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Responses to Davis, “Neurovisuality”

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BY CHARLES PALERMO

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Charles Palermo writes:

Things remain visible to people outside the visuality within which they were intentionally produced, though what is visible in an artifact in this context (or what is visible about it) may differ from what is visible in the context of visuality. By the same token, people can succeed to *many* visualities, though both Wölfflin and Panofsky were somewhat uncertain (on different grounds) about just how far it is possible to do so when we are dealing with visualities constituted in the past and accessible to us only in things made to be visible within them that happen to have survived into our own visual world.

Whitney Davis elegantly lays out the relation of visuality to history in this passage, early in his impressive account of what he calls “neurovisuality.” As his references to Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky suggest, there are important ways in which the problems he elaborates are continuous with old problems in the field of art history. Crucially, in the current context, he addresses himself to the problematic notion that people can look at a work of art made in an earlier epoch and find that “what is visible” in those works is not what they were intended to make visible, and that what they were intended to make visible is no longer visible in them.

Davis takes for a concrete example a work of Albrecht Dürer’s, which both Wölfflin and Panofsky discuss. Davis glosses their efforts. By “removing the background in Dürer’s engraving of *Knight, Death, and the Devil* of 1513...to expose the outline silhouette of the Knight, to *visibilize* it, Wölfflin meant to show how his readers—that is, people today—can still *see* the primary rhythmic configuration of a pictorial artwork made five hundred years ago. That is, Wölfflin stands for the idea that we can still see Dürer’s linear rhythm after all these centuries. Panofsky stands for the contrary: “In Panofsky’s iconology, remember, we can only use a picture that was made in the distant past or in a different culture in *discursive* ways; we cannot

fully use it *visually* in the way that its makers did." We can talk about how a sixteenth-century Lutheran would have seen it, but we can't see it ("use it *visually*") ourselves.

But what is "it"? Neither Wölfflin nor Panofsky (nor Davis) would claim that we can't see Dürer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. The complicated relation between cultural position and vision is the topic they address. But they all admit that we can look at the work of art. Panofsky might be a pessimist and Wölfflin an optimist, but they are concerned about the uncertain prospect of our succeeding to visualities intended for historically remote beholders.

Our best chance seems to be that offered by Wölfflin, who removed the background from the print, thereby enabling the latter-day beholder to "see" the rhythm of Dürer's linear work. But one might equally argue that Wölfflin is *at least* as pessimistic as Panofsky, because, in order to make it possible for us to succeed to the original work's visuality, he had to show us "an autonomous artwork, ...one produced by Wölfflin rather than Dürer." We can "use it *visually*," but "it" is a new work, one Wölfflin produced for beholders who were his contemporaries. Or, perhaps we should say that, what we can finally see ("use...*visually*") is Dürer's print, but we see it by looking at Wölfflin's illustration. Either way, the object of our visualization is not in front of us. We can see Dürer's print, just not by looking at it.

To say that (neuro)visuality defines itself in terms of the effects an object of visual culture produces in the viewing subject calls into question the place of the work of art or of visual culture in it. If Wölfflin's altered image can afford me an equivalent for the experience of linear rhythm Dürer's print afforded its original audience, then the "succession to visuality in neural circuits" does indeed take place crucially "in natural history" and "in social life," but the specificity of such successions lies in the "neural correlate" or "causation" or at any rate in "the visual succession to visuality," and *not* in the work of art or visual culture. Ultimately, this means we're each of us his or her own Wölfflin: we experience neural correlates afforded by images, *but the "succession to visuality" takes place "in neural circuits."* And looking at the work of art turns out to be irrelevant (if not inhibiting) to our success in seeing it.

Strange as it may sound, I think this is obviously right. Imagine looking at a badly damaged copy of Dürer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. Imagine tears, stains, vandalism, etc., obscuring the image. Perhaps even an inscription applied to the work in, say, the nineteenth century. (To enhance the thought experiment, let's imagine something inane written by some commentator whose

understanding of Dürer's project was evidently limited.) Indeed, let's say it has been colored in.

An astute scholar of Dürer's work will still be able, we hope, to succeed to visibility by doing what Wölfflin taught us to do—namely, by responding to what we know rather than what we're looking at. This learned acculturation may, as I hope I rightly take Davis to speculate, become part of a recursive neurovisuality. That is just to say that our knowledge of history and our sense of what time's toll looks like may become part of the way we see old works of art at the neural level, thanks (I gather) to the plasticity of our brains. Whether this hypothesis is true, and regardless of the extent of that truth, this will justify me in doing what I have always done, as an art historian: attempt to interpret works of art.

But Davis refuses this point. In fact, he notes regretfully that "art historians can overlook neural causalities that might operate *outside* visuality—causalities that might explain why pictures or artworks can retain their visual 'power' or 'agency' (aesthetic or otherwise) far beyond their original contexts of making in a particular historical visuality, that is, why they can be globally transmitted *between* historical visualities despite tenuous material connection between the social groups or visual cultures in question." In other words, after convincing me that my knowledge should trump my vision, Davis tells me my vision should be counted on to transcend my knowledge. The object of my attention is now the object of my vision—the thing I'm looking at.

Can we have it both ways, or is this special pleading, now on behalf of interpretation, now on behalf of subjective experience?

One can imagine a way to reconcile the two commitments. Suppose those "pictures or artworks" that "retain their visual 'power' or 'agency'...beyond their original contexts of making in a particular historical visuality" and can therefore "be globally transmitted *between* historical visualities despite tenuous material connection between the social groups or visual cultures in question" are precisely those pictures or artworks that do not happen to raise the historical problem we began by discussing—that works from remote milieux are liable to afford us different visualities from those they were intended to produce. Let's say, they're works for which an all-knowing Wölfflin would make illustrations (such as his altered *Knight, Death and the Devil*) that looked just like the original. If that is so, Davis has no contradiction to explain. But if that's so, it turns out that interpretation always precedes vision (if only logically). Art history needs no neuroanything.

Whitney Davis Responds to Charles Palermo:

Charles Palermo's response to my speculations about "neurovisuality" (let alone what I called "neurovirtuality") is right on target. Is the concept needed at all? Or does it needlessly proliferate art-historical ontology (whether at the level of method or theory or both) beyond essential categories? I believe in Occam's razor as much as the next hairy beast. To use Palermo's turn of phrase, then, does the hypothesis of neurovisuality simply ratify us in doing what he always does—"attempt to interpret works of art"? (For myself, I'm involved in a quite different project—explaining pictures. But we can be indifferent to that difference, I think.) And in an obfuscatory language to boot? Or does it bring something to that very enterprise? To give the hypothesis of neurovisuality its best shot, the answer to his final question is that "interpretation always precedes vision" *because of neurovisuality* or *as neurovisuality*, not *in spite of it* or *without it*, as he implies. More exactly, what he calls "interpretation [that] always precedes vision" *is* neurovisuality, the neural representation of the "knowledge" that he might use as a beholder to make sense of the intentional order of the artwork or picture, just as the effect that a "visual object produces in the viewing subject" simply *is* neuroaesthetics (though I tried to show that neuroaesthetics *without* an account of neurovisuality likely cannot handle the subjective effects of beholding an artwork or a picture insofar as its culturally particular intention is salient).

In both logical and material terms there may be no ontological difference between interpretive looking in Palermo's sense and neurovisuality in mine. As I said in my essay, our choice of analytic representation has little theoretical valence. It's instrumental. In talking about visual artworks or pictures made to be visible, you can talk about *interpreting* their intentions or you can talk about *seeing* them. Claims advanced in either terminology are fully interconvertible if they are indeed claims about the intentional autonomization of autonomic processes of vision or proprioception of any other kind. I have no truck with (and I try not to trade in) essentialist claims for verbal ekphrasis as the only way to represent the (neuro)intentional order of the objects in view. (Palermo plays his cards close on this score: he just "interprets works of art." But it's possible that this means he just doesn't want to learn to write differently.) If you don't like the specialist or mandarin terms of the one, move to the other. My hunch is that his intentionalism should best understand itself as materialism, and therefore as an archaeology of successions and recursions in (for example) the visual brain, with the phylogenetic and ontogenetic histories that are entrained by that analysis.

At a rhetorical level, however, there may be a salient difference between interpretation *in* visuality (and of it) and the neurovisuality *of* interpretation (and in it)—though ironically it's the difference that explains why neurological investigations and what seem to be ontologically more economical inquiries might well make epistemological common cause. Obviously interpretive "looking"—in a parallel to "reading"—is culturally bound, and historically particular. It confronts not only the problem of making sense of the productions of "historically remote beholders" (Palermo focuses on it as an art historian). It also confronts the question of people in one's time and place who do not share one's culture (this is the troubling case behind the scenes in this debate). Intentionalism has long been associated with exclusivistic hermeneutics—with having the right knowledge to look at things aright—and by circular appeal to intention it has long justified the teaching of the supposed knowledge that enables correct interpretation. (That's why intentionalism has fallen into such bad repute.) The hypothesis of neurovisuality dodges this defect without denying the principle. If visuality is exclusive to those who can "look" and "read," neurovisuality is open to anyone with a brain: intentionalism for everyone and anyone. Again, a point of intellectual tactics, not strategy.

I must clear up one misunderstanding, however. I did not mean to argue that art historians overlook "neural causalities that might operate outside visuality" because they ignore neurovisuality. That would indeed be a contradiction. Rather, I suggested that they might overlook one contribution of *neuroaesthetics* (distinct from neurovisuality), namely, that it might address such causalities. I'm agnostic about them as a point of science, but I'm interested in them as a matter of history. As I said, they could help explain the cross-cultural or transhistorical "power" and "agency" of artworks, pictures, and artifacts, possibly even their "interpretability"—one of the deepest unresolved questions in art history. Palermo notes a contradiction between neuroaesthetics and neurovisuality, between "subjective experience" and "interpretation" as represented neurally (and irrespective of their discursive representations in aesthetic and hermeneutic science). And so there is. But it's not *my* contradiction. It's the contradiction—or, more realistically, the uncertainty—between a neurology that does not find conventions and intentions wired or writ into the rules and programs of the brain (at least at some empirical level of recursion that could be modeled analytically) and one that does.

Art history may need no neuroanything. But Palermo may have missed the drift of my argument—my stated theme.

Neuroeverything needs art history.