



Are We Post-Theoretical? A Conversation

The following text is an edited and abridged version of a written conversation with the four authors Jessamine Batario, Marian Bleeke, Gerald Guest, and Zachary Stewart.

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On Theory and Post-Theory

Marian:

My first response is that “post-theory” seems a lot like theory to me!

Gerry:

I agree with Marian that “post-theory” is a lot like theory. I would say that it is theory—but different. In part, simply because of the passage of time. The academic context in which we think about theory and respond to theory’s legacy continues to change. First, the overall influence of theory has waned. As it has waned, it has also transformed. In the 21st century, the humanities as a whole are so much more focused on the contemporary. This feels very true for art history. Walk into a major museum and it’s almost a guarantee that modern and contemporary art will be the marketing focus.

In academia, the humanities has fractured into multiple contemporary areas of focus. This disaggregation has brought an important diversity to universities but it feels like we’re more disconnected than ever. Medieval art really feels like an insular topic

—with a lot of interesting things going on, but still isolated. I feel that a post-theoretical focus has something to offer. Most importantly, it asks us to reflect on the ways in which we produce knowledge within the field.

Marian:

The difference that “theory” as a movement made was that we were very self-conscious about deploying those new theories. Work done under this umbrella would call attention to its use of these new ideas, where more traditional scholarship often took its theoretical premises for granted and so left them unstated. And we were very conscious of using these new ideas in order to disrupt the established narratives of the discipline. Doing that was exciting. It seemed to make art history matter in a way that it had not done previously, by making it more than a merely academic enterprise. I use “we” there because I’m from the “theory” generation, that is, one of the people shaped by “theory” as a movement. I would date theory in this sense to the 1990s, when I was in graduate school.

Gerry:

I also feel aligned with Marian here in that my self-positioning in this space is very much a product of my graduate school years. And so I think it's important to be self-aware about these commitments, which feel both intellectual and affective. I think the work that we do is deeply personal, even if we have been taught to strive for a kind of transparency that requires us to write ourselves out of our scholarship. I wish that things weren't that way.

On Labels

Zachary:

Are our open-ended definitions of theory more expansive, perhaps, than those invoked during the Theory Wars of the 80s and 90s? No one here, for instance, seems to feel compelled to self-identify as any kind of -ist. (I know I don't.) Is that part of being "post-theoretical"?

I'd also like to consider our reliance on formal-analytical techniques. This was a topic that came up during the Q&A at Gerry's Kalamazoo session, but we ran out of time.

Gerry:

In response to Zachary's comment about formal analysis: This is important to me because I think of myself as an iconographer or iconologist with theoretical commitments. And I'm probably prioritizing iconography over theory. It would be interesting to hear how the rest of us label ourselves?

Marian:

I wouldn't label myself an iconographer. I'd say I'm a feminist scholar and that I do the social history of art.

I'm also one of the people who has had a continuing commitment to theory, in the sense of the bodies of thought that I initially encountered at this period in my life (in graduate school). For me that was feminism and work on reception and response. These were exciting ideas to me because they changed who we could write about as art historians: viewers instead of artists and women rather than men. To me that was exciting because it brought art history closer to my position in relationship to the material. It made art history personal and so made it matter.

Jessamine:

Zachary asked us about how we identify as -ists. For convenience, I'll admit I'm a modernist. I might balk at any other intellectual naming. In my non-academic life, I'll admit to being many things, and to practice what I preach about inserting my subjectivity into the histories I write, my future work will address those aspects more than they have previously.

And speaking of the emerging presence of the art historian, that brings me to the issue of formal analysis that Zachary brought up. And this will tie into the issue of temporality also. Formal analysis seems to me to be the foundational training we all receive as art historians. I think if we slow down and think about that, what we are actually doing

—describing a work of art—implicitly records our own presence in front of it. So we have two presences—the object’s and our own, in our present moment. This is what opens up the time travel aspect, what allows us to easily make connections between our surroundings and the remote past.

Zachary:

The naming question comes out of my own ambivalence because, honestly, there are times I wonder if I’m not a positivist in sheep’s clothing. I love measuring buildings and cataloging tracery types and molding profiles. I love getting lost in an archive. I find there’s something tremendously satisfying about dating an object or monument or attributing a work to a particular patron, architect, or artisan. The traditional art-historical stuff, in other words.

On Historiography

Zachary:

Can/should historiography be conceived as another form of accumulation that informs/helps/haunts our work as scholars?

Marian:

I think so. For me historiography is crucial. It is like theory in promoting an increased level of self-consciousness in our work. I need to be aware of how the material I’m working on has been shaped for me by previous scholarship and so what preconceived notions I am bringing to it. Here the nineteenth century is especially important: if we time travel, our trip back to the Middle Ages always goes through the nineteenth century first and that sets up so many of our expectations.

Gerry:

I’d like to hear about others’ commitments to historiography. A renewed interest in historiography seems to me to be a key component of the post-theoretical in that we’re more aware of how scholarship is produced institutionally. But I also feel that I’m a weak historiographer. How might we think about a better commitment to historiography in art history as a discipline? In response to Marian, I really feel like the nineteenth century is a bit of blind spot in my thinking. How can I do better?

Marian:

Gerry, if you want to think about the nineteenth century, just start looking for where it comes up in the projects you are working on. I think if you look, you will find it! For example, I’m working on another article about where and how ivory, or really objects made out of ivory, appears in the inventories of members of the French royal family from the late 1300 and early 1400’s, including Jean de Berry. I can do this project from Cleveland because most of these primary sources were edited and published in the nineteenth century and now those publications are out of copyright and available to download from the internet. But the question is, why were they being edited and published in the nineteenth century? I’ve not asked that, yet, but I could and probably should.

Jessamine:

Being committed to critical historiography also forces us to “time travel,” because we have to consider the historical circumstances that shape each reading too. And yes, the nineteenth century is so crucial, not

only as a stop to understanding medieval art, but in understanding the institution of art history as a whole. (I admit I am speaking from the perspective of someone who received her training in the United States, in institutions inflected by European traditions.)

Another topic I'm working on: the fateful year of 1884. This was the year that the Euro-American powers decided to standardize time across the globe, and incidentally, the same year that several European states decided to carve up Africa for their colonial trade interests—tying back to Marian's essay about ivory in the Congo! So in the span of about five weeks in late 1884, both time and (and a huge chunk of) space became compartmentalized. I relate periodization in art history to these nineteenth-century episodes.

By committing ourselves to critical historiography, we transgress the boundaries between our subfields, which I think is only a good thing. And that's one way of undoing the silos that periodization has created.

On Time-Traveling

Marian:

I think there is a sense of lateness or belatedness to my work and to a lot of what we do today. I'm not doing the primary scholarship of identifying and documenting the works of art. That was done a few generations ago. And I'm not the first to go beyond that into analysis and interpretation. That's been done too. I'm late to the game. In some ways that's a burden: my object of study includes all of the existing work about the

works of art I study in addition to the works of art themselves. But it is also an opportunity. I'm having a hard time articulating this, but I feel like, because the basic groundwork of the field has already been laid, I can do things that are more speculative, more adventurous, and so more interesting to me.

Gerry:

I agree with Marian that we might recuperate "lateness" as a positive quality, a building on the work we admire with a critical awareness of where we've been and where we are now.

Jessamine:

A quick note on belatedness as both a burden and opportunity: I imagine this is what Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" felt like. Confronted by a massive accumulation, feeling overwhelmed but having a singular opportunity to see something that those from the past might have overlooked. Connections become visible. And they don't have to be linear either.

Marian:

I'm finding a lot of overlap between the things I'm saying and Jessamine's paper. The idea of the accumulated past as both a burden and an opportunity. The sense of lateness and a shift from facts to interpretation and argumentation, which put a spotlight on our work as historians and our commitments in the present as shaping that work. And yes, that is scary today, because what was a tool to allow us to create a past that was more inclusive of different experiences can also be used for a different agenda.

On Ethics and Risk

Gerry:

Marian notes that her current work doesn't feel that different from past work—but I think that the ethical commitments are new. That feels exciting and different. It feels like there's a momentum that needs to be consciously sustained. It also feels challenging. How exactly does one deeply build these ethical commitments into our teaching and writing?

Marian:

I don't feel like the ethical commitment in my work is new, because feminism was/is also an ethical commitment. The commitment to talking about race is new, I've not thought about it before. I'm going to be very honest here and say that, up until a few years ago, I would have said that I wasn't interested in race as an issue because it wasn't an issue for me because I'm white and therefore am not impacted by race (whereas I've always been aware of being impacted by gender). Now I know that's not true. I am impacted by race in that my privilege as a white person makes it possible for me to believe that I'm not impacted by race. And I'd say that the way that commitment is expressed in this article is new too in that I was very conscious about foregrounding work by scholars of color.

Gerry:

What feels new is the explicit concern with inclusion as it relates to students and scholars. At Kalamazoo in 2018, there was a great session with the wordy title "We Teach People, Not Content: Understanding How Our Students' Lives and Backgrounds Affect

Our Teaching of the Middle Ages." It felt new and important as well as theory-inspired.

Jessamine:

Overall, I find myself agreeing a lot with what Marian has already expressed in this discussion, especially what she has said about self-consciousness and ethics. That's another connecting strand between our essays: we have each written ourselves into the texts, and have addressed some kind of ethical stakes. One might argue that social art history was addressing ethical, larger issues—of course it was—but I think more recently not only are those stakes becoming clearer, so are the subjective positions of the historians as well. And not in a negative way.

On Art History Today

Zachary:

Our concern for present-day affairs suggests some kind of continuity between critical-theoretical and post-critical-theoretical approaches. How do we parse that?

Marian:

One of the criticisms of theory at the time was that it was anachronistic, that somehow since a person in the Middle Ages couldn't have identified as a feminist it wasn't appropriate to take a feminist approach to medieval materials. I hope we are well past that by now! Again I think it comes back to being self-conscious or self-aware, if my work is always going to be shaped by the moment in which I live, then how can I deliberately shape that work to speak to the issues that are important in this moment?

Zachary:

I like Jessamine's conception of formal analysis. I think that's what I was getting at in my question. Formal analysis is, in effect, a theory—or a highly codified disciplinary practice at the very least. We write ourselves and our training into our objects of inquiry. It's inevitable. And that's where Marian's point about self-consciousness is so crucial. That we write with a perspective or a set of assumptions is not, in and of itself, a problem so long as we try to be explicit about it or them.

Gerry:

Finally, let me say that reading the other articles in this collection has been inspiring. For me, being post-theoretical means taking in the intellectual and ethical commitments of other scholars. Zachary, Marian, and Jessamine each bring a provocative temporal breadth to their essays—something lacking in mine. I'm hoping to learn from that.