ESF SCH EXPLORATORY WORKSHOP

GLOBAL THEORY, LOCAL PRACTICES, AND THE RESEARCH INTO VISUAL MATTERS

Vilnius, September 19-23, 2007

Scientific Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A probe into diverse research practices opens an opportunity to explore how universal tendencies in visual expression and its interpretation take root in various locations and what local meanings and site-specific values they acquire. Therefore, the Workshop was organised with the aim at exploring how an inquiry into visual matter combines theories accepted globally and local specificity of a piece under inquiry.

From the mid-twentieth century, the universality of scholarly theories has grown significantly, while their application has predominantly remained local. The expansion of visual material and interdisciplinary research has, in some cases, transformed the entire discipline of art history forming a broader field of visual studies. However, the changes have not affected scholarly research practices as much as titles of publications, keywords, and even university study programmes demonstrate. Local schools and individual researchers continue working within disciplinary practices, while methods from other fields are frequently used as a pastiche rather than direct application of a theory. A critical reflection upon research practices developed into a hypothesis that locally applied universal theories result into ‘glocal’ scholarship specific features of which can be traced in case studies and throughout a discussion of scholars. Indicating features of ‘glocal’ scholarly practices and building a prospective framework that would depart from pastiche-like interdisciplinary research and bring a new quality of scholarship based on collaboration of scholars directly applying disciplinary practices were the aims that the Vilnius Exploratory Workshop put forward.

(A) BACKGROUND AND ORGANISATION

For the Exploratory Workshop to function successfully it was essential to assemble a body of scholars who would collaboratively debate and explore beyond the areas of their field of specialisation. The Workshop group evolved from reflection upon daily research and teaching practices at the Department of Art History and Theory of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, a group of scholars with whom these reflections had been shared and those who joined the Workshop having been invited after the international call for papers. The very concept of the Exploratory Workshop required its agenda to abandon usual thematic areas based on chronology, geography, or material, and to concentrate on theoretical issues that would deliberately breach these themes. At the same time, the planning for the Workshop emphasised the expansion of the visual material under investigation and site-specific questions on research agendas.

Seventeen out of twenty invited participants were able to attend the Workshop. Meetings took place in the Reading Hall of the Library of the Vilnius Academy of Arts and the “Europos Parkas” sculpture park. Both proved apt environments for sessions and discussion groups.

The Workshop combined several forms of consequentive meetings: papers delivered to the whole group, followed by discussion; plenary session based on issues raised in paper presentation, discussions in groups of five to seven participants; summary reports of group moderators, followed by the final discussion on how to transform issues raised at the Workshop into research project/s. The purpose of the multiplicity of forms was to allow the most intense possible discussion, particularly in small groups, whilst
maintaining a shared agenda and a sense of the breadth of the issues under debate. By the end of the Workshop all the participants were asked to fill in the evaluation form thus giving a feedback on various aspects of the Workshop’s scholarly content and organisation. Answers and comments given have been integrated into this report.

(B) ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The growing importance of visual material and globalisation of scholarship urges to rethink practices of scholarly research. Voicing of an image depends on strategies that range between (although are not limited to) an author’s intentions to a perceiver’s interests. By the same token, any visual material is a part of social network combining general and site-specific meanings. As to the research practices, the interdisciplinary approach has become a must in most of inquiries within the humanities, even though few scholars attempted at combining practices of different disciplines rather than relying on personal/collective imaginary of what these practices are. Even though various aspects of interdisciplinary research have been addressed during the last decades, the role of scholarly imagination as an essential precondition of such research has been formulated for the first time.

(C) THE EXPLORATORY WORKSHOP

Given the emphasis on globality, locality, and inter/disciplinarity, a key task was to discover ways of combining the general and the specific in a feasible research project. Thus, the Workshop began with papers divided into sessions followed by discussions. Next came a plein-air session offering an opportunity of informal exchange of ideas and opinions in an artistically-charged environment followed by a general discussion that raised key topics for discussion groups. The final session summarised the issues raised, set conclusions, and laid plans for further investigation.

SCIENTIFIC CONTENT OF THE EVENT

Day One:
The Rector of the Vilnius Academy of Arts Adomas Butrimas and the Workshop convenors welcomed the participants. The ESF representative Jacques Dubucs introduced the ESF activities and funding policies, drawing special attention to the possibilities relevant to the humanities and studies of visual culture in particular. Afterwards Agnė Naruštė introduced ‘glocalisation’ – the central concept for the Workshop. She gave an overview of the ideas behind the Exploratory Workshop among which the most significant were the imposition of grand narratives, shared familiarity with images, visual thinking, extra-visual information, and scholarly imagination. Considering the expected results that the Workshop could lead towards, Naruštė asked whether ‘glocalisation’ that has become a strategy in arts could be turned into an approach to the study of images. The convenors invited Workshop participants to reflect upon theoretical frameworks used for the research of visual material highlighting the specificity of their application in local contexts.
The morning session entitled “Images as Tools of Power” consisted of two parts. The papers of the first part aimed at revealing how art piece or a visual record enforces the understanding of the past and reveals its site-specific meanings. Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans inquired into how history is represented in contemporary art. In a set of case studies, she analysed pieces by Laurenz Berges, Luc Tuymans, and Mirosław Bałka. All the three artists work with the issue of abandonment presenting visual records of places that in recent or more remote past were “playgrounds” of history. Placed against the background of the traditional genre of history painting these works open the question of how an event and a location become a bearer of meaning. Davide Deriu in his case study (the paper was circulated in advance) examining aerial photographs of cities ruined during the World War II revealed how different logics within the making and usage of aerial photography grow into conflicting issues of aesthetic fascination, record of collected trauma, or document for the claims of damages. He emphasised the impact of the accessibility of the photographs through the Internet on building of personal and communal sense of historical trauma.

The discussion moderated by Lars Saari concentrated on key issues of: (i) enhanced significance of pictured events, (ii) the difference between personal and visual testimony that split into two question of (iii) the fictionality of memory and (iv) the perception/experience of trauma recorded in an image.

The second part of the morning session considered how power is given to images through the foundation of institutional research units and disciplinary traditions within the national contexts of Greece and Slovenia. Areti Adamopoulou gave an analytical overview of how art history has been established as a study programme with its departments in Greek universities from the 1960s until today. Institutional grounding of the discipline had to overcome the superiority of archaeology understood as representative of Greek culture and Greekness in general. Foreign education and disciplinary enthusiasm of scholars has been instrumental for the overall legitimation and institutional establishment of the discipline on the national level. Monika Pemič examined the frequency and intensity of attention that art historians paid towards the Slovenian ‘National Club Houses’ (narodni domovi). The examination of the Club Houses of Ljubljiana, Maribor, and Trieste showed how national significance is ascribed to architectural forms in relation to statehood and nationhood. The discussion moderated by Giedrė Mickūnaitė addressed questions of (v) relativity of visual skills as a main tool of art historical research versus (vi) the dependency of seeing upon verbal information. These issues opened broader inquiry into (vii) the hierarchy of disciplines within the humanities and (viii) the translation of local experience into ‘global’ knowledge more briefly termed as global test for a local image.

The afternoon session under the title “Visual Matter in the Mesh of Psyche” opened with Verena Kuni’s paper that explored cultural contexts of contemporary needlework giving special emphasis of its usage as a means of expressing social and political position. In recent decades, needlework once regarded as exclusively feminine and domestic occupation has become not only an artistic medium, but also a means of expressing public activism. The do-it-yourself technologies and Internet communication are key components for the networks of activists and spreading of ideas conveyed through an image and the technique. The paper put forward an open question of potentials and limitations of transdisciplinary study of needlework as cultural production
and performance. Ewa Wójtkowicz exposed the tension between locality and globality in art of the Internet. Arts in the virtual world questioned the validity of such key concepts of art history as centre and periphery, artist and perceiver and clearly prioritised process over result. The discussion moderated by Agnė Narušytė predominantly focused on (i) transmission and accessibility of visual message, (ii) process and network based visual expression, and (iii) accidentality of contact with the visual matter.

In the second part of the afternoon session, Ole W. Fischer analysed contradictions in theories and practices of architectural design. Critical theory has not only reshaped scholarly thought, but also been declared a strategy in creative industries. Fischer views architecture as activity that intertwines power, capital, and media on the one hand, and critical reflection, creative autonomy, and participatory scenarios, on the other. The example of the Blur building in Swiss expo 2002 – a simulated cloud – was taken to demonstrate how post-critical debate has nourished the story around the design rather than determined its concept and realisation. Beverly K. Grindstaff examined how theory of hygiene formulated in the later eighteenth-century Prussia had become a social norm. Since Immanuel Kant declared hygiene being a fundamental obligation to oneself, it was ascribed with ethic and aesthetic value. The imposed ideal of the healthy German body turned into a norm of everyday life and has been implemented into design practices.

Lawrence Wallen moderated the discussion that followed these papers. The participants developed the earlier raised key points and added the following: (iv) the impact of social, political, and intellectual change upon the design practices and (v) the acceptance and normative potential of an imposed message. The discussion concluded with a more general observation on (vi) the methodological difficulties of moving between the general and the specific that has been represented by the participants of Swiss and US schools.

**Day Two:**

Ivan Gerat’s paper opened the morning session “Pleasures of Reading.” Giving an example of medieval narrative painting from the lives of saints, above all, St Elisabeth of Hungary, Gerat stated that picturing a story makes it apparent to the audiences and by the same token transforms it into a document of an event. Reality invented behind a visual representation combined with its didactic potential was used to impose certain values or patterns of behaviour upon the churchgoers and functioned as a sign of heavenly sanction to those who observed these instructions. Helen Bome looked at medieval evidence from the conflicting perspectives of local scholarship and the shared Christian mentality of the later Middle Ages. Such an approach reversed the question of the Workshop and demonstrated how fragmented pieces of medieval art taken together with the absence of written evidence are ascribed with local and even ethnic meanings. On the other hand, the ‘global’ perspective of medieval mentality also faces a pitfall of imagining the past, that is, ascribing today’s knowledge to what contemporaries saw in the images they viewed.

The discussion moderator Krista Kodres raised the question of (i) difficulties of decoding and re-decoding images from the distant past. To that the participants added the issues of (ii) media and destination as a means of transmission of visual message and (iii) going beyond visual perception of an image. The latter had direct relevance to the paper by Rupert Cox exploring the role of aurality in perceiving of an image. Based on the painted screens depicting Nagasaki’s past and the environment of their display, Cox
addressed the ways of how the past can be transmitted through a combination of sensory environments and conveyed topographically through individual and collective experience. In the following paper, Tanja Mastnak presented a cross-section of contemporary art practices in Slovenia centred around the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. This intense cultural environment produced artworks that are framed by a larger theory and highly reflective upon local and regional situation. The paper emphasised the impact of the critical mass of thought and values of artistic ideas that art viewers invest into the pieces exhibited. The discussion under the moderation of Arūnas Gelūnas concluded that (iv) image happens in the minds of viewers, (v) research of the visual matter should go beyond ocular perception, and (vi) participation in the visual culture is a means to convey a diversity of meanings.

The afternoon session moved to the “Europos parkas” sculpture park taking a change to introduce the participants with a private initiative within on the local art scene that has attracted internationally distinguished artists; offer a chance for an informal one on one discussion; and reflect upon issues raised thus far. In the evening the participants assembled for a summary discussion provisionally titled “Theory, Practice and Experience of the Visual.” Moderator Mickūnaitė reminded the participants the discussion points reached during the paper sessions and summarised them in the following key issues: testimonial power of images; local experience versus global transmission of a visual message; coherence and/or conflict of visual strategies and research practices; and scholarly imagination as a generalising tool of research. Participants were invited to share their opinions on these issues with an aim at arriving towards a set of interrelated concepts that could serve as points of departure for the discussion groups of the day three. The intense discussion has indicated several topics that require a more thorough debate and also have potential to open new research areas: an image in its medium, a story, an interpreter, and references that go beyond a visual piece. Among the mechanisms that activate this frame, memory has been recognised the most significant. Considering the future research agenda, a key-term of inter-pictoriality suggested by Gerat has been acknowledged as having the strongest scholarly potential. At the end of the discussion Dubucs made observations on the ideas that has been put forward suggesting the participants to consider broader concepts of the semantics of iconic representation and its epistemology. He also encouraged the Workshop to search for a common denominator that could give a basis for a future research agenda.

**Day Three:**
The day began with a premier of experimental film “The Documentary Imperative” by Jordan Basemen. Having exchanged opinions on the verbal and the visual message of the film, the participants joined the discussion groups on the following issues: image and story moderated by Kodres, image as a medium moderated by Gelūnas, and image as material and memory holder moderated by Saari. Afterwards the moderators summarised the group discussions.

Kodres pointed out that the entire discussion group acknowledged the importance of disciplinary identity of an interpreter, in this case, the art historian. Reflecting on how the interpreter is being shaped by the very object of study, and on how a story shapes the process of interpretation and its result – a newly told story – the group raised the importance of theory, by means of which the existing sources are turned into resources...
that ground argumentation and make it thorough. The group also raised the question of how the professional identity of an art historian is being formed in our days and reflected on what is the content and structure of this identity.

In his summary of the group discussion, Gelūnas noted the screen as a key-concept and medium in perception of an image. The fact that most of the visual material is transmitted and experienced as screen images results into dematerialisation of art pieces. Exclusively ocular perception of an image on a screen surface reduces the range of bodily experiences but allows more diverse image interchange within viewers minds.

Discussion group moderated by Saari concentrated on material as a carrier of meaning. This group also discussed interaction and accessibility of images and focused on how images are made accessible through being entered into and accessed through various databases. Special emphasis has been laid on the familiarity with and acceptance of an image as a segment in perceiver’s thinking.

The final discussion under moderation of Mickūnaitė concluded that the new path in visual studies could be found not by interdisciplinary approach practised by scholars within one field but through a cooperation of researches of different disciplines. Visual material has a potential to get into a dialogue with one who addresses it. However, this address is by most and large organised according to disciplinary logic. Thus, a new quality within research can be achieved though application of different logics within one research. It has been agreed that a contribution from information scientists and media scholars and technologists could infuse visual studies new qualities.

The closing session discussed continuing collaboration centred on the Workshop group and assessed the impact of the form which the Workshop itself had taken. The participants acknowledged that the Vilnius meeting raised a number of questions that require much more time for discussion and which potentially can grow into a longer and larger research projects. The Workshop assessments recognised the term of inter-pictoriality as central for the ‘glocalisation’ of research agendas. Reflecting upon the research practices, emphasis was laid on their dependence on the logic of the image archives and interaction of images within contemporary media landscape. For the most part of research these given conditions are taken as “natural” and by the same token frames scholarly agendas. The Workshop concluded that the first step into further development of these issues would be a formation of a network of scholars assembled from smaller research groups. As to the means of in which research groups should act and collaborate, it has been agreed that the form of experiment seems to be the most promising. The experimental character of work is understood as demonstration of and reflection upon disciplinary logics in a set of studies on same visual material. It is believed that such sessions would build awareness about the principles that define the arrangement, storage, and dissemination of images. The next step would be interdisciplinary interpretation leading to both theoretical insights as well as application of varied disciplinary approaches in building new kind of image databases. Considering the needs of such a scholar network, human and time resources are of prime importance, while experimental part of the research could be carried out and tested in a well equipped visual lab that most of institutions with established position of art history and/or visual studies have. The Workshop decided to make a project proposal for the European Science Foundation in search for the funding of the scholarly network that would investigate logics within and beyond an image.
Final Programme

Wednesday 19 September 2007

Arrival

20:00-22:00 Video night at the hotel. About Identity: videos about Lithuanianism. Review of the works by the Photography and Media Art students of the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

Refreshments

Thursday 20 September 2007

9:00-10:00 Welcome by Adomas Butrimas, Rector of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, and convenors Giedre Mickunaite and Agne Narusyte

Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)
Jacques Dubucs (Standing Committee for the Humanities)

Morning coffee

Morning session: Images as Tools of Power
Moderator: Lars Saari, University of Turku

10:30-11:00 Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Image as a Concealed Entrance to History (Berges, Horsfield, Balka)

11:00-11:30 Davide Deriu, University of Westminster. 'The Puzzling Pleasure of Ruins': The aerial photograph as image of historical trauma

11:30-12:00 Coffee break
Moderator: Giedre Mickunaite, Vilnius Academy of Arts

12:00-12:30 Areti Adamopoulou, University of Ioannina. Art History in Greek Universities: Past and present

12:30-13:00 Monika Pemic, Universität Hamburg. The Slovenian 'National Club Houses' (narodni domovi) in the Light of the (Slovenian) Art Historiography

13:00-15:00 Lunch
**Afternoon session: Visual Matter in the Mesh of Psyche**
Moderator: Agne Narusyte, Napier University

15:00-15:30 Verena Kuni, University of Frankfurt. *New Perspectives on Old Patterns? Needlework Revisited: Between art and activism, crafts and cultural performance*

15:30-16:00 Ewa Wojtowicz, Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan. *Translocal Art of the Internet*

16:00-16:30 Coffee break

Moderator: Lawrence Wallen, Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich

16:30-17:00 Ole W. Fischer, ETH Zürich. *Imagining the Invisible. Spatial Practice in the Crisis of Criticality, Autonomy, and Representation*

17:00-17:30 Beverly K. Grindstaff, San Jose State University. *Toward an Interdisciplinary Study of Design: Hygiene as an aesthetic field*

19:00 Dinner

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**Friday 21 September 2007**

**Morning session: Pleasures of Reading**
Moderator: Krista Kodres, Estonian Academy of Art

9:30-10:00 Helen Bome, Institute of History, Tallinn University. *Trees in Stone: in the eyes of the medievals and the moderns*

10:00-10:30 Ivan Gerat, Institute for Art History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. *Key Scenes of the Painted Legends in the Middle Ages: Anthropological, semiotic, and phenomenological aspects of the visual narratives*

10:30-11:00 Coffee break

Moderator: Arunas Gelunas, Vilnius Academy of Arts

11:00-11:30 Rupert Cox, University of Manchester. *Seeing Culture: Auditory reflections of a painted past*

11:30-12:00 Tanja Mastnak, Ljubljana Graduate School of the Humanities. *Between East and West: Theory, solutions, creative potential*

12:30-14:30 Lunch
15:00-16:30 **Afternoon field trip to Europos parkas sculpture park and “plein-air” discussion session**
Moderator: Arunas Gelunas, Vilnius Academy of Arts

16:30-17:00 **Coffee break**

17:00-19:00 **Summary discussion Theory, Practice and Experience of the Visual**
Moderator: Giedre Mickunaite, Vilnius Academy of Arts

19:00 **Dinner**

**Saturday 22 September 2007**

**Morning session**

9:00-9:30 Experimental film (21 minutes) 'The Documentary Imperative' by Jordan Baseman, a video artist, who has collaborated with academic staff at the University of Manchester as part of a project called 'Alchemy', based at the Manchester Museum ([http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/alchemy/](http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/alchemy/)).

9:30-11:00 Discussion groups: session moderators indicate key topics that have been raised in the papers and at the discussion and discuss them in groups of 4 to 6 participants. Summaries of these discussions will be presented after the coffee break.

11:00-11:30 **Coffee break**

11:30-13:00 **Moderators’ reports and closing discussion What’s next? Is there a shared understanding of the research situation? Are there and what are the unexplored topics for future research agendas? What are the needs and potential for collaborative projects?**
Moderator: Giedre Mickunaite, Vilnius Academy of Arts

13:00-15:00 **Lunch**

19:00 **Closing dinner: Trolleybus tour to the Vilnius TV tower. Starting and meeting point - at the Mindaugas memorial, in front of the National Museum of Lithuania (pls. see the Vilnius map in your folder).**

**Sunday 23 September 2007**

**Departures**

10:00-12:00 **Guided tour in Vilnius (on foot). Starting point - hotel lobby.**
FINAL LIST OF PARTICIPANTS
List of Participants

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