8. Questions of Ethics
Seeing as an Act of Scholarly Research

The central task resulting from my readings was to inquire into the ethical dimensions of seeing that can be negotiated between the fields of art history and visual culture studies. In other words, my focus on seeing led not to a confrontation along the lines of "who does it better" in terms of method, scope and object, but to an attempt to link the question of the relevance of each discipline with the fundamentals of its engagement with its object. These fundamentals, which I read as each discipline's immanent scopic regime, emerged quite clearly from my readings, with their various advantages and pitfalls.

The ethics I am referring to here might also be called stance or responsibility – responsibility for the Other of one's research activity, or one's seeing as researcher. My readings made me more keenly aware that the seeing of art historians, with regard to discrete objects, is often hidden behind the classifying procedures of art-historical objectification. These procedures mask the reputation of seeing as unpredictable, unquantifiable and subjective, and thus reputedly unscientific. Art history clearly has surprisingly little confidence in the objective reliability of its key form of data collection; either that or it wishes to avoid being infected with this reputation. Art history pursues an ethics of objectivity; what this overlooks is seeing's subjective side, which is also authorial: the subjectivity of the interpreting viewer.

For visual culture studies, the opposite applies. The discipline's scholarly activity centres not on the object but on the subject – a subject that must fight for recognition, in turn measured in terms of the subject's visibility in a society and its visual culture. The ethical dimension here is rooted in the political

agenda that determines the relevance of the discipline.[1] The presupposition of visual culture studies that modernity is visual, making visibility a key precondition for the representation of identity, alters the dynamic of the three-way relationship between visual object, producer and viewer, with consequences that only became clear to me in the course of my readings. My interest in engaging with visual culture studies grew out of my critique of hegemonic and pseudo-objective discourses in art history. I saw in it a chance both to find approaches allowing the viewpoints of "Others" to be introduced into art history and to reflect on the discrepancy between the questionable objectivity and the masked subjectivity of the art-historical viewer position. I was all the more surprised, then, by what my readings revealed: the "Other", the recognition of which is supposedly the focus of visual culture studies, surreptitiously became a huge I (the I of the interpreting viewer) in an interpretative manoeuvre I refer to as the narcissistic circle. The slippery surface on which this circular movement takes place is the model of the gaze after Sartre and Lacan: out of the model of a scopic regime that highlights the fragility of ego constructions, and which was thus also a critique of the illusory quality of identities per se, visual culture studies made a strategy affirming positively framed identities.

Of central methodological importance here, I propose, is the question of the relationship between historicity, alterity and models of seeing in art history and visual culture studies. This question necessarily arises from the double critique of objectivist seeing in art history and of narcissistic seeing in visual culture studies. Historicity and alterity have one thing in common: they constitute the unfamiliarity of the object and Other in the eyes of the viewing, interpreting subject. They show this subject its limits, the ultimately uncrossable threshold that lies between the I and what lies outside it. In many respects, how this threshold is negotiated is the biggest problem between art history, with its focus on objects, and visual culture studies, which has been dedicated from the outset to rendering the subject visible. It is the approach to this threshold that I call a stance in the sense of an ethics of scholarly research; it is of importance to both art history and visual culture studies.

1 See Mieke Bal, "The Commitment to Look" in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4 (2005), 145-162, who speaks in this context of an ethics of seeing. She also comments on the conflicts between art history and visual culture studies from the viewpoint of the latter.

Historical unfamiliarity in art historical seeing

Let us briefly recap on approaches to the unfamiliarity of the art historical object (which I refer to, by analogy with cultural alterity, as historical alterity), with respect to the gazes exchanged between the viewing, interpreting subject and its object. The readings in this book have shown two basic forms, both of which implicitly aim to overcome this unfamiliarity of the object. Firstly, an objectification of the subjective factor in interpretative acts via analytical categories, trying to neutralize the subjective dimension of dealing with the object with the aim of attaining verifiability or something approaching a supposed historical truth. And secondly, an approach involving the hermeneutic circle. Panofsky and Gombrich stand for the first position, Wolfgang Kemp for the second. All three more or less ignore the seeing of the interpreting viewer, going to great lengths to develop approaches and procedures that integrate this seeing back into the object.

Gombrich tries to achieve this by framing perception as an activity that compares pictures with reality on a trial and error basis, placing it on a verifiable basis that is only marginally impacted by historical change and that applies to producer and viewer in equal measure. Panofsky does it by assuming that historical periods have distinct underlying intellectual dispositions that are expressed in the symbolic form of perspective as a necessary concretion of worldview. His characterization of perspective as a model of seeing that is distancing and objectifying, but also distance-denying, also prompts him to make a political critique that I will now apply to those models of seeing that centre on the position of the viewer. To the distance-denying model of perspective, Panofsky attributes aims he finds politically suspect and which today would be referred to as narcissistic – the striving for power and an expansion of the sphere of the I. What would a dialogue between Panofsky and Bryson or Bal on the relationship of viewer and object look like? It is likely that Panofsky would firmly reject Bryson's and Bal's appeal for the viewer's right to interpret the object from his/her own subjective viewpoint, dissolving the historical and cultural unfamiliarity and thus the tension between viewer and object, in favour of the interpreting subject. I, too, do not see this form of power over object and interpretation, that finally puts the interpreter in the place of the author stripped of power by poststructuralism, as a viable alter-

native to the objectification of the interpreting subject in analytical categories or holistic concepts of truth (a charge levelled at Panofsky).[2]

Kemp, on the other hand, short circuits the hermeneutic circle of understanding by locating the viewer as an implied viewer within the picture. He works with the paradox of not locating reception with the recipient but putting it back into the picture, whose internal structure always already determines the viewer's perception. In this way, the picture retains its autonomy with regard to interpretations imposed from outside. The interpreting viewer has no *place*. One could go so far as to say that this model allows no interpretation whatsoever in the sense of a subjectively motivated difference between the picture and its reading. Here, good interpretation consists in the ability to identify and read the picture's narratological cues. This could be called the extreme opposite of Bryson's model of the dominance of the interpreting viewer – and this even though Kemp's focus is on the reception of the artwork. In this constellation, what becomes of the unfamiliarity or alterity of the object? It dissolves, so to speak, as the viewer follows the reception-guiding prompts of the artwork; the viewer is "obedient", submitting to the authority of the work, in turn meaning that his/her subjectivity is not taken into account, necessarily remaining latent. While Bryson and Bal make a radical appeal for the recognition of the viewer's interpretation, thus negating the picture's alterity, in Kemp's model the act of interpretation is reduced to following instructions communicated by the picture.

Baxandall, Pächt and Alpers pursue different strategies with regard to the historicity of their object. They want to understand the historical unfamiliarity of the picture, thus facilitating something for which one might use the metaphor of empathy (of the interpreting viewer with the object in its alterity). In different ways, all three put seeing centre stage. Baxandall goes in search of the "period eye" of the 15th century by reconstructing the knowledge of a typical Florentine businessman derived from the practice of everyday seeing. He is interested not in the seeing of the interpreting viewer but in the mode of seeing that was common to both artists and their clients, forming the basis for the formal qualities of their pictures. Within the bounds of what is pragmatically feasible, Baxandall wishes to overcome the alterity of visual experience at the time the pictures were painted. In relation to the historicism of art history, this is the most radical position because it tries to neutralize the subjective input of the interpreting viewer. Consequently, one might speak

2 Especially by Christopher Wood, see chapter 1 of this book.

here more of reconstruction than of interpretation, not so much of art but, through art, of the historical culture from which the art emerged – artworks understood as "lenses bearing on their own circumstances".[3]

Alpers, too, has a historicizing position. Her focus is on the visual activity of a time and place in which obtaining knowledge via observation had great cultural importance – the Netherlands in the 17th-century. She embeds her interest in observation as a historically specific cultural practice in art history by studying art that shows this practice in action. In this way, she too takes art as a cue to reconstruct something else – in this case 17th-century Dutch visual culture. She thus interprets art as evidence, similar to the way historians interpret sources. In *The Art of Describing*, art provides evidence of the visual culture of observation that was held in high esteem within society as a practice of knowledge acquisition.

Pächt is the only one to focus attention on the seeing of the interpreting viewer, treating it as a problem of art-historical method in the face of the historical alterity of the discipline's object. For Pächt, art historical practice must be based on "getting one's eye in" with artworks.[4] This includes the visual habits of the period in question, which he says can be accessed via extensive experience of looking at artworks from that period. Although Pächt is aiming for verifiability, it should be derived from this seeing, which he conceives of as a relation between the unfamiliar object and the viewing art historian, a relation in which the tension between the viewer's background and visual habits and the unfamiliarity of the object are not neutralized in holistic or objectifying basic assumptions. While "getting their eye in", Pächt calls on viewers to begin by suppressing their own wishes, such as the search for iconographic meaning, in favour of a mode of looking geared towards describing the artwork's material and formal structure. Such precise observation is intended to weaken the dominant normative aesthetic that influences the way art historians see, achieving openness with regard to aspects of the work that may be unfamiliar to the interpreting viewer. While Pächt's call to maintain an awareness of the difference between the seeing of the viewer and the historical artwork in the process of art-historical analysis accepts the situatedness of the interpreting viewer, it also looks towards methods of overcoming this situatedness. For Pächt, obtaining verifiable insights depends on the visual,

3 Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors*, vii. Cf. chapter one, 5.

4 Pächt, *The Practice of Art History*, foreword.

dialogical interplay between the interpreting viewer and the object in its material and formal qualities.

All of these positions share a focus on the historicity of their object. One might conclude from this that historical alterity necessarily implies a greater orientation towards the object than towards the interpreting subject, accompanied by models for objectifying the resulting historical knowledge. One might add that this object does not always have to be an artwork: for Baxandall and Alpers, the gaze leads through the artwork to its context as the primary focus of interest – and their positions are also the ones with the greatest affinity to visual culture studies.

Cultural unfamiliarity – the "Other" in the gaze of visual culture studies

Unlike in art history, in visual culture studies the Other is a key concept both politically and in terms of legitimizing the discipline – the Other here always being a person, it should be noted, rather than an object. Attention is focused on the recognition of such Others in their identity *as* Others; in other words, the object of visual culture studies is not the art object, as in art history, but subjects. In visual culture studies, objects usually feature as evidence of the representation of negatively or positively shaped and connoted identities of such Others, or of power constellations within the socially dominant scopic regime in which both the "Ones" and "Others" have their place. The range of objects examined by visual culture studies goes beyond that usually classified as art.

However much this political agenda seems to imply a dialogical approach (between the Ones and the Others), the theoretical model of visuality on which the relationship between One and Other is based surprisingly leads, as my readings of what can now be called "classic" texts from visual culture studies have shown, to processes of mirroring that I have described as narcissistic.

I am not claiming that art history practises the dialogical gaze while visual culture studies remains locked in a narcissistic loop. My readings of texts from art history have shown that the dialogical gaze leads a marginal existence in the methodological thinking of the discipline (Riegl, Pächt, Olin). For visual culture studies, on the other hand, my readings show the problematic reception of the Lacanian model of the gaze. Whereas the Lacanian gaze demonstrates the illusionary character of self-identity, visual culture stud-

ies basically turns it into its opposite, the theoretical affirmation of identity-politics.

The narcissistic circle – a critique

This rewriting of Lacan is a central conclusion from my readings, and it is certainly not something I was expecting when I began work on this book. Originally I was seeking to understand the way visual culture studies succeeded in introducing new, political subjects and subject-matter into the investigation of visual culture. My intention was similar to Stuart Hall's: a "raid"[5] on another discipline in order to widen the possibilities of art history.

Driven by its political agenda, visual culture studies extracts positive-affirmative identities from the critical negativity[6] of the Lacanian approach – making it possible to transform the interpretative act of seeing into a narcissist circle. Unlike language, seeing has always been considered as intrinsically narcissistic, beginning with the myth from which narcissism takes its name. In 1859, Baudelaire linked portrait photography with the myth of Narcissus, equating it with the mirror.[7] Not only psychoanalysis connects seeing and narcissism, but also the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty when he states that "there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision", a statement for which he in turn drew on psychoanalysis.[8]

The reception of Lacanian models of the gaze by visual culture studies has methodological consequences for its interpretative practice. In the model of the mirror stage, it is only the transition to language that enables the narcissism of the infant mirror stage to give way to an I capable of dialogue. The use of this model within visual culture studies as a model of visuality means that the interpreting viewer is assumed, in the act of seeing, to be caught in the infant stage. This in turn means that language/speech and seeing as activities

5 Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities", in *October* 53 (1990), 16. See also chapter 4, first section, in this book.

6 A concept from critical theory that can be applied here.

7 "À partir de ce moment, la société immonde se rua, comme un seul Narcisse, pour contempler sa triviale image sur le métal." Charles Baudelaire, "Le Salon de 1859" in Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques*, (Paris 1890).

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston 1968), 139. Original French: "il y a un narcissisme fondamental de toute vision", in *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris 1964), 183.

of the subject, with their consequences for the I, are assumed to be separate and unconnected – a problematic assumption.

A strange paradox arises here: when the Lacanian model of the gaze is used to analyse visuality, and when this analysis sticks to and generalizes the pre-linguistic infant model of the mirror stage, then language, of all things, is omitted from the construction of the seeing and interpreting subject – as if the subject automatically regressed to infancy in the act of seeing. This theoretical separation of seeing and speaking reflects something that could be described, in the term used by Bal, as visual essentialism:[9] the isolation of visuality from language and from the other senses. In the specific focus of this reading, infant narcissism becomes a necessary aspect of seeing. According to another reading, only the child's entry into *language* makes "mutual recognition beyond personal narcissism" possible.[10] This would mean that seeing and speaking, which I discuss here as *media* between the subject and the world, structure this relationship in fundamentally different ways: seeing as solipsistic, speaking as dialogical – a conclusion that is contradicted, for example, by Olin's dialogical model of seeing. For art history and visual culture studies, it should be noted at this point that increased attention and self-reflection needs to be devoted to the relationship between interpretative seeing and its articulation as or transformation into language and text.

The discourse of visual culture studies also adopted Lacan's later model of the gaze. This deals with looking on a metaphorical level; the gaze here is a metaphor or parable, a simile for the being-in-the-world-and-always-already-looked-at of the Lacanian subject. Whereas the mirror phase describes a typical experience of actual children, for which Lacan provides evidence, I see his model of the gaze with the diagram of the gaze and the screen as being more figurative in character, meaning it cannot be transferred literally to real pictures and situations of visual reception. And here lies another fundamental problem in the reception of the Lacanian model within visual culture studies.

Due to their metaphorical links with seeing itself and with the visual material focused on by visual culture studies, such a literal application of Lacan's models of the gaze within the discipline strikes me as dangerous: language as symbolic takes second place to the imaginary, which in turn is duplicated or linguistically mirrored in metaphors of the visual, and then transferred back

9 See Bal, "Visual Essentialism".

10 Gerda Pagel, *Lacan zur Einführung* (Hamburg 1989), 34.

into a language that revolves around recognition of the self that must set itself apart against the threat emanating from the gaze of the Other. When the Lacanian models are adopted like this as a metatheory of visuality, interpretation becomes a narcissistic "event" in its own right.

There is another paradox here: such oversimplification reduces the psychoanalytical theory in question to seeing, which is used by Lacan himself, with its implications of optics and scopic regimes, as a metaphor, a figure of speech and/or simile for structures of the unconscious and the "illusion of consciousness".[11] As a result, those who interpret visual objects fall once more into the "presence trap" of this "medium", and the subjects of their interpretation (including, specifically, themselves) run the risk of being reduced to infant narcissism. The only theoretical way out of this trap is to construct seeing as reading; otherwise, seeing rather than reading would be the central heuristic concept for the cultural production of meaning. In cultural studies, as in visual culture studies (for which it prepared the ground), the production of meaning is the activity that defines culture.[12] As yet, however, no models exist for how meaning is produced via seeing/the image/the visual that might match the abstract rigor of the models put forth for language by semiotics and linguistics. Finally, seeing is not merely an activity of decoding.[13]

Other questions are also raised. If, following Bal, meaning is understood as the production of narrative in the act of reception, then applied to art it would mean that much of what has been addressed by art history, such as style, and other questions of the aesthetic qualities of the object, would fall outside the realm of reception. Conversely the residue in the object that cannot be subsumed within a narrative could be defined as the remit of its aesthetic properties – drawing a line between narrative and aesthetics in theoretical discussions of reception. In such a model, then, the production of meaning is conceived of as distinct from the aesthetic dimension; elements

11 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 83. See also Georg Christoph Tholen, "Auge, Blick und Bild. Zur Intermedialität der Blickregime" in Bohrer, Sieber, Tholen, *Blickregime und Dispositive*, 19-30.

12 "To put it simply: Culture is about 'shared meanings'." Stuart Hall, "Introduction" in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1997), 1.

13 The same applies, I suspect, to the act of reading, but this comment is only a weak articulation of my scepticism towards the gesture of controllability on the part of linguistics.

of form and materiality can then be registered only as non-aesthetic. According to this logic, these elements can only be perceived within a narratological straightjacket, as is the case with Bal's reading of Rembrandt.[14]

Attention and recognition

In this light, the classificatory approach of classical art history takes on a different relevance: it has brought forth an attention to and observation of those elements (commonly referred to in art history as style, facture, etc.) that are not subject to such a constraint. But are they not subject, instead, to other constraints, such as those imposed by the museum and other administrative institutions? Yes, they are. However, if one is to believe the arguments used by visual culture studies to set itself apart from and legitimate itself in the face of its Other, art history, this also happens, if one assumes the autonomy of art or, to put it another way, if one assumes an aesthetics of art that cannot be functionalized. The attention of art history is thus not limited to those elements that can be used to construct a narrative which derives its coherence from the perspective of the interpreting subject. Art historical practices of seeing, then, insofar as they are not geared exclusively towards the reading/construction of meaning and narrative, are more broad-based.

At this point one must ask how, in methodological terms, might it be possible to conceive of and practise an ethics of seeing that can lead to the recognition of the visually Other – a recognition of what may be historically or culturally 'other' that is not focused on an interpretative identification with the mirror image? Could this attentiveness as a practice of dialogical seeing beyond the limited cognitive objectives of classifying art history (as outlined, for example, in my reading of Otto Pächt) be of significance to such an ethics? And what might be the contribution of visual culture studies to this project? After all, the discipline pursues a social and political agenda. In contrast to art history, ethics seems to be inscribed in the project of visual culture studies from the outset, as part of its program. As I see it, the problem of ethics as it poses itself here lies in the methodological consequences of this program and thus in the position of the interpreting subject with respect to what is being looked at.

14 See chapter 6 of this book.

Visual spaces of the subject: Narration and observation

In the course of my readings two main focuses of interpretative activity have emerged: the search for a narrative and observation. In the former, what the interpreting viewer does with the object is usually referred to as reading; drawing on literary criticism, this approach is referred to as narratology. Mieke Bal and Wolfgang Kemp explicitly base their models on this approach, and it is also implied in the work of other authors discussed. In most cases, it manifests itself in focussing more attention on content (or, in film studies, plot) than on the conditions/media of production or the forms of the object. In this, it resembles the method of iconography: narratology largely ignores the aesthetic specificity of the object, focussing instead on its representation of content, as well as analysing its formal elements in terms of this criterion. This interpretative technique has a major subjective component, which is rarely acknowledged or highlighted. The second focus, observation, is commonly understood as a procedure of distancing the subject from the object, but it can slip into the opposite, a state referred to by Michael Fried as absorption – as I have pointed out above in my reading of Alpers.

Both of these positions, which I describe as stances towards the object, make possible, by categorizing the corresponding procedures as a method, the objectification of the subject, thus rendering it invisible, so to speak. In extreme cases, both also facilitate narcissistic coupling of the object to the interpreting viewer, projections of a narratological interpretation (as we have seen in the case of Bryson), and absorption in the object. This absorption depends on the aesthetic quality that consists in the viewer becoming drawn into the act of perception, "forgetting" him/herself, which is also a type of narcissistic circle, less in the form of incorporating the Other and more of expanding the I to include the Other via an experience of merging.[15]

In art history, on the other hand, observation as a rule is linked to a non-identificatory distance with regard to the object that permits no such experience of merging – since it is a practice of acquiring knowledge *about* the object

15 This absorptive experience is the benchmark of quality required of art by Michael Fried; it cannot be identified in any of the positions under discussion here, however, because it cannot be pinned down in scientific terms. It is not a theoretical position but a subjective experience of perception that depends on the aesthetic autonomy of the artwork and that seeks neither representations nor narratological coherence. See Fried, "Art and Objecthood".

(Pächt) or its surrounding historical culture (Alpers). In visual culture studies, such distancing has a bad reputation that is articulated via metaphors of seeing: seeing as an objectifying and distancing sense that claims to provide evidence of truths it constructs itself, as epitomized by one-point perspective. Against this backdrop, I thought it important, in my reading of Panofsky's essay on perspective, to highlight the political implications of distance and closeness that he identifies in this symbolic form.

From what we have said so far, one might deduce an irreconcilable opposition between two interpretative procedures: narratology and observation. It is tempting to assign them to the extreme poles of the relationship between interpreting subject and object – distance and closeness. Within the discursive framework of this polarity, distance belongs with objectivity and the masking of subjective elements in interpretation, while closeness is coupled with presentism, immersion and subjectivity through to the narcissistic circle. But narratology and observation cannot be clearly assigned to these poles. Kemp's version of narratology, for example, is ultimately an objectifying procedure from art history like any other. In the approaches of Bal and Bryson, however, it is accompanied by an empowerment of the interpreting viewer over the object, coupled with anti-historical presentism and a high degree of narcissistic projection. Observation, on the other hand, cannot be simply associated with objectifying distance, as shown by absorption as its most extreme case. But I do think that in visual culture studies, there is a predominance of narratology, or of a desire for narrative and for a form of realism in the sense of a narrative continuum in the representation of the world. And I identify the reason for this in the political agenda of visual culture studies: the desire for narrative is fed by the desire for identity, for a wholeness of the subject, be it an individual or a collective. In narratology, narrative is viewed as a social and cultural practice that supports identity-formation; narratives are considered, in the sense of an anthropological constant, as "distinct bearers of meaning, cognitive tools in the formation of meaning and identity".[16] Mieke Bal has rendered structuralist narratology "productive for the analysis of cultural phenomena",[17] especially with her work on the concept of focaliza-

16 Ansgar Nünning, "Wie Erzählungen Kulturen erzeugen: Prämissen, Konzepte und Perspektiven für eine kulturwissenschaftliche Narratologie" in Alexandra Strohmaier(ed.), *Kultur – Wissen – Narration. Perspektiven transdisziplinärer Erzählforschung für die Kulturwissenschaften* (Bielefeld 2013), 15-33: 18.

17 See ibid., 25.

tion. Narrative, then, offers a sphere of action for the subject, not just for the narrating subject but also for the interpreting subject, as both are driven by a desire for meaning and identity. And when the desire of the subject determines his/her view of the object to the point where it only reflects this desire back, then we have the narcissistic circle.

How can such a position deal with objects that do not narrate, that do not use narrative to produce meaning and thus identity? In art, we know such objects from the avant-garde of the 20th century. As Pächt's example of the illuminations from the Admont Bible show, pictures whose meaning is unfamiliar to the viewer, too, can fall out of the narrative into the abstract mode – the forms of an intended but no longer comprehensible narrative elude the construction of meaning. Conversely, forms that refuse a realistic mode of representation (or, in more general terms, that do not match the viewer's mimetic standards) but that still tell a story, may also be perceived as abstract – this, too, is seen in the case of the Admont Bible. This denial of obvious meaning, however, is what calls for precise *observation* of the object. What does this mean? Is an observing, attentive focus on an object only possible when narrative is not possible? Abstract, non-figurative art would then be opaque in more ways than one: it would be neither a window onto reality, nor onto a narrative, nor, in the sense of a mirror, onto the viewing subject. But for all this autonomy, for all this hermetic quality, it remains an Other for observation and dialogue – a thought that prompts me to make an appeal for an approach to objects beyond the control of narcissistic desire.

"Self-identity is a bad visual system. Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning."[18]

Visuality and art, the founding concepts of visual culture studies and art history respectively, can both be conceived of in essentialist terms. For an ethics of seeing with genuine methodological consequences, however, I would argue that it is necessary, in both fields, to conceive of these founding concepts as categories that have been agreed on, and not as anthropological constants. This is also the basis for thinking about the perennial problem of how to structure the relationship between the object of research and the researching subject now that claims to objectivity in this relationship have been debunked as

18 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges".

myths and historical constructions by poststructuralist and feminist critiques of science. In the context of her feminist critique of the "objective" natural sciences, Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" proposed a solution that became very influential, although it made little impact on either art history or visual culture studies. The title of this section is a quotation taken from her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, first published in 1988.

Haraway offers a drastic description of the situation in which feminist criticism found itself at the time, faced with a radical constructivism that was "conjugated with semiology and narratology": "We unmasked the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our 'embodied' accounts of truth, and we ended up with one more excuse for not learning any post-Newtonian physics and one more reason to drop the old feminist self-help practices of repairing our cars. They're just texts anyway, so let the boys have them back."[19] It was a matter of finding out "how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, … and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world".[20] She does not see this divide as unbridgeable. As her linking metaphor, she chooses "a much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse: vision. Vision can be good to avoid binary oppositions".[21]

This brings together the two factors that interest me as scholarly positions with regard to the object: a critique of the concept of objectivity, as it applies in one form or another to art historical positions, and the use of seeing as the founding metaphor for the positions of visual culture studies. How does Haraway use seeing as a metaphor? And what does she need it for?

She begins with the discursive figure of the "disembodied gaze" that we know in its symbolic form as one-point perspective: a gaze that promises objective, hegemonic knowledge about the world without disclosing its standpoint: "The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power." This is a good summary of the feminist critique at the time, to which the discourse of visual culture studies

19 Ibid., 186-187.
20 Ibid., 187.
21 Ibid., 188.

also refers, right through to Mirzoeff's *Right to Look* in 2011. Haraway counters this gaze with the "particularity and embodiment of all vision" as the prerequisite for a "doctrine of embodied objectivity".[22] In this way, she does not separate seeing from objectivity in order to claim it for what she sees as the obviously partisan feminist critique; but neither does she equate it exclusively with subjectivity. Instead, she seeks to connect embodied seeing with objectivity. This seeing is embodied because "all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life."[23] The eye functions as a medium that translates the world for and within its specific context/body. Translation is to be understood here as a metaphor for the fact that seeing can never be immediate, only mediated. In Haraway's view, this is just as true of technical optical systems as it is of natural ones. In her view, this situatedness of embodied seeing must be linked with the demands of an objectivity based on a viewpoint that is partial rather than total, because "only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices."[24]

This responsibility for the generativity of visual practices is an important cue for an ethics of seeing. And it is only logical that Haraway demands the same responsibility for feminist theory, criticizing a modus operandi that adopts the viewpoint of the repressed in a manner that is uncritical and romanticizing. Haraway has no time for "innocent 'identity' politics … as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule – or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on – if one intends to see and see from these positions critically."[25] Just as it is impossible to identify with the repressed person in order to adopt their viewpoint, it is impossible to be immediately present unto oneself: "Self-identity is a bad visual system. Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning."[26] Haraway insists that identity, including I-identity, does not produce science, but that "critical positioning does, that is, objectivity".[27]

Haraway's critique of identity positions as perspectives for a knowledge of the world was first published in 1988, shortly before the founding phase

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 190.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 192.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 193.

of visual culture studies around 1990. To my knowledge, it met with little response during that phase. Clearly, her critique resonated more strongly with those (natural) sciences that were sure of their store of objective facts and knowledge. I, too, will deal with just a selection from her thought, as I am interested in the way she links a critique of identity with visual metaphors in relation to the problem of the relationship between interpreting viewer and object.

The reasons for this lack of interest in Haraway are clear: in theoretical terms, visual culture studies moves between Foucault's discourse analysis, Lacan's concepts of the gaze, and a more general basic assumption of the social and cultural constructedness of knowledge, and hence within the framework of poststructuralist and postmodern theory that Haraway in turn recommends to the natural sciences as a way of reflecting critically on their own constructedness. The critical acuity of this theoretical framework is endangered, however, by the way visual culture studies deals with the concept of identity. Two specific variants are important here: the political version of positive amplification of identity often leads to what Haraway describes and criticizes as identification with the perspective of the "subjugated"; the other version is the radical subjectivization of interpretation, legitimized via what I consider to be a literalist misunderstanding of Lacanian models of the gaze, leading to a radically narcissistic self-empowerment of the interpreting viewer/subject. For Haraway this results in "self-identity", which she considers to be a bad visual system because it allows no distancing, either between the interpreting self (that is unable to situate itself) and the world, or between the viewer and the object, which is only seen insofar as it can be integrated into the viewer's self-image without threatening it. This object is then, as Haraway puts it, "a resource for appropriation" to which "any status as *agent* in the productions of knowledge" must be denied.[28]

Haraway's model of situated knowledge uses metaphors of seeing and perspective in a way that suggests a link with a model of dialogue between object and interpreting subject as developed by Margaret Olin with reference to art-historical precursors like Riegl and as hinted at in Pächt's thoughts on interpretative practice. Haraway's characterization of the object as an "agent" corresponds with the role played in art history and visual culture studies by the historical and cultural alterity of the object. This alterity is not something

28 Ibid., 198.

whose resistance to being incorporated into the construction of the interpreting subject must be overcome (be it via objectification or identification) but the element that turns the relationship between interpreting viewer and object into a dialogical one. And this relationship gives rise to situated knowledge insofar as the object recognized in its unfamiliarity is able to call the world-view and perspective of the interpreting viewer into question. This constitutes the action of the object understood as agent.

Seeing the Other

While art history focuses its gaze all too rigidly on discrete objects, forgetting or denying that this gaze is shaped by subjective factors, visual culture studies does focus its gaze on the "Other", but what it sees there is above all that which can be reconciled, for whatever reason, with the interpreting I. This gaze is a look in the mirror. The element of the unfamiliar that identifies the Other as other in the gaze of the One becomes or remains hidden, because it threatens the identity of the interpreting viewer. The methodological and theoretical ramifications of these two specific scopic regimes unfold in the concrete situations where they are applied, where the exchange of looks within the triad of object, producer and viewer are subjected to a variety of challenges. They also raise the question of the viewer's relationship to past and present: the art-historical interpreting I operates on the assumption that it is capable of objectivity in dealing with history; and while the interpreting I of visual culture studies, in its radical form at least, engages with theoretical critiques of objectivity, the conclusion it draws is that its own subjectivity, and thus its own present, must form the sole basis for interpretation. In ethical terms, this form of seeing means a denial of or failure to recognize the Other, be it a discrete object or a subject. This can only be overcome in the form of a dialogical seeing that recognizes the unfamiliarity of the Other: such seeing is aware of its desire to rewrite this unfamiliarity and to reduce it to what can be integrated into its own identity construction, whereas dialogue keeps the tension between identity and alterity open.

This position is not identical, however, with the well-known calls for "self-critique and relativization of one's own supposedly sovereign and certainly western, historically determined ethnological way of looking at different, for-

eign cultures",[29] as formulated especially in the context of postcolonial critiques of science. As a consequence, the discipline of ethnology developed the method of participant observation[30] in order to remove or at least reduce the imbalance of power between field researchers and those under study. However, alterity does not begin with the exoticism of other cultures; the reception of Lacan's model of the gaze has brought a more radical position into play here, based on the subject's being-other-unto-itself in the gaze of the Other and the (vain) attempts to resolve this into a narcissistic gaze. By reading it as a positive affirmation of identity, visual culture studies deprive the Lacanian model of the gaze of its critical potential. Instead, the emphasis should be on enduring the unfamiliarity of the Other, be it object or subject, and on keeping it alive.

Outlook: The digital world and its consequences

Not so long ago, art history focused entirely on historical alterity, with contemporary art considered the remit of art criticism. In recent decades, this has changed fundamentally, as the discipline deals with objects right up to the immediate present. This has gone so far that teaching staff are increasingly complaining that their students are losing their awareness of history. They prefer studying the present, it is claimed, in order to avoid the unfamiliarity of historical objects and the attendant need to acquire specialist knowledge. Such complaints are often accompanied by a broader verdict on the times: the politics and practices of knowledge displayed by the media, especially the Internet, are geared towards simultaneous retrievability of information regardless of its historical situatedness; attention spans are shorter; the status of information is arbitrary and it can be combined at random. Historical alterity is broken down into individual information units, making it possible to absorb the past into a puzzlingly structured, ever-changing, ever-present data network in which the active subject no longer features.[31]

29 Martin Schulz, *Ordnungen der Bilder. Eine Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft* (Munich 2005), 121.

30 See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority", in *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983), 118-146.

31 Superficially (and cynically) speaking, it seems as if this diffusion of the subject into information networks has now realized on a technical level what poststructuralist cri-

The texts read in this book do not address this technological change, a development that will force art history and visual culture studies to re-examine their approaches. The fundamentally altered conditions of access to and use of knowledge brought about by information technology and the culture of the world wide web have consequences for the categories on which the practice of visual culture studies and art history are based. They also affect my thinking about an ethics of seeing in these two fields: for visual culture studies this category is visibility as the visual representation of identity; for art history, art as object. Both are exposed to huge forces of change by the conditions of the digital world, the consequences of which I will in these concluding words sketch in.

It is questionable, for example, whether the political agenda of visual culture studies, framed as a matter of visibility within society, which involves intervening in the struggle for the right to identity-based representation of the "subjugated" (Haraway) or "subalterns" (Gayatry Spivak), is still sustainable in the face of ever-louder criticism of the endless, uncontrollable circulation of representations in the media, from television to surveillance cameras to social media and mobile phone cameras. For media artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, the fascination with and mimetic desire for attractive self-images has become a threat: "As we register at cash tills, ATMs, and other checkpoints – as our cellphones reveal our slightest movements and our snapshots are tagged with GPS coordinates – we end up not exactly amused to death but represented to pieces."[32] She notes a growing tendency towards withdrawal from representation: "… people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation – which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time – feels more like a threat."[33] Within these structures of image exploitation, the right to symbolic representation and visual presence in the cultural field has become a danger, the political resource of visibility has become a further instrument of control and marketization of both individuals and social groups. The consumer, for whose rights Mirzoeff was still campaigning in 1999, is now entangled in

tiques of the subject were calling for. But this would imply that this effect was a critical activity, and not something that must itself be criticized.

32 Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation" in *e-flux journal* (eds.: Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle), #32 (02/2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/ (accessed 26 Sept 2016).

33 Ibid.

a regime of "(mutual) self-control and visual self-disciplining, which is even harder to dislocate than earlier regimes of representation".[34]

Under these conditions, visual representation can no longer be a political resource. The hope that symbolic representation of subaltern identities might lead to enhanced political and economic equality is in crisis; ultimately, hard-won visual presence based on fixed identities resulted in a situation where minority groups are now seen, recognized and addressed in precisely these formats of fixed diversity – as consumers. Instead of political participation, this regime of representation delivers "gossip, surveillance, evidence, serial narcissism, as well as occasional uprisings".[35]

It is a common theme in the debate surrounding the status of images in the world of digital media that as signs these images have neither an author nor a referent. If images in the digital world no longer have a referent, then visual representations of identity, the currency of visual culture studies, also have no referent (i.e. no subject). It follows that these representations put identities into circulation that have no referent. At the very least, these identities have detached themselves from the subjects who provide the images/data to look at, in order to float "freely" and uncontrollably in the network where, reduced to information, they can also just as uncontrollably be "harvested". In such a subject-less visual regime, the Lacanian models of the gaze adapted by visual culture studies are no longer effective, since representation has been suspended.

As well as the subject, what is also diffused in the world wide web is alterity, the unfamiliarity of the Other that can only come into play as the Other of a subject. Steyerl's "serial narcissism" comes to mind: in the world wide web, technology has led to an effect that can be conceived of by analogy with the narcissistic circle triggered in the interpretative practice of visual culture studies by Lacan's models of the gaze, working against the alterity/unfamiliarity of this Other in an attempt to smooth it over or mirror it into the self of the interpreting viewer – accompanied by a denial of objectifying distance.

Here, the object as an Other, as something in dialogue with the subject, comes back into play – for example the object of art history, the individual work of art. In the age of Google, the artwork, too, has altered its character and status, writes David Joselit in *After Art*.[36] To grasp this development in

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, Oxford 2012).

theoretical terms, he borrows metaphors from the financial markets and the Internet – from those fields, then, in which the aggressive capitalism of recent decades culminates. He does this not from a position of critical negativity, but because he wishes to refute what he considers to be the underestimated status of today's art. In his view, art needs this support. Against the idealization of the artwork as a unique auratic object – based on simplified readings of Benjamin[37] – Joselit upholds the circulation of digital images, which he applies to art. He pursues a strategy of positively revaluating something that seems to be in need of help – an approach that is familiar from visual culture studies. Joselit tries to rethink the current status of art by dressing its system of values, its forms of production and its manifestations, in the dynamics of finance and the Internet. The new values of art in the age of its digitally enhanced reproduction are based on the concepts of 'circulation' and 'currency'; the concept of media is replaced by that of format, the concepts of form and content by information. The image is "a visual byte", a form of information,[38] whose power Joselit sees not in its ontology but in "a current or currency" that is activated on contact with the viewer.[39] The more points of contact are established, the greater the power – a metaphor that links the (monetary) currency of images with the currents and networks of electricity. In Joselit's view, there has been a shift from the individual artwork to "populations of images", leading to "changing formats of contemporary art".[40] Today, it is saturation via mass circulation – "the status of being everywhere at once rather than belonging to a single place" – that creates value for and through images.[41] He thus contrasts two main aspects with the conventional status of the artwork: the shift away from individual picture to a "swarm of images" that produce a "buzz" rather than a Benjaminian aura,[42] and uninterrupted global circulation, reproduction and combination in digital media. Here, however, the digital image does not take the place of the artwork; instead, Joselit sees an

37 For Benjamin's theory of the loss of aura, associated with art's mechanical reproduction, is still being used in art discourse as evidence of art's loss of value, while prices on the art market have soared. This limited reception turns Benjamin into a nostalgic figure yearning for the fixed, auratic artwork of old and forgets the political expectations that he associated with art's mechanical reproducibility and with this loss.

38 Joselit, *After Art*, XV.

39 Ibid. XVI.

40 Ibid., 15.

41 Ibid., 16.

42 Ibid.

obligation for art to respond to this development. He claims to have observed that contemporary art is moving away from individual or serial art objects towards "the disruption or manipulation of populations of images through various methods of selecting and reframing existing content". The *what* becomes less important than the relationship between the "discrete images and their framing network".[43] In his view, art criticism must adjust to a shift from an object-based aesthetics towards a "network aesthetics of images premised on the emergence of form from populations of images".[44] Form and medium are subsumed under the concept of 'format', superseding the individual artwork as a discrete object: "Formats are dynamic mechanisms for aggregating content."[45] The economies of this "overproduction of images" can only be understood and processed via an "epistemology of search", because they function via "connectivity".[46]

Joselit sees his political project exemplified in *Fairytale*, Ai Weiwei's contribution to Documenta 12 in 2007, for which the artist brought 1001 Chinese to Kassel: rather than criticizing the power of images, he argues, Ai used the power of art – in this case its (or rather his) prestige and economic power – to transport people and objects both in space and in the imagination. "This is our political horizon, after art."[47] In Ai's elaborate operation he sees proof that connectivity produces power. "One need not exit the art world or denigrate its capacities. Instead we must recognize and exploit its potential power in newly creative and progressive ways. Our real work begins *after art*, in the networks it formats."[48] This closing sentence highlights another of Joselit's concerns: he is clearly of the opinion that as a *part* of aggressive globalized capitalism, art is in the process of losing its legitimacy as a critical force, especially in the eyes of radical opponents of capitalism. He thus attempts a difficult volte-face: precisely this integration into the networks of turbo-capitalism, he argues, gives art a power that must be exploited. Which raises the well-known question: Is there such a thing as a critique of capitalism from inside? This question might also be asked the other way round: is there such a thing as a critique from outside the system? Joselit's essay provoked a range of

43 Ibid., 34.
44 Ibid., 43.
45 Ibid., 55.
46 Ibid., 56.
47 Ibid., 94.
48 Ibid., 96.

responses.[49] What interests me here is something else, namely Joselit's view that art should set more store by networks than objects. The examples he gives include discrete objects, like the photographs of Sherrie Levine, Ai's chair installation at the 2008 Venice Biennale, or Wang Guangyi's painting *Coca Cola* (2004). There are also the usual formats of contemporary art: videos, performances, sculptures, social interventions like those of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Santiago Sierra, as well as references to the art strategies which since the 1960s replaced high modernism à la Greenberg. His examples thus come essentially from the western canon of neo-avant-garde, conceptual art and post-avant-garde, i.e. those currents that have an inbuilt reflexive element, be it with regard to their own art practice or to the art system with its institutions and dynamics of exploitation, extended to include formats that are explicitly critical of capitalism such as Tania Bruguera's *Generic Capitalism* (2009). The departure of the discrete object from art production, then, is a topic that already has a history and a discourse. Joselit now describes it as an integrative moment of digitally accelerated capitalism; its critical thrust must come from its success *within* the system. This may also be the reason why, surprisingly, he does not address Internet art, since it is not (yet) integrated into the existing value creation chains of the art market.[50]

In their analyses, both Steyerl and Joselit presuppose the power of total media immersion as a fact of conditions today. For Steyerl, however, this does not immediately lead to a Baudrillardian merging of the real world with media simulacra; instead, she contrasts the identity simulacra of the world wide web with the resistance of real people/subjects – their withdrawal from representation. Joselit's position is necessarily less clearly defined because a separation of network images from reality would go against his argument; in his model, the dividing lines between the discrete objects of art and the image

49 For critical reactions to Joselit's political repositioning of art, see, for example, Todd Cronan, "Neoliberal Art History" in *Radical Philo-sophy* 180 (Jul/Aug 2013), 50-53, http://nonsite.org/review/neoliberal-art-history (accessed 16 Sept 2016).

50 Value creation chains that are (still) strongly shaped by criteria which Internet art does not (yet) offer or actively seeks to undermine: authorship, object character and the institutions of display. It should be noted here that this art system has learned to exploit even such art forms as do not produce objects in the strict sense, like performances and site-specific actions. In terms of exploitation, Bruguera's action or Santiago Sierra's *Hiring and Arrangement of 30 Workers in Relation to Their Skin Colour* (shown in 2002 at Kunsthalle Wien) could be said to be objects in this sense, even if Joselit describes them as formats. See Joselit, *After Art*, 66f.

clusters of digital circulation are fluid; the materiality of the art object does not feature in his argument.

Media technologies, their economies and their usage change so fast as to make it impossible to propose definitions and recommend paths of action for the long term on the basis of today's situation. And there is certainly no question of formulating strategies on the basis of one-sided descriptions of the current state of affairs. Many such analyses and declarations of paradigm shifts have been absolutizing, putting them at odds with the ambivalences of real developments; one need only think of the "end of history", the "end of art", or "globalization" that was soon joined by its opposite, an insistence on the local, leading to the portmanteau concept of the "glocal". Absolutizing talk of total media immersion also shows a dubious one-sidedness, regardless of whether it is due to unfettered techno-optimism, a media critique, or a more general critique of culture, often with a moralizing character.

I would argue in favour of insisting that art, in the broadest imaginable sense and in ways that constantly reflect changing conditions, contests the power of the factual.[51] For today, this would also mean contesting the power of "total" media immersion, even and above all when this power is (merely) imagined, because such imaginings, too, play a part in the transformation of the factual, as does a critique that speaks of the media, of images, of the Internet as an overwhelming flood to which people are helplessly exposed. The fact, for example, that Joselit does not elaborate on possible differences between art and media circulation at least suggests that art is indeed involved in the corresponding processes of change. Or to put it differently: art's autonomy can no longer be the basis for its ability to critique or contest; art is involved and distanced at the same time – as discussed above with regard to Haraway's "situated knowledge".

The ties between art and visual culture are closer today than ever before. And in contrast to what was implied by the distancing rhetoric of visual culture studies in the 1990s about art history being an elitist, bourgeois practice, this does not mean that art no longer has any critical legitimacy. On the contrary, its critical, contesting voice is necessary – and not so much in the visual forms of political agitation, as they are known from bygone eras of clearly drawn political battle lines. These new ties can also act as a meeting ground between art history and visual culture studies. Art history might profitably depart from its structural fixation on a discrete object – for although art

51 For this succinct formulation I am grateful to Bettina Uppenkamp.

itself has not abandoned the discrete object, its strategies are more open in their connective mobility. Art history should also open its heuristic categories, categories that belong to an episteme of objectivity, to thinking in relational terms, and here it can profit from the dialogue with visual culture studies. Thinking its main activity of seeing as being embedded in the relational could then also be described in correlation with what Joselit calls connectivity. In very simple terms, one might say: connectivity is to today's mobile art what context is to the art of discrete objects.

The growing resistance to digitally inflated presentations of identity diagnosed by Steyerl, on the other hand, will have very real consequences for the basic assumptions of visual culture studies, since public visibility now manifests itself as a kind of crazy hall of mirrors. It can be assumed that the strategy of visibility as a political resource in the struggle for recognition of subaltern identities is coming to an end, and with it the fixation on identities that had, in their affirmative function, long become prisons, especially in times of increased transcultural circulation. This can be beneficial in several respects: freedom from narcissism as the driving force behind visibility in identity politics, accompanied by the possibility for visual culture studies to focus its gaze beyond an identity-based framework more strongly on its object, visuality – visual phenomena of cultural production in the broadest sense, exchanges of gazes and scopic regimes in which relationships between subjects and media situations manifest themselves, their social and cultural interplay, their technologies, their social and economic effects, their accompanying cultural practices. And art has a special function in this field: to contest the power of the factual, be it visual or not, it bundles (in concentrated and, ideally, surprising form) aesthetic and critical-analytical forces of a kind that are not to be found in any other cultural production.

I imagine the respective objects of art history and visual culture studies as being positioned between the relational factors of visuality and the discrete objects of art. They relate to each other not in the sense of a hierarchy where art history features as a special case of visual culture studies, but in the interplay outlined above that situates art as a condensation and contestation of those conditions examined by visual culture studies. This is territory where art history and visual culture studies can meet, with attentiveness, in a seeing that orients itself towards the outside of the subject while remaining aware of its subjective genesis.