



Discipline/Survey

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were many and unforced: Rodin's peopled workplace and state commission followed on Vermeer's domestic retirement where the world was encountered as a woman, a map, a tapestry, and some objects on a table; Piero's work with pigments on wet plaster followed a discussion of new discoveries about the techniques of painting caves; the crowd mirrored in the memorial wall at Washington wanting paper on which to trace the names of the dead was followed by worshipers circling an Indian temple clockwise in the prescribed ritual manner. Finally, against these habits of making and looking, one lecturer traced how his puzzled dismissal of a contemporary painting was transformed into admiration. In the coming year, no lecturer will be asked to give more than two lectures, and I shall use the released times to hold what might be called a discussion section of the whole.

What then has been the loss and what the gain? As a former teacher of, and an old-time believer in, the Giotto to Picasso survey, I think one thing that has been lost is the sense that art itself has a history. The history internal to the making of art, it should not be forgotten, is a Vasarian heritage. Not the great names that have recently been the subject of so much bad temper, but the recording of an impersonal, successive development and handing on of pictorial skills inflected this way and that. In a previous time, in the old hanging, the Italian paintings in the National Gallery in London magnificently made the point.

From Vasari to the National Gallery, this point, but also the discipline of history of art itself, began and developed out of the example of Italian art (though at times, of course, taking issue with it). A problem facing art history as a discipline is what holds us together when that Italian center, the breeding ground and testing place of so much looking, thinking, and writing about art and its history, is no longer in place. Attending to a small number of works of art in play between a number of teachers and students is a possible beginning. —

Discipline/Survey

PETER BACON HALES

In our discipline the survey represents the epitome of contested territory. It promises a bold description of what is important, a staking of territory, the definition of borders, and, more surreptitiously, the creation of a system for owning and governing that territory, in the form of a methodology. This urge to colonize is more the case in the history of art than in other academic disciplines, because other disciplines in the American system of higher education rarely if ever propose to present the sum of accumulated knowledge in a coherent, ideally seamless, chronological

journey lasting exactly two semesters and traveling from the beginning of human history to the immediate present.

To change the survey is thus to make a fundamental statement about the discipline—to transform, and to recommit. It is, no doubt, for precisely this reason that so many departments have found the survey to rest at the core of debates about the curriculum, and have found revision of the survey to confirm and to exacerbate schisms and disputes among factions within the faculty.

Reordering the art historical survey course is not a simple matter of high ideals and reasoned debate. It is also a tense contest of values, and economics: areas of study diminish, others expand; faculty members ask or are asked to retrain into new areas and to rethink their fundamental dogma; individuals, often the ones most used to power and influence, are expected to abandon cherished lectures and courses, while others are asked to add to their teaching loads in the name of disciplinary transformation. To change the survey is, in other words, a deeply political act, not only in the convenient politics to which we academics are so accustomed—the politics of high words in the classroom and global position statements at professional conferences—but also in the realpolitik, where one person's values make demands on others who may fundamentally disagree, where compromise is painful and consensus a chimera.

This process is rarely fought out in the language of theory. Instead, discussions in curriculum committees and faculty meetings take on the tense incomprehensibility of a David Mamet play: everything is significant, and everything significant is held back, in a complex contest to win the field without opening one's own side to a scrutiny that might reveal its flaws.

All this became apparent when our large, broadly defined, undergraduate-based department began its transformation of the survey in the mid-1980s, a process that has yet to end, and that I will use as a test case and a metaphor for the larger issues behind the survey. This case has interest, I think, because it resulted in a shift not only in the *material* of the survey, but in its *structure*. Indeed, shifts in the material necessitated a shift in structure for reasons deeply imbedded in philosophy and as equally bound up in the pragmatics of the moment.

In some departments, I imagine, fundamental changes in pedagogy come about as a result of heroic individuals and concerted, principled debate. In most cases, however, I suspect that such shifts take place as they did in ours: as a result of small changes that result, finally, in a crisis not of faith but of structure. It is not that we fail to believe in what we are doing. Rather it is that we can't organize it properly. We can't figure out how to do the things we say we are doing. And so we rethink what we do.

In the case of my department, a number of conditions and events conspired to bring us to this moment. Until roughly a decade ago, the survey had been almost exclusively

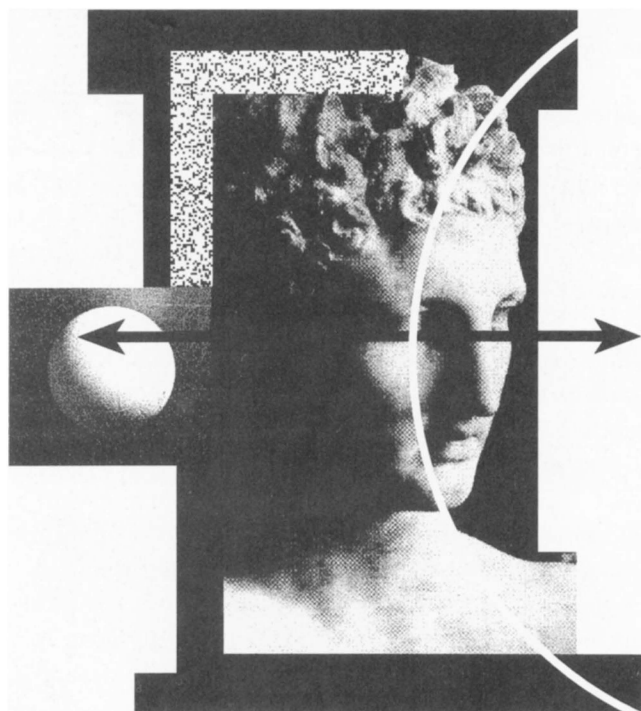


FIG. 17 Richard Rose, *Untitled*, 1995, computer-generated graphics.

taught by a core of art historians in traditional fields of art history. But the faculty had steadily tilted away from this tradition, as aggressive expansion brought specialists in the histories of architecture, film, photography, and design to serve interest groups in the surrounding schools and departments of architecture, studio arts, and design. The addition of a pre-Columbianist with a doctorate in Latin American studies continued this trend. The result was a department with a majority of its members trained outside the traditional boundaries of art history.

By the mid-1980s, then, the ideological issues that have characterized debate within the discipline were imbedded in the faculty: the presence and importance of “non-Western” cultures and their arts; the distinction between art objects and artifacts, between “high” and “mass” arts; the methodological tensions among formalism, iconography, “social history,” “cultural history,” and anthropology; and the most basic questions about the discipline as a history of “monuments” or as an assemblage of histories imbedded in objects redolent of local meaning(s).

At about this time a number of faculty members drawn from both the traditional core and the outer subdisciplines began to pressure the department toward a curriculum less Eurocentric and less devoted to the traditional monuments of Western art. The result was a compromise wherein new areas of world art and architecture entered the survey, but its approach remained true to the older methodological approach of *Kunstgeschichte*—the setting out of monuments in a historical lineage linked by stylistic continuities.

Having decided to add non-Western architecture and art, the department left it to the individual faculty members to make the transition. The curriculum committee intervened only to the extent of demarcating the subject areas to avoid overlap or repetition. Most of the new emphasis went to Oriental art. To some extent this appears to have been dictated by the historiography of the area: there was the “ancient” Far East, a “medieval” Far East, etc. Similarly, one syllabus included “some chronologically parallel periods of Non-Western Art in . . . Meso-America.” African and Native American arts (and those of Oceania) appeared (if they appeared) in the final quarter, as addenda to the shift into modernism.

Yet the political dynamic of the department dictated that these additions remain cursory. In curriculum meetings the department presented a picture of rosy unanimity on the importance of inclusion and extension. But when it came to the writing of syllabi, each subject added demanded that something be dropped. What of the Renaissance was to go to bring Aztec into the canon? What of modernism to give space for the Dogon? And each new subject meant a new lecture in an area far from the expertise of the faculty member. The result quickly became a survey “dealing with major periods and important figures in art history in the West,” squeezed slightly to “include some reference to contemporary ideas in other parts of the World,” to quote a syllabus from the fall of 1987. Non-Western cultures represented about 13 percent of the lecture time.

Then within a brief span, three administrative demands pressed the department into something significantly more schismatic: a shift of the entire university from quarters to semesters, the addition of a graduate program, and the decision of the school of architecture to scrap a required undergraduate architecture survey and replace it with the new generalist survey—assuming, that is, that the content of the survey be modified to include significantly more architecture, and that architecture be integrated into a coherent pedagogy.

All of these moved the debate from polite agreement and laissez-faire response to a tenuous state, with far more at stake. The departmental committee invested with the conversion of the curriculum from quarters to semesters chose to use the moment to rethink the entire departmental curriculum and to begin by debating philosophy rather than mechanics. The committee members were emboldened in part by the upper administration’s admonition that, once put in place, the new curriculum would have to remain unchanged for at least three years. Since that time frame included the first years of the new graduate program, the curriculum committee and the department as a whole agreed to rethink the survey.

Now practical matters impinged. The most important concerned the size of the class. As matters had stood, each of the survey courses was taught about twice a year, and course

size hovered around ninety, with faculty members doing most or all grading. Shifting the course so that each half was taught only once a year, combined with the addition of all undergraduate architecture majors, meant the class size would balloon dramatically—to three or four hundred students per class.

At ninety or one hundred students in a class, the older survey had depended heavily on machine-graded, multiple-choice or “objective” short-answer, questions. There was little or no discussion. Students entered a darkened room, looked at “monuments” for fifty minutes three times a week, memorized their stylistic characteristics, their periods and styles, their dates, and their makers, and then presented this knowledge in exams.

One hundred or four hundred: it didn't matter. But to increase the size meant to free up faculty time and faculty lines that could then be recommitted to teaching assistants—graduate students who could earn their keep (and be forgiven their tuition costs) by presiding over discussion sections in which students would have the chance to argue back at the screen, dissect the images themselves, learn to locate and to vocalize their sense of the physical and visual qualities of the works, go to museums and galleries and then discuss the real objects with each other and with a qualified if youthful and inexperienced teaching assistant.

Even more tempting was the opportunity to change the nature of the assignments. Faculty members could specify papers of various types—a critical essay, an appreciation, a brief research paper—and the students could be promised attentive grading to improve their critical and writing skills. This latter area of training was particularly crucial because, like many state universities, ours had encountered budget cuts over the decade, and special programs in writing and study skills were among the first to be cut. The development of a “Writing across the Curriculum” mandate cynically shifted responsibility for these skills to the university as a whole, without providing any resources. We believed in the necessity of real writing and real discussion, but without some way to shift resources, this was unlikely to happen.

Agreeing to changes in the mechanics of pedagogy was the easy part. The difficult issues concerned the curriculum itself—*within* the course outline. Studying the syllabi of the survey for the years immediately prior to the shift to semesters, the curriculum committee saw how little non-Western material had actually entered the lectures, how little architecture, and how little artistic context. At the same time, the committee's members understood that art historians with most or all of their training in European high art of the period from early Christianity to the end of the nineteenth century would not readily abandon their areas.

Most members of the faculty agreed that the process was stymied by the question of order and coherence. The traditionalists, most experienced with the survey, sought to minimize the shift in materials in order to retain the coherent



FIG. 18 Richard Rose, *Untitled*, 1995, computer-generated graphics.

narrative of Western art history that they had used before. The iconoclasts argued for a different and more inclusive organizing narrative, one that could apply to Western and non-Western, elite and vernacular arts. Yet neither side could in fact muster a coherent explanation of its underlying philosophical tenets. A standoff appeared imminent.

Then one faculty member presented an unusual proposal. Rather than offer continuity and coherence through chronology and culture, offer it through structure. Divide the course into segments roughly corresponding to centuries, and within each, provide seven recurrent subjects for separate lectures: an individual art object; an individual artist; a style; a school, milieu, or locale; an issue or theme; secondary media (printmaking, photography, decorative arts, and the like); and a non-Western culture.

The segment on the seventeenth century will illustrate. The sequence might begin with Baroque Rome (milieu or locale); move to Bernini (individual artist); examine the way that Maria de Medici's patronage of Rubens used art as propaganda (issue); move to Versailles (individual object); examine Dutch realism (style); then Rembrandt's etchings (secondary medium); and end with the screens and *shibui* of Rimpa Japan (non-Western culture).

This proposal had the virtue of bringing all the central, underlying issues to the fore. Principal was the way it seemed to accept a disjointed, noncontiguous art history; as some opponents remarked, it was “not a survey at all.” (And, again, the addition of non-Western, and especially tribal, arts formed the principal ruptures to continuity.)

Despite this, the proposal brought a nearly audible

sigh of relief from all quarters. Under it the iconoclasts could point to the inclusion of all the elements they had hoped to introduce into the discipline. At the same time, traditionalists could see the ways in which this proposal could be made far less terrifying and schismatic than it might at first appear. Monuments remained, if in a slightly different guise. Rembrandt didn't disappear—he was recast in terms of his etchings.

By adding such a significant set of novelties, the new survey promised the opportunity to dismantle the canon. But its real disruption lay in the ways individual lectures were assembled, pinned together, and then yoked to one another. It required the survey professors to rethink, to reorganize, and to rewrite virtually every lecture in the survey. For some time, at least, the survey could not be taught by rote.

Yet this offered a goad to a further change: diminishment of the role of the professor from authorial presence to supervisor and overseer of a heterodox assembly of lecturers. The principal survey professors had protested that they could not possibly master all these new areas of subject matter, and this had been one of the main armatures to their argument against significant transformation of the survey. To counter this objection, members of the committee proposed a second structural change: a new program in which all members of the department would participate in the survey, teaching the lectures appropriate to their areas, and spreading the new areas broadly through the faculty.

This is not an unknown method—it was in fact rather commonplace in the 1950s and early 1960s in many large universities. Its advantages and disadvantages—political and pedagogical—were transparent. It offered a course in which entry-level students found themselves introduced to the elements of a diverse curriculum by contact with experts on the subject. The demands on the supervising faculty member became less onerous in direct proportion to their willingness to give up segments of the survey to others. The amount of non-Western material, and of architecture, could be mandated, and the department would have some assurance that those areas were taken seriously and taught well by faculty members with real knowledge.

This corollary to the proposal had multiple unspoken effects, of which two deserve attention as political events yielding larger ideological results. First, it meant the end of the split within the faculty between bona fide art historians and outsiders, by requiring of all faculty the responsibility for teaching at least some lectures, and by offering all faculty members—even a historian of photography or a pre-Columbianist—the opportunity to supervise the course. Second, it undercut the argument that the seven repeating segments were too disruptive and non-narrative, by rejecting narrative continuity as a primary goal. This remained a contentious issue, deeply intertwined with the argument that there would be “no time to teach the important material,” as one participant recalled the argument recently.

In the end, deadlines and exhaustion of debate combined with many other factors to make this model the basis for the overall structure of the new survey. The result was a course that undercut the traditional hierarchies upon which surveys normally rest—the hierarchy of civilizations; the hierarchy of media; the hierarchy of individual genius in the social context; the hierarchy of eras that put the antique world, the Renaissance, and high modernism at the centers of the discipline; and the hierarchy of the profession that saw traditionally trained art historians, predominantly white males, as dominant. It would be a world history of architecture and art, with significant emphasis given to the non-Western world (the goal as some remember it was to achieve surveys with a third or more of their lectures focused on non-Western materials). Architecture, too, would receive a significantly greater place, as would the built and environmental context for the buildings designed by architects. Mass culture and the vernacular would edge closer to the center. Narratives of influence would decrease in significance, and interrelationships among arts, social circumstances, and culture would increase. Lecturers highly proficient in their subject areas would present their subjects to a large lecture hall filled with close to four hundred students; graduate students would supervise discussion sections, field trips, and the writing of varied assignments designed to hone critical thinking, visual acuity, and writing skills. A new pedagogy of art history would emerge.

This was the utopian picture envisioned five years ago, when first the curriculum committee, then the department as a whole, approved the final template for a new survey course. But the syllabi that have emerged since the plan went into effect reveal the power of individual faculty members to reshape, even subvert, this structure, and the power of the discipline's traditions to modulate and forestall innovation.

In its most naked form the structure has seemed lock-step. Applied directly and without modification, it seemed baffling to many students; without synthetic lectures by the supervising professor to open and close each segment, shifts have sometimes seemed serendipitous, abrupt. As a result, each faculty member has chosen to recast the new curriculum while remaining more or less true to the underlying seven-area arrangement.

This has been particularly the case with the addition of non-Western materials. Faculty members have either chosen to accept the disruptive presence of non-Western subjects every two weeks or so, or to attenuate that disruption by various more-or-less artificial coherences (putting African masks in the chronology of their discovery by Western modernists, for example). Alternatively, some have gone against the sequencing system by clustering the non-Western materials in larger groupings—a mechanism that emphasizes differentness from the West, but appears to lump wildly

divergent cultures and their productions, as if they were coherent products of some primitivistic oversoul.

As the more conservative art historians have reshaped the proposal in practice, its more radical premises have moved to the background. Despite the apparent mandate for sweeping transformation, the underlying ideology remains for the most part conventional. The sequence of civilizations follows the nineteenth-century adage that “westward the course of empire makes its way”: from Paleolithic to Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic, ending with Giotto and Jan van Eyck, in the first half; and from Piero to postmodernism, in the second. Non-Western artifacts and cultures now take up between 20 percent and 30 percent of the lecture time, a significant if not paradigm-busting increase. But these shifts have seemed not to subvert but to confirm the theory that large, centralized cultures make the important art: this past year, tribal cultures were the subject of just two out of eighty-two lectures. African art was disposed of in one fifty-minute lecture—the same amount of time devoted to Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, which followed immediately after it.

The past year’s experience has underscored the host of inertial forces at work in the survey. It is on the practical matters that so much depends: choosing a textbook, persuading guest lecturers to volunteer their time, determining appropriate examination questions, training the teaching assistants to teach well while teaching against the grain of their own experience as students. And yet these are also often the places where tradition and ideology are most deeply imbedded.

Underlying these lies the still disruptive question of order. The new structure of the survey quite deliberately broke with the ordering schemata that had dominated the discipline since the nineteenth century. Careful study of the syllabi over the past years reveals a struggle, perhaps unconscious, to restore the clear thread of influences, so that undergraduate students may with relative ease learn these influences, pass them back to the teacher in examinations and papers, and then leave the course with a reinvigorated sense that the intellectual work of the university is to reinforce the order that underlies all things and binds them together.

For many of my colleagues, the restructuring of the survey must have meant some uneasy sense that the very underpinnings of humanism were under attack. This, I think, accounts in part for the ways in which the new survey has tended to reinvent the old one. Looking at the schedule of lectures proposed during the debate, one faculty member cried out in dismay, “Where’s the logic, here?” Much of the recent work has focused around restoring that “logic”—whether by reinforcing the narrative of influences, social and formal, or by reinforcing the universal appropriability of world culture. Rewriting the survey has not meant erasing the notion of the discipline as panoptic. The faculty member

invites qualified students up into the central raised observation chamber, offering to them the exhilarating pleasures of an order made up of orthogonals radiating from that central point, a perspectival system that makes sense of every culture, every object, while placing the obedient students and their teachers at the center of all things. Small wonder that few of us readily give up the heady experience of owning the view, when it includes all of human history.

Yet to disrupt the teleological scheme of progress or the panoptic scheme of universality is not necessarily to succumb to nihilism or to abandon intellectual rigor. Instead, one might imagine a structure built around an attentive and respectful investigation of the underlying principles of multiple cultures and their visual productions. But this, it would seem, undercuts the very concept of the survey, with its rapid pace, its dependence on ordering systems already familiar to the student (and hence deeply imbedded in the dominant culture of the time and place), and its valorization of “mastery.” The alternative might be not a survey at all, but an introductory course based on a series of questions rather than a set of universal laws.

The result of this more radical restructuring might be a series of courses similar to those that form the basis of the fundamental courses in most English departments: courses whose outcome is the mastery of a method—close reading, analytical comparison, critical writing—rather than an agreed-upon body of subject matter. This alternative form of the survey would, in the end, still retain the single most deeply held belief of the old survey—the humanist’s belief in a universally applicable system of knowing, based upon rational inquiry and debate. In this, then, a more radical attack on the underlying structures of the art historical survey might better reinforce its most basic ideology of rational humanism.

It is unlikely such a proposal will succeed. Proposed within the curriculum committee over the past two years, it has garnered spirited debate but few votes. And it has contested with a more radical proposal, to remove all non-Western materials from the two-semester survey, setting them within a third course, and allowing students to choose among two of the three. This, too, has garnered debate but insufficient unified support.

Yet what we have today is signally different from the traditional survey that preceded it. Neophyte students still sit in the darkened amphitheater, gaze down at the dramatic persona of their professor, whose words and gestures render significance to the bright and seductive icons that loom above the rostrum. But now different people occupy that position as the semester progresses—some may be women, some Asian, some of African descent. And the icons above suggest in their strangeness (and in the unstudied hesitance of the professor seeking to draw them into the narrative) something of the ebullient heterodoxy of human cultures and their histories.