



Introduction to On Unstable Ground

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The roots of this project lie, like so many of the best things we do as scholars, in the classroom. While studying the Bayeux Embroidery in an undergraduate seminar, Rachel and her students noted an interesting feature of the textile: the ground line sometimes fluctuated between level and bumpy within the same scene, seemingly without narrative motivation. Looking closer, Rachel began to notice a moralizing correlation between the stability of the ground and the people standing upon it (her observations ultimately resulting in the essay included in this issue). When she shared this observation with her Material Collective colleagues a lively discussion ensued about the nature and meaning of “ground.” We considered the ways different works might be said to be grounded: whether we are examining the earth on which they stand, the substrate beneath their surfaces, the foundations of their ideologies, or the justifications for their existence, art historians seek in many ways to excavate the grounds for our objects of study. We thought about how the ground continues to shift under our feet and that many of us will need to move to higher ground to avoid flooding, or perhaps to elevate our moral stance. We bemoaned the need to cover a lot of ground figuratively in a survey course even as we depend on the ability to do so literally in high-speed vehicles. We wondered if our changing beliefs, conclusions, and opinions are as well-grounded as the electronic equipment through which we communicate them. Whether as a metaphor, as an action, or as a

material fact, we ignore the ground at our own peril: it is never as firm as we might wish to believe it is. Such was the genesis of this theme issue of *Different Visions*.

While many authors responded to the expansive riffing on “ground” that we included in the call for papers, we were somewhat surprised to discover that a majority of the resulting essays were significantly concerned with the somewhat more traditional art historical uses of “ground,” both to identify an element in the fictive space of an image and the formal features making up the visual and physical substrate of a work. But at the same time, we were struck by the variety of ways in which the authors developed these elements. For Tina Bawden, Nancy Thebaut, and Saskia Quené, questions of how ground is depicted and conceived in works of art opened onto theological issues related to the place of humans within divinely ordained structures. For Rachel Dressler, Susan Kim and Asa Mittman, and Emily Shartrand, the ground emerged as an important way to structure and articulate social relationships among individual people, classes of people, and human and non-human actors. Kim and Mittman’s exploration of ground also speaks to this element’s potential cosmological function, a role Matthew Westerby and Joy Partridge also investigate. Finally, both the Quené and Kim and Mittman essays consider the material aspects of ground as the support for figuration.

The resulting collection thus takes its place alongside other recent scholarship on medieval art—and in art history more generally—that demonstrates the abiding power of not simply visual analysis, but the intellectual tradition of formalism as a method in art history. Like many critical tools, formalism has fallen in and out of scholarly favor across the decades. Often dismissed as an overly hermetic and somewhat elitist pursuit, formalism had seemed, from the 1980’s on, to have been largely relegated to art history’s past as a methodological tool lacking any real currency.^[1] And yet, recent years have seen a significant number of conferences and edited volumes on subjects that occupied the attention of bygone formalists such as Schapiro, Alois Riegl, and John Ruskin, such as abstraction, ornament, space and perspective, color, scale, and more.

Tempting as it is to dive into an examination of the features of this neo-formalist turn (if it may indeed be dubbed so), such a survey is outside the scope of this introduction. Still, a consideration of some of the possible sources of the formalist revival might help cast the essays gathered here in sharper relief. A chief influence has surely been the prominence of “New Materialist” thinking in the humanities since the first decade of the 21st century. Within art history, the ambitious metaphysical and ethical claims of New Materialism were often grounded in careful

analyses of the precise qualities of the materials and techniques that produced a particular work of art.[2] Such close material analysis readily elicits close formal analysis. The art historian might observe the ways in which a maker worked both with and against the physical qualities of a certain medium to achieve a desired effect, or might consider how the palette of a work is determined by the availability of particular pigments and the chemical processes that occur as they age. New Materialism's insistence that we pay more attention to objects necessarily entailed that we look at them more closely.

It is no mere coincidence that this renewed attention to the physical nature of artworks occurred in a time when their digital avatars were proliferating. As others have observed, the era of digitization has, ironically, reinforced for art historians the importance of seeing art objects not as simple "images" but as real things with physical qualities that respond complexly to their original—and subsequent—viewing environments (as noted explicitly in Kim and Mittman's essay). Nonetheless, digitization has been a boon to scholars, especially those far removed from major collections and sites, and has especially fostered the study of manuscripts. It is likely no accident that a majority of the essays gathered here focus on manuscripts, and studies of manuscripts similarly dominate many of the other collections of "neo-formalist" art history.[3] It is interesting to consider the causal relationships here: if (and it is a contentious if) manuscripts currently hold a dominant position in the study of medieval art, how might that be shaping the formal elements that come under scrutiny, and the kinds of questions we ask of them? We have noted, for example, the emphasis in the collected essays on "ground" as a physical substrate, as a pictorial element and symbol, and as a perceptual counterpoint to depicted figures. As a counter-example, Westerby's essay is unconcerned with such definitions, since the ground in an architectural site is a very different phenomenon. Our original call had anticipated greater consideration of "ground" from geographic and ecocritical perspectives, but such studies are perhaps more suited to media other than manuscripts. What other questions or topics might we be neglecting as a field due to these media biases? Such a question certainly is not new—it is at the heart of decades-old questions about the lines between visual or material culture and art history, and between fine art and craft—but it is certainly worth asking ourselves again and again.

These are some of the questions that this group of essays prompted in our minds. Of course, one of the great pleasures of scholarly collections such as this one is that many new questions arise out of the individual essays, such as the symbolism of snails, the definition of lakes, the intricate problems of how painters depict fabric,

and more. We are grateful to the authors for giving us the opportunity to explore these and other questions. We hope readers of this issue will similarly contemplate the grounds of their own practice.

References

- 1** For example, the fact that the short but incisive historiographical essay by Linda Seidel on the topic in the *Blackwell Companion to Medieval Art* concludes with Meyer Schapiro in the middle of the twentieth century could be taken to imply that formalism, unlike the other methods discussed in the same volume, was more a part of the field's past than its future. See Linda Seidel, "Formalism," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, second edition, edited by Conrad Rudolph (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2019), 171-94.

- 2** Such close attention to objects themselves might be the most significant contribution that art history can make to New Materialist thinking, but is perhaps the most overlooked by other disciplines.

- 3** The significant copyright distinctions between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects may also be a factor here, as they may be inspiring more manuscript repositories to offer their images through Open Access systems, thus making study and publication of manuscripts easier.