

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Matthew Rampley, ed. *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 257 pp. \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-1845-3.

Reviewed by Allen Roberts

Published on H-AfrArts (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti



## Musings about Contemporary Studies of Visual Practices

I agreed to review Matthew Rampley's *Exploring Visual Culture* for this list in 2006, but as sometimes happens to us all, other responsibilities intervened; aside from copping a *mea culpa*, the following thoughts are offered to present the volume in broader perspectives of conversation about the arts of Africa and its diasporas.

For those of us trained in sociocultural anthropology but interested in visual practices and what they produce, the word "but" in this sentence has long been a painful signifier. As British anthropologists Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton put it fifteen years ago, "the anthropology of art continues in many ways to be marginal to the subject [of anthropology] as a whole, as if art were considered of secondary importance"—and this, "despite growing recognition that the very physicality of art offers a prime medium for beginning the intellectual exploration of other societies." [1] The essays from two conferences at Oxford in the mid-1980s that Coote and Shelton present in their collection disprove the wisdom of any such dismissal, and remain significant across the years and several disciplines: Raymond Firth's cogent overview of art and anthropology with particular attention to "art and 'beauty'"; Alfred Gell's signal paper, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," that spells out his complex theory in concise prose; Susan Kuchler's piece on "*Malangan* and the Idiom of Kinship in Northern New Ireland"; and Howard Morphy's treatise on "The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu" of Australia, among others.

If these strong examples seemed to offer hope to a downtrodden lot, disappointment at the indifference shown by many in the discipline—including, ironically enough, many of those engaged in what is called visual anthropology in the United States—does not seem to have been mitigated. So it was worthy of notice that Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins introduced their 2006 reader on the anthropology of art with the assertion that "the anthropology of art has entered an exciting stage in its history. It is in the process of moving from its place as a minority interest that most anthropologists could neglect towards a more central role in the discipline." [2] The papers that Morphy and Perkins assembled are classics rather than recent work, for the most part, and it is useful to have important pieces such as James Clifford's "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," Susan Vogel's introduction to *Art/Artifact*, Alfred Gell's compelling response in his "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps," Robert Farris Thompson's "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," Nancy Munn's "Visual Categories," and Ruth Phillips's "The Collecting and Display of Souvenir Arts" all in one place. Yet this round-up of earlier writing leaves this reviewer unconvinced that the disregard for art-oriented research is a thing of the past in mainstream anthropology. In this regard, I am reminded of a senior colleague in a major anthropology department here in the United States telling me three or four years ago that s/he did not feel free to admit an interest in the arts, as such less-than-serious pursuits would surely detract from chances for salary-increasing promotions.

To some of us—and I readily admit to being jaded in this regard—anthropology seems to have been passed by of late by several initiatives located elsewhere in academia. Interdisciplinary efforts in still-emerging fields like cultural studies, performance studies, and religious studies have left much humanistic anthropology in a lurch, its fire stolen (to mix metaphors). Theory has moved to other buildings. Comp lit. lights up, and language departments are filled with a buzz once heard elsewhere. There are many exceptions to such gross generalizations, of course, and it would seem that visual anthropology, with its subset society in the American Anthropological Association, its prominent journal, and the several Olympian figures around which it has been constructed, would provide the grist for new perspectives. Yet British scholar Sarah Pink outlines the future of such work in quite telling ways.

As Pink puts it, “during the latter part of the twentieth century the dominant practice in visual anthropology was ethnographic filmmaking,” felt to be a “glamorous practice” celebrated through festivals and awards.[3] She notes that some theoretically inclined cineastes—and notably David MacDougall, whose *Film, Ethnography, and the Senses: The Corporeal Image* (2006) is well worth a read—turned to “questions of the body, phenomenology and experience.” “The relationship of film to anthropological writing” was also interrogated, especially as “the bastions of scientific anthropology were crumbling in favor of a subjective and reflexive approach.” Although Pink asserts that “resistance to the visual in anthropology is now a problem of the past,” the fact that she feels impelled to say so leaves the door open to doubt, especially when, for her, “the future of Visual Anthropology” lies in “new experimentation with illustration and drawing,” an “applied visual anthropology,” and “new possibilities for digital media in research and representation.”[4] These are worthy pursuits, needless to say; but what is curiously understated or ignored completely is “art” itself, as understood and made by the people among whom visual anthropologists conduct their research. Such a deduction is reinforced by the introduction and essays in the collection edited by Sarah Pink, László Kürti, and Ana Isabel Afonso, *Working Images: Visual Research and Representation in Ethnography* (2004). There are strong contributions here, including Cristina Grasseni’s consideration of the “skilled vision” of Italian cattle breeders achieved through “an ‘education of attention,’” and Gemma Orbitg Canal’s own artistic use of photography to express a sense of “wakefulness” versus the dream world of Pumé

people of Venezuela. But again, the point is “putting film to work,” as Paul Henley titles his paper, in order to effect a more evocative ethnography. In other words, despite statements to the contrary, visual anthropology remains locked in debates about documentary processes by anthropologists for anthropologists rather than engaged in close consideration of the visual epistemologies of those we study.

Visual culture is another field to be considered here, that has continued to grow in prominence since the burst of works in the 1990s with Nicholas Mirzoeff leading the charge through his *Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999) and his various collected volumes including *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998). Recent collections join this latter to establish a baseline for inquiry. Matthew Rampley’s *Exploring Visual Culture* is useful in this regard, and although its British focus will leave American students scratching their heads about distinctly English television programs and advertisements for products they have never encountered, Rampley’s collection of brief essays can provide a basis for introductory undergraduate teaching in combination with choices from Mirzoeff’s reader. Rampley himself sets forth provocations: “Art long ago ceased to be the most important visual expression of cultural identity” (p. 1). One is left to peruse the articles of the volume to discover what may (or may not) have taken its place.

The topics of Rampley’s chapters suggest the sweep of visual culture, at least at a particular moment in a particular place as conceived by particular scholars. Broad essays on “the meanings of culture,” “definitions of art and the art world,” “concepts of craft,” “representation and the idea of realism,” “the ideology of the visual,” “visual practices in the age of industry,” and “visual culture and its institutions,” are complemented by more particular discussions of “design and modern culture,” fashion, photography, architecture, “visual rhetoric,” “the rise and fall of the author,” technical reproduction, mass media, and cyber culture. A number of insouciant photographs are among the illustrations, proving to readers how hip the writers must be, especially as the images may be derived from advertising or other domains of little interest to more formal “art” studies. The focus of the book, however, is almost entirely upon the visual culture of G-8 nations, to the exclusion of China and India as well as the visualities of Africa and the rest of the “less-mainstream” world. Such a perspective is not unusual to this book (although the naïveté of ignoring China and India is there to be contemplated), for a foundational argument of visual

culture as a "tactic, rather than an academic discipline"—at least as articulated by Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998)—is that the postmodern "visual turn" evidenced in the limitless and intrusive advertising and consumerism dominates Western lives in ways never before imagined (pp. 4, 11).

The fact that Mirzoeff and others consider that the "tactic" of visual culture needs no plural is particularly significant. All this is too well known to deserve elaboration here; yet if the anthropology of art, visual anthropology, or visual culture do not offer sustained attention to non-Western visual practices, where *can* one look for new insights concerning African visual cultures? Any such question can only solicit idiosyncratic responses. Here is a list of works in no particular order, that I might suggest to graduate students with whom I work on visual practices. They are offered here as suggestive rather than in any way exhaustive.

Collections of essays that stretch definitions of anthropologies of art include Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds., *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* (2006) and Mariet Westermann, *Anthropologies of Art* (2005). Both offer strong papers, the latter including work by Africanists Ikem Okoye, Suzanne Blier, and Sarah Brett-Smith, as well as "Toward an Anthropology of the Image" by Hans Belting that anticipates the translation of his brilliant book of this title from the original in German and its first translation into French.

Works that address Religious Studies and the efficacy of images include three works by David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (1998); *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (2005); and *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in America* (2007). Morgan's focus is upon Protestant visual practices in the United States, but his central thesis in *Visual Piety*—that sacred pictures often actively structure rather than only passively illustrating devotion—is of direct application to many African visual contexts including but not restricted to those of Christianity.

Byzantine arts provide a provocative comparison for Africanists, particularly those works by Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (1994); Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (2000); and Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (2002). These and related studies give a sense of the active presence of divinity that inheres in arts and vi-

sual practices, and so provides its efficacy. Using African analogies, the Tarasov book describes how the prolific use of icons was meant to transform Mother Russia into one huge *nkisi* with a great deal of *ashe* to spare!

South Asian Studies suggest where African visual studies might be taken, and I suggest *Image Journeys: Audio-Visual Media and Cultural Change in India*, edited by Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher (1999); Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (1997); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (2007); and Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997), as well as his "Photos of the Gods": *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (2004). The boundless insights of these and related works simply must be taken into consideration by next-generation Africanists, since there are parallel circumstances and topics, and our South Asianist colleagues are especially progressive with regard to what questions to ask about contemporary, popular, and traditional arts, and how to ask them.

Finally, I suggest as both useful and important such critical studies of photographies, vernacular and otherwise, as Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History* (2002); Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004); Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo, *Arts Photographiques en Afrique* (2003); Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (2003); Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, Modernity: A Visual Economy of an Andean Image World* (1997); and Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (2006). Over the last two decades or more, some of the most progressive thought in art history has been in the critical study of *photographies* (with Geoffrey Batchen to be thanked for attention to "vernacular" ones of the sort that Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo discusses so thoughtfully), with the plural suggesting that even this most "indexical" medium is a cultural construction. Elizabeth Edwards and her colleagues consider the material histories of photographs as *things*, that, like other objects, possess "social lives" of their own. The Pinney and Peterson collection offers compelling studies of "image ethics" that might be applied to African circumstances. Deborah Poole's well-known work has lost none of its luster, and deserves direct application to African image worlds, as does Thompson's evocative narrative of how "tropical" images have become the basis for understanding (by tourists) and living (for local people) an exotic Caribbean.

Notes

[1]. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, "Introduction," in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

[2]. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, *The An-*

*thropology of Art: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 1.

[3]. Sarah Pink, *The Future of Visual Anthropology: Engaging the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11-12.

[4]. Ibid, 12-20.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afarts>

**Citation:** Allen Roberts. Review of Rampley, Matthew, ed, *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15694>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.