it rather a farewell to a certain narrow understanding of visual studies? In other words, is this a new call to continue the critical effort you have been engaged in for over ten years against a certain***

routinization of visual studies that does not seek to extend its arguments (or not enough) to all visual artifacts and confront the real theoretical and epistemological challenges facing it?

James Elkins. Sophie, it's lovely to meet you in this forum! (There is something appropriate about a digital forum in this age of endless traveling. Even though I travel a lot – seventy-five countries so far – I have still relatively few French scholars as friends. This is, for me, a fascinating anomaly.)

Farewell to Visual Studies is a large-scale effort: over forty scholars are in the book, from perhaps twenty countries. I co-edited it with Sunil Manghani, a wonderful reader of Roland Barthes, and Gustav Frank, whose area of expertise is German literature.[8] We wanted the book to be an opportunity for visual studies to consider its position in the second decade of the twenty-first century. We find that visual studies, visual culture, the Swedish-language *Bildvetenskap*, and the German-language *Bildwissenschaft* lack disciplinary self-criticism and are often self-congratulatory. There is a kind of euphoria about the visual, because these fields have discovered the world beyond fine art, and they are thinking about visuality and politics in ways that art history still does not. My co-editors and I wanted to produce a book that gathers criticisms of visual studies, so that fields like visual studies can become more self-reflective.

I will give two examples. First, we wanted to introduce Anglophone readers to the German-language literature. *Bildwissenschaft* produces an enormous number of books and essays, most of which are unread in the United Kingdom and North America. *Bildwissenschaft* has different concerns, and a different style, than writing in other countries, and non-German visual studies can only become more complex by including it. I think the field of visual studies has four or five "flavors" worldwide – there is also a Chinese visual studies, which is entirely different from European and American kinds of visual studies – and we hope our book will make visual studies more complex.

Second, we hope to introduce different histories of visual studies. As a discipline, visual studies is "presentist": it looks disproportionately at contemporary art, and it tends to ignore pre-modern art. This "presentism" has been critiqued, for example, by Keith Moxey and Michael Ann Holly, both of whom are in our book *Farewell to Visual Studies*. This "presentism" is accompanied by another, which I think may be even more important: visual studies traces its own history only to the late 1980s (the first PhD program) or, before that, to English cultural studies in the 1960s. But if we pay more attention to national varieties of writing, the history of visual studies changes. Our book also looks at writers like Béla Balázs, and we suggest new ways to think about the history of visual studies that begins before the Second World War.

And in answer to your last question: I wish *Farewell to Visual Studies* were about extending visual studies "to all visual artifacts." I would love it if visual studies looked more at science and other non-art images. But sadly, that remains my own interest, and so I did not promote it in the book.

As I think you know, I am writing my last two art-historical texts this year. (This is explained on my website. I'm surprised you haven't asked me about that: this year it's what most people want to talk about.) One of the two books I am writing is *The Impending Single History of Art*. The other is a large textbook called *Visual Worlds*, which I am co-authoring with Erna Fiorentini, who works at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin. That book is an introduction to the entire visual world, in all fields, for beginning university students. It is my opportunity to experiment with images of all kinds and not focus on fine art. But it is not a book of visual studies: it's impossible, I think, to do justice to non-popular, technical, scientific images in the frameworks of visual studies or even *Bildwissenschaft.* In that sense *Visual Worlds* really is a "farewell to visual studies."

Sophie Raux. ***Today the field of visual studies can boast of thirty years of existence within the international academic landscape, and historiographical surveys are beginning to appear. In your introduction to the collective volume*** **Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through The Discipline**[9]***, you draw up a map of the most active centers in the field, citing the English and North American space, Latin America, Scandinavia and the Germanic world, and China and Taiwan. While French Theory helped nurture many approaches to visual studies, how do you explain the fading of France in the current panorama of international research? Is it a problem of visibility that could be due, for example, to the lack of institutionalization of visual studies in our country, or a language problem***

– the French publishing so little in English? Or do you consider that French research has remained too impervious to the "in"discipline of visual studies so that its contribution still remains marginal today?

James Elkins. What a wonderful, complex question. I wish I could answer it adequately in this forum! Let me offer instead a couple of *aperçus*. (I borrow that word from Georges Didi-Huberman, who gave a wonderful lecture on the *aperçu* subject in Prague in May 2015.)

The voice of France can never be missing simply because it is central. I would probably not have said "fading," because for me, the French poststructuralist model is crucial to the possibility of visual studies. I refer not only to Foucauldian analysis of politics and institutions, but to Roland Barthes's ideas about the power of the image and Gilles Deleuze's ideas about cultural difference and identity, which have led on to any number of writers, from Hélène Cixous to Catherine Malabou and François Laruelle. These aren't, technically speaking, visual studies authors: but visual studies requires them.

On the other hand, there is the ongoing question of the relation between visual theory and the practice of visual studies. I am developing a distinction between texts read *as* art history, and those read *for* art history. Every visual studies student reads poststructuralist analysis, perhaps beginning with Michel Foucault's. Those authors are indispensable for the discipline's sense of itself. But they are of use for visual studies, not as examples of visual studies. The French texts have a fascinating undecidable location, at once in and for visual studies.

Instead of "fading," I would perhaps say "waiting." I was in Zurich in May for a conference on the practice-led PhD Swiss academies would like to award without relying on universities. We talked about how this sort of PhD has existed in the United Kingdom since the 1970s, and I mentioned that they have also existed in Japan for that long (over twenty "art universities" confer the PhD in Japan). Several people in Zurich worried that German-speaking countries are late to the conversation on the PhD. For me, that belatedness is a virtue. It permits them to think about all the things that have been written and thought on the PhD in the last forty years and develop new models. I am not sure they will! But belatedness, as Dipesh Chakrabarty once said, is opportunity. The situation in French scholarship is similar: visual studies has arrived at an interesting moment in its development, and a new intervention would be very welcome.

The issue of language and publishing is also crucial here, as you say. In *The Impending Single History of Art*, I spend a chapter analyzing the language competencies of art historians. Because English is currently the lingua franca of art history (it's a wonderfully apposite expression, "lingua franca"!), it matters exactly how English is used, how it is expected, how it is judged. I make a distinction between competence in speaking English, in reading English, and in writing English. It is common to have speaking competence in English. Competence in speaking and listening helps people attend international conferences, and hear and answer questions posed in English. Next is competence in reading English. This is more problematic. Most French scholars read English, just as most Anglophone scholars read French, German, Italian, and other European languages. But this skill is problematic because there is a difference between reading adequately and reading fluently. To take an example from German: for five years I was on the annual review panel for Eikones, the research center in Basel. Each year we read as much of their literature as possible, and as a result I have read almost twenty volumes of Eikones conferences and monographs. English and French sources are always in the footnotes, but it is an open question how extensively some Eikones contributors engage English and French texts. It is a sensitive and unquantifiable phenomenon, but it matters because as the scholarship grows, it can develop a tradition or custom of citing books without really entering into serious dialogue with them. "Reading adequately" can mean pursuing a kind of conversation with a scholar that is really not profound.

The third of these skills, writing English, is the most important and also the most sensitive. (Sorry, my little *aperçu* seems to be growing into a dissertation.) I know a number of scholars who speak French as native speakers. They have excellent conversational and reading skills in English; their skill in writing English can also be very high – but not quite good enough to submit essays to English-language journals, or send manuscript proposals to English-language university presses. For scholars who have not experienced this, it may sound trivial; after all,

it's always possible to hire an editor. But it is a real-life obstacle, and it produces measurable effects on entire communities of scholars.

Riccardo Venturi. ***My first question concerns the role of painting within the realm of images, or the place of painting in image theory as it is conceived in art history and visual studies. Is painting our model for images in general? This is an old question (in France tackled for instance by Hubert Damisch and Yve-Alain Bois), recently discussed in one of the conversations you hosted at the Stone Art Theory Institute[10]. Is painting our visual model? Can we assess the specificity of painting without embracing a modernist position about its medium specificity?***

James Elkins. I have always loved this question. I love the ways it is asked. It is asked polemically: people say, why should I pay attention to painting? Can't we finally just leave it behind? It is asked nostalgically: people say, de-skilling has meant that painting is largely lost. It is asked historically: people say, since the advent of multimedia and the post-medium condition, painting can no longer be a model. It is asked in the spirit of Nietzschean recurrence: Thierry de Duve has remarked that painting dies and is resurrected every five years. It is asked in a revisionist spirit: Richard Schiff has recently blamed criticism for the state of painting.[11] I wonder if this wide range of questions means that a good approach to the question of painting as model is not historiographic or theoretical, but affective. I will come back to this in a moment.

As you mention, the question came up in the Stone Art Theory Institute book *What Is an Image?*. It was prompted by the strange fact that we had talked for several days about the nature of images, but we had not agreed whether or not paintings were an optimal example. Our seminar consisted of thirty people talking in a closed seminar from nine in the morning to six in the evening, for three or four days: a very wide range of scholars from several fields and a number of countries... and yet we seemed entirely undecided about what an optimal example of "an image" might be.

So, I raised the question: is painting our model? Or perhaps our exemplar? Is it crucial for our understanding of what an image is? Or is it simply the easiest, closest example, without any special ontological or epistemological relation to our subject? For Jacqueline Lichtenstein, for example, painting is indispensable and central, but with an important caveat: she does not think art history in general pays enough attention to paintings. Rather, she says art historians tend to abstract away the painterly and material qualities of paintings, and treat them as pictures. For W. J. T. Mitchell, who was also present at our discussions, paintings have no special position as models, except what they have been given by the ideology of art history and criticism. For Gottfried Boehm, painting, and especially, perhaps, mid-century abstract painting, has a deeply privileged and central place in the imagining of what an image, and a picture (or *Bild*), can be and how it can create meaning. For Marie-José Mondzain, painting is crucial as a model not just for the "image" which is itself a contested term, but for representation, fidelity, incarnation, and other fundamental concepts of Judeo-Christian thinking.

The conversation was fascinating and unresolved. It was one of my favorite moments in *What Is an Image?*. It would be possible to say the irresolution was due to the different discourses that were represented in our seminar. For some people, the question was ontological (I would count Gottfried Boehm in this category). For others, it was ideological (W. J. T. Mitchell). For still others, it was historical and disciplinary (Jacqueline Lichtenstein). And for still others, theological (Marie-José Mondzain). To these you could add semiotic and structural (Yve-Alain Bois) and even phenomenological and psychoanalytic (Hubert Damisch).[12]

But to return to my initial observation: there are so many ways of asking this question, and so many disciplines are brought to bear on it, that it may make sense to consider it not as an ordinary question, the kind that can be answered by the application of a philosophic discourse, but as an anomalous question, one that requires a different kind of answer. The question: "Is painting a model for the image?" might be like one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's questions that involve certainty, like "Do I have two hands?" In other words, it may not be a question that can be sensibly posed within the philosophic language that it seems to draw upon.

That is why I suggested it might be a question about affect, about desire. The questions such as "Why do we need them to be models?" or "Why do we need paintings not to be models?" might lead to a deeper question "What do we want paintings to be?"

Riccardo Venturi. ***I am particularly interested in the role of moving images in image theory. In* What is an Image? *– one of the most exhaustive treatments of the question, which gives voice to scholars from the United States and Europe – not many of the speakers frontally address images in the context of moving images. This is odd, since there is no doubt that cinema – the "eye of the century" (Francesco Casetti)[13] – represents the genuine visual revolution of twentieth century. Can art history efficiently address moving images? Is the circulation of the gaze, the collective experience of moving images, or the audience a major impediment to a more comprehensive consideration?***

James Elkins. You are exactly right, the many participants in *What Is an Image?* were almost all content to speak of the still image as an example – and therefore, by implication, a model – of the image in general. The same is also true of the participants in the forthcoming book *Farewell to Visual Studies*, with an important series of exceptions: our Germanists, led by Gustav Frank, were interested in re-introducing the study of film into visual studies from a new perspective.

Anglo-American visual studies has always studied film, beginning with Douglas Crimp's spectacular critical essay "Getting the Warhol We Deserve," a polemic against Rosalind Krauss's misunderstandings of visual studies.[14] And yet Anglo-American visual studies have never taken film as its central example of a fine art: that place has been taken by photography. The reason is that many universities in North America and the United Kingdom have long had Film Studies or Media Studies Departments; those departments predated the appearance of visual studies as a field. Photography, on the other hand, was just emerging as a widely accepted fine art when visual studies was getting underway in the 1980s, and so it was easier to adopt into the new discipline. As a result, Deleuze's books on film are read in visual studies, but not as central texts. By comparison, Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Vilém Flusser are widely cited.

In the event *Farewell to Visual Studies*, Frank and I, along with Lisa Cartwright, were interested in exploring an alternative history to the field including figures like Balázs and Hugo Münsterberg. For Cartwright that history leads up to laboratory studies; for Frank and myself it points to another, earlier, German- and English-language theorization of film that was adopted by what Frank calls "visual studies version 1" – that is, German writing before the Second World War.

This is how I would explain the slight, but measurable, distance between visual studies and the moving image. There are many counter-examples, but I think this explanation is helpful. The case of art history is different: it still continues to privilege painting, sculpture, and architecture in art before 1960 (this is documented, for example, in the book *Partisan Canons*[15]). The moving image becomes central in the study of performance, time art, and other inventions of conceptualism, but that theorization involves phenomenology, theater, and performativity, and it takes its theoretical cues from Henri Bergson, J. L. Austin, and performance theory, and not so much from film theory or Deleuze. So it is not surprising that the scholars in the event *What Is an Image?*, who were mainly art historians, were satisfied with references to still images, photography, painting, and documentation.

This raises a fascinating possibility. I attended a conference in spring 2015 in Copenhagen called *What Is an Image?*, and the organizer, Bent Fausing, joked with me that we should have a third conference with the same title in another five years. If such a thing were to be done, would it be conceivable to found the conference on the moving image – to begin with it, instead of using it as a secondary example? I leave this to you.

Notes

1 James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, Cambridge/New York, 1998; *The Domain of Images*, Ithaca, 1999; *Master Narratives and Their Discontents*, Londres, 2005; *What Photography Is*, New York, 2012; *Six Stories from the End of Representation: Images in Painting, Photography, Astronomy, Microscopy, Particle Physics, and Quantum Mechanics, 1980-2000*, Stanford, 2008.

2 James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*, New York, 2003; James Elkins et al. eds., *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline*, New York, 2012; James Elkins, Sunil

Manghani, Gustav Frank eds., *Farewell to Visual Studies*, (*Stone Art Theory Seminars*, 5), University Park, 2015.

3 James Elkins, *Stories of Art*, New York, 2002; *Chinese Landscape Paintings as Western History*, Hong Kong/Londres, 2010; *Is Art History Global*?, New York/Londres, 2006; James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, Alice Kim eds., *Art and Globalization*, (*The Stone Art Theory Seminars*, 1), University Park, 2010.

4 For Thomas Kaufmann's thinking on premodern globalisms, see Elkins, Valiavicharska, Kim, 2010, cited n. 3; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham, 2015, with an Introduction by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, p. 1-22. For Susan Buck-Morss on Haiti, see her contributions to *Art and Globalization*, cited above and also her book *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Pittsburgh, 2009.

5 Piotr Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History," in *Umeni/Art*, 5, 2008, p. 379; Hal Foster, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, New York, 2004.

6 Elkins, 2003, cited n. 2.

7 Elkins, Manghani, Frank, 2015, cited n. 2.

8 Elkins, Manghani, Frank, 2015, cited n. 2; these issues are also discussed in Elkins et al., 2012, cited n. 2.

9 Elkins et al., 2012, cited n. 2.

10 James Elkins, Maja Naef eds., *What Is an Image?*, (*Stone art theory institutes*, 2),University Park, 2011, p. 79-89.

11 See www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/reviews/exhibitions/156620 (viewed on September 26, 2015).

12 Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, 1990. The very entertaining debate with Jacqueline Lichtenstein is in Elkins, Naef, 2011, cited. n. 8. See also Anna Brzyski ed., *Partisan Canons*, Durham, 2007; Douglas Crimp's "Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture," in *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies*, 1, Winter 1998, www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue1/crimp/crimp.html (viewed on September 26, 2015).

13 Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, New York, 2008.

14 Crimp, 1998, cited n. 12.

15 Brzyski, 2007, cited n. 12.

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