

**Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, 1996, 236 pp., 4 colour plates, 73 black-and-white illus., \$20.00 (U.S.), \$28.50 (Cdn) paper**

**Ernestine Daubner**

Volume 23, numéro 1-2, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073297ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073297ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Daubner, E. (1996). Compte rendu de [Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, 1996, 236 pp., 4 colour plates, 73 black-and-white illus., \$20.00 (U.S.), \$28.50 (Cdn) paper]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 23(1-2), 96-100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073297ar>

- 3 See Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 4-12.
- 4 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult – Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990); translated as *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), chs. 17-19.
- 5 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 432-53.
- 6 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 75-88.
- 7 For an examination of this problem and its roots, see Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," *Art History*, VI (1983), 253-70.
- 8 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 120.
- 9 Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style," 263-70.
- 10 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 24.
- 11 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 105-06, 168 n. 13.
- 12 This is a complex question with a great deal of attendant bibliography. For an account of early moments in the shift to a criti-

cism based not only in reason but also in the instinctively moral, and deeply psychological, response of the senses to "forms in and of themselves," see Charles Dempsey, "The Greek Style and the History of Neo-classicism," in *Pietro Testa, 1612-1650: Prints and Drawings*, by Elizabeth Cropper (Philadelphia 1988), xxxvii-lxv. For a discussion of an early attempt to provide an overtly rationalized system for the analysis of style, see Carol Gibson-Wood, "Jonathan Richardson and the Rationalization of Connoisseurship," *Art History*, VII (1984), 38-56. Gibson-Wood points to the Achilles' heel of connoisseurs' claims to rationality when she observes that, when faced with the problem of explaining how theory applies to practice, "Every writer on connoisseurship ... has usually either recommended a specific attributional technique or retreated to the position that the connoisseur 'just knows' an artist's style when he sees it."

- 13 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 40-41.
- 14 See Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 146-47.

LAURIE SCHNEIDER ADAMS, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, 1996, 236 pp., 4 colour plates, 73 black-and-white illus., \$20.00 (U.S.), \$28.50 (Cdn) paper.

"Immensely complex, [there is a] convergence of many levels of meaning [...] in a single artistic product" (p. xvi). These opening remarks by the author of *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* appear to assert that a work of art is more than an ahistorical aesthetic object and more than an art historical object. Indeed, such words suggest that the author recognizes art's embeddedness in socio-economic structures and epistemologies. Furthermore, in writing a book with the title, *The Methodologies of Art*, the author seems to acknowledge that the act of interpreting a work of art, even of providing an historical basis for an art object, is positioning oneself within a complex network of interweaving and ever-changing cultural languages. And certainly, considering the diverse methods that this author examines (Formalism and Style, Iconography, Marxism, Feminism, Biography and Autobiography, Semiotics, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, as well as Psychoanalysis), one is readily led to believe that Laurie Schneider Adams, like many art scholars in the last few decades, has crossed strict traditional art historical boundaries.

In light of the ever-expanding discipline of art history, there is no doubt that one would welcome a book that historicizes and effectively elucidates the various traditional and contemporary methodologies. One has, of course, already seen the burgeoning of such studies in text-based disciplines. Terry Eagleton's book, *Literary Theory*,<sup>1</sup> is a good example. Eagleton's concise, lucid and transparent writing

on a broad range of contemporary methodologies (though not comprehensive and not directly related to art) has served even the art history scholar. Anthologies, such as *Critical Theory Since Plato* and *Critical Theory Since 1965*,<sup>2</sup> have also benefited academics espousing new interdisciplinary approaches.

This is not to say that art historians have failed to produce their own valuable literature. There are numerous anthologies of traditional methods, among them the important *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, which contains classic essays by such canonical figures as Frederick Antal, Henri Focillon, E.H. Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin.<sup>3</sup> In his *Art History and its Methods*,<sup>4</sup> Eric Fernie, the Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London, has compiled a selection of writings from Giorgio Vasari to Griselda Pollock and provides commentaries on the various approaches. While Fernie takes into account the problematics underlying some contemporary theories and methods and negotiates them in light of the critiques of the discipline and the advent of the "new art history," in many ways, his interpretations remain grounded in a traditional art historical perspective.

Other art historians have dealt exclusively with contemporary approaches. James M. Thompson's anthology, *20th Century Theories of Art*, includes the writings of a broad range of contemporary theorists (though only one by a woman) and provides brief but lucid overviews of the various methods, as well as valuable suggestions for further readings.<sup>5</sup> Recently, one has also seen the emergence of books, such as *Critical Terms for Art History*, which bridge critical theory and art history.<sup>6</sup> This particular book contains per-

continent and engaging writings by outstanding scholars on such topical issues as representation, simulacrum, originality and appropriation. A recent publication, *Art as Theory: Theory Rules*, offers insightful essays on the links between art, art criticism and theory and acknowledges the shift away from pure art history toward a broader cultural history.<sup>7</sup> Other books of collected essays explore the application of the new critical approaches to the expanded field of visual culture. The most recent, *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* and *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, both edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, provide excellent readings by renowned scholars such as Mieke Bal, Thomas Crow, Arthur C. Danto, Rosalind Krauss, Linda Nochlin, John Tagg and Lisa Tickner.<sup>8</sup> There are also numerous books and collected essays on gender studies, post-colonialist theory and cultural studies that now feature in the libraries of art scholars.

Despite the scores of invaluable books and anthologies that are available, many will agree that what is still wanting is a primer that disentangles the intricacies of the multi-disciplinary theories in a clear, succinct manner, without compromising their complexity, and without ignoring the problematics that engendered them. Such a primer would recognize the interrelatedness of the various approaches and their applications to visual culture. What the new art history needs, in other words, is a comprehensive study of the various traditional and contemporary methodologies that is scholarly and accessible. A tall order – a daunting task for one author. Nevertheless, Laurie Schneider Adams has assumed the challenge, if one accepts the statements made in the promotional material for this book and if one relies on the information provided on its jacket, which includes a prestigious endorsement by David Carrier. It is fair to say that Adams' book has been set up to raise certain expectations – expectations, unfortunately, which are quickly dashed.

One could, of course, argue that in an ever-changing discipline it is difficult to be all-encompassing. However, it is not simply that Adams makes certain omissions: discussions of post-colonialist theory, critical theory, cultural studies are absent. Adams' study is disappointing in a more fundamental way. One finds in her book not only glaring silences and astonishing exclusions but also strange misconceptions and a surprisingly dated perspective that counters the very methodologies she describes. Her writing barely hides her opinionated stance and quite traditional view of the role of art and the artist. Indeed, it is paradoxical to find, in the introduction to a book addressing contemporary methodologies, a statement such as, "[e]ven a three-dimensional representation, such as a sculpture, is an

'abstraction' from nature..." (p. 10). How can such an author effectively examine post-structuralist theories and deconstruction? Furthermore, when one reads the monolithic analyses of iconic works in her opening chapter, "What is Art?," one wonders why she ever undertook this project. In fact, her lack of a nuanced reading makes one ponder the emptiness of her earlier words about an image being "a convergence of many levels of meaning" (p. xvi). This is not the only contradiction. Indeed, her opening chapter paves the way for further surprises.

Even a cursory glance at Adams' study reveals fundamental gaps. Thumbing through the book for the first time, perusing its index and its illustrations, one is struck by the absences. For example, out of the 73 black-and-white illustrations and 4 colour plates, there are only five images of works made by women artists and two non-western works. Since the images by women artists serve to illustrate her chapter, "Feminism," one must assume, then, that women's art is inappropriate for illustrating the other supposedly "masculinist" methods.

Adams' examination of contemporary methods begins with two chapters entitled "Contextual Approaches:" the first covers "Marxism;" the second, "Feminism." Although she begins her discussion of the former by examining how Marxism affected interpretation of history, the reader gains little insight into the Marxist dialectic and the concept of historical materialism. Nor does Adams provide any clear explanation of the superstructure-substructure dichotomy or, more specifically, of how art, art history and society (inter)relate. Adams does give brief overviews of the writings of some classic "Marxist" art historians, briefly summarizing, for example, the writings of Frederick Antal and Michael Baxandall on the social, religious, political and economic context of Italian art production in the fifteenth century, as well as elaborating upon Arnold Hauser's sociological reading of the sixteenth century. She also provides a quick overview of Svetlana Alpers' study of Rembrandt and the marketplace and T.J. Clark's study of Delacroix and Manet. However, even in her discussion of Clark's social art history, the reader is not given any indication of how the Marxist approach "revolutionized" art history. This reader would have expected Adams to articulate what Clark calls "the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes."<sup>9</sup> It is most surprising, however, that she fails to make concrete connection between Marxism and feminism, even in the chapter, "Feminism."

Adams begins this particular "Contextual Approach"

by pointing out that the feminist challenge was twofold: the first was to consider ways in which women have been discriminated against both as practicing artists and as “subjects of art;” the second was to recover information about the contributions of women, “both as artists and patrons” (p. 79). However, in her hasty discussion of the representation of women in art, Adams makes the astonishing statement that feminist theories based on “assumptions that both the artists and the viewing public are male” (p. 80) support T. J. Clark’s interpretations of the male viewer. Does this make Clark in some way the father of feminist revisionism? Strange that, regarding the issue of the male viewer, one finds not so much as a mention of Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the active male gaze and the objectified female.<sup>10</sup> Nor is there even a casual reference to the Marxist feminist, Griselda Pollock. Indeed, Adams might have greatly benefited by reading Pollock’s critique of Clark’s perception of feminism as just one other methodology.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Pollock’s decade-old essays on feminism and art history are far more insightful, complex and comprehensive than the information provided by Adams.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that Adams does not draw on some feminist writings. In fact, she briefly summarizes a few classic case histories by such authors as Linda Nochlin, Mary Garrard and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. I shall pause for a moment to comment on the essay by Solomon-Godeau that Adams briefly outlines.<sup>13</sup> As an incisive study of Paul Gauguin’s “primitivism,” Solomon-Godeau’s article raises pertinent questions and astute observations regarding the representation of the “native” woman. It is most ironic for Adams to mention this insightful essay, given how it contrasts so sharply with her own rather innocent reading of Gauguin’s paintings in her chapter “Iconography.” Indeed, Adams’ perfunctory summaries of the writings of feminist scholars tend to make the reader lose touch with many of the significant issues they have raised. Moreover, even though Adams remarks how feminists have questioned the high-low art dichotomy and the hierarchic gendering of the arts and crafts, it is not apparent that she understands the real impact of feminist interventions and how these have triggered the radical revisioning of art history – without which the author arguably would not have written her book in the first place.

In short, Adams’ study provides little insight into the structural gender bias ingrained in the discipline of art history and no analysis of the problems inherent in the project of redressing a discipline based on hierarchical categories. Adams provides no genuine inquiry into issues that have preoccupied feminist scholars and artists for the past few decades: not into the politics of representation, not into

the question of sexual and gender difference, not into issues regarding subjectivity and identity.

Indeed, throughout this chapter, her repetition of such phrases as “according to feminists,” “feminists argue...,” screams out that she has positioned herself on the outside. This location does not provide her with greater objectivity but only with a disregard for the issues at play. This realized, it is not then so curious to find that two-thirds of her chapter, “Feminism,” is based on biographical accounts of historical women featured in Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*, 1979. It is Chicago’s work, Adams notes, that serves her “as a framework for a discussion of feminism and art history” (p. 86). Her notion of a feminist art history is to repeat, for the nth time, the story of Artemisia Gentileschi’s rape or to write at length about the personal relationship between Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz and how this particular female artist rejected feminists’ readings of her work and stated that the “only people who ever helped me were men” (p. 98).

If Adams’ superficial overview of feminist art histories lacks perspicacity and rigour, so too do her analyses of the other contemporary theories. Adams’ two chapters on “Semiotics” (one entitled “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism” and the other, “Deconstruction”) are a case in point. Here, the author has a wonderful occasion to examine the significant impact that structural linguistics, structuralism and post-structuralism have had on art theory. However, the opportunity is lost. It is not in Adams’ book that one will find clarifications about the use and abuse of many of the terms and concepts. Nor is it here that lucid explanations are offered on how semiotics relates to the art object and to the construction of meaning.

Adams does not adequately relate the relevance of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory about the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (the sound-image or graphic image) and the signified (the concept or meaning the signifier refers to). Rather than explaining Saussure’s clarifications about the conventional perception of a symbiosis between word and thing, sign and referent, Adams speaks at length, and with a certain nostalgia, about how the Old Testament and Edenic language “reflected reality and was in perfect harmony with it” (p. 137).

Also, her writing provides no insight into the fundamental distinction between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), between speech and writing (*écriture*), between the concept of difference and *différance*. As a result, Adams withholds essential keys to understanding the distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism.

Most unfortunate is that Adams has also missed an excellent opportunity to highlight the overuse and misuse of

the current buzzword “deconstruction” – a word which has become a kind of “*passé-partout*,” incorrectly employed to mean a great number of things (to critique, to criticize, to analyse, to decode, to destroy, to destruct ...).

Although a whole chapter is devoted to deconstruction and to Jacques Derrida’s book, *Truth in Painting*, a reader unfamiliar with post-structuralist theory would be hard-pressed to understand Derrida’s position on truth, on the metaphysics of presence, even on his deconstructive strategies. Adams discusses, among others, Derrida’s chapter, “Restitutions,” (which deals with the famous Heidegger-Schapiro debate regarding the “true” attribution of Vincent Van Gogh’s, *Shoes*, 1886). Adams’ account, unfortunately, does not convey the wonderful, whimsical and witty play of words about shoes and about laces that tangle and disentangle, that ravel and unravel, that snarl and unsnarl, and that tie the two thinkers, Heidegger and Schapiro, together. Derrida’s is a humorous, hilarious account of how hollow dark holes of whose (?) shoes swallow up the truth claims of these would-be truth-makers. It recounts how the hook-like laces ensnare and lure these authoritative authors into speaking about the truth: about the “truth” that lies within painting, about the truth that “lies.” In my mind, this is one of the finest examples (at least for an art scholar) of Derrida’s playful and lyrical deconstructions. Here, words slip and slide over truth and untruth, making visible what lies obscured and hidden when one speaks of “truth.” A Derridean reading would reveal that it is Adams herself who has become ensnared and entangled in her words: words that speak not of Derrida, not of deconstruction, but about herself, about her fixed position, her hidden belief that there *is* an origin, an original model, a stable meaning, an essential truth in art.

Adams’ “truth” has, moreover, concealed the significant implications of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Not one word is uttered about how deconstruction has served feminist and post-colonialist scholars. No insight here into how post-structuralism relates to subjectivity, identity, difference. Yes, Adams does comment on Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” in her curious final chapter entitled “Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis: Roger Fry and Roland Barthes” (the title surely says enough). However, her peculiar remarks obscure what is at play: “[Barthes], like Foucault, ‘killed’ all his literary predecessors, when he championed the death of the Author ...” How do such words permit a reader to discover that the “death of the author” opens up new notions of the subject in movement and in flux. How then can one ever expect to find a word about how the loss of a strong subject position affects the project of feminists and other disenfranchised groups who have

never possessed a powerful voice with which they might speak as subjects and thus articulate their subjectivity. These dilemmas and problems are invisible in Adams’ book.

Not even in her chapter entitled “Biography and Autobiography” can the reader learn about the numerous debates and critiques regarding the author, the omnipotent genius or the universal subject. There is nothing here on the discourses that construct the myth of the artist and the institutional powers that create and perpetuate the “name” of the artist. Another flagrant omission, in this regard, is Michel Foucault – a curious oversight given the enormous impact Foucault has had on contemporary art writing. He earns only two brief (and negligible) sentences.

One of the more perplexing and misleading studies in Adams’ chapter on “Semiotics” is her discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although this philosopher wrote a book entitled *Signs* and although he acknowledged Saussure’s theories, this does not warrant placing him in the realm of the semiotician, the structuralist, the post-structuralist! Even more puzzling, Adams paints this phenomenologist as a hybrid of Roger Fry and Ernst Gombrich.<sup>14</sup> Adams gives us no clue as to the manner in which Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology undermines Cartesian dualism, how he rewrites the meaning of the *cogito*. There is no intimation here as to how Merleau-Ponty reclaims a carnalized vision wherein subject and object remain inextricably intertwined, no insight into Merleau-Ponty’s words about “sensible speech” that “tears out or tears apart meanings in the undivided whole of the nameable...”<sup>15</sup> And there is nothing about how Merleau-Ponty perceived a work of art to be a convergence of subject and object, nor a mention of how pre-existing language is mediated by the artistic subject. For Adams all this apparently suggests that “Merleau-Ponty believes that the life of an artist ‘follows’ the life of his art” (p. 141).

Annoyed with such bewildering misconceptions and flagrant omissions, this reader was impatient to end this chapter and to read about a method in which Adams was apparently more conversant – psychoanalysis.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the opening sentence in this chapter appeared to announce a different tone: “The psychoanalytic approach to art history deals primarily with the *unconscious* significance of works of art” (p. 179) [my emphasis]. Anthropomorphizing a work of art is certainly a humorous, ironic way to begin. These words bring to mind W.J.T. Mitchell’s witty and masterful “What do Pictures Really Want?”<sup>17</sup> Would Adams be placing a work of art on the analysts’ couch? Not at all.

As in the other chapters, Adams’ study consists simply of cursory overviews – this time of certain psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, D.W. Winnicott and Jacques Lacan. Given the impact of psychoanalytic theory upon

contemporary critical writing dealing with issues of representation and spectatorship, with the construction of gender and sexual difference and with the question of subjectivity and identity, and given the expectations created by a book that purports to discuss the various contemporary methods, it is astonishing that Adams could justify including only these authors. There is not so much as a hint that there exists a whole body of significant writings on psychoanalysis and visual culture by renowned scholars and artists, many of whom are women.

Even her discussion of "Lacan and the Power of the Gaze" is remarkably general. This is no doubt due to its complexity, as Adams herself admits: "Lacan's writing is difficult, and what follows is a brief summary of a few of his concepts explicated by Anthony Wilden" (p. 206). Because of her cursory approach, the link between Lacanian theory and visual images is obscured. An example: "In Giotto's *Nativity*, the play of the gaze is contained within the narrative of the picture. In Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, on the other hand, the gaze operates self-consciously between the viewer and the represented woman" (p. 210). Without contextualizing these particular works, and without theorizing the notion of the gaze, her examples fail to provide insights into the significance of Lacanian theory as a method of analysis.

My review of Adams' survey of the methodologies of art ends where she herself begins, with the traditional ones. Here I offer only a few comments. I remain laconic about these chapters on "Formalism and Style," "Iconography," "Biography and Autobiography" because I believe that I have already conveyed Adams' position sufficiently: her belief in the story of the great artists, the iconic works of art, the unambiguous harmony between word and image, sign and referent, her conception of ancient notions of mimesis. Indeed, Adams simply repeats here the androcentric and Eurocentric tales we have so often heard.

In a book that deals with the various methodologies of art, this reader would have expected Adams to make visible "the convergence of many layers of meaning," to let us hear the multiple voices that make up our visual languages and to permit us to discern the many points of view. This would have provided an occasion to visualize how the different and diverse perspectives overlap, intertwine, contradict and oppose each other. However, throughout Laurie Schneider Adams' book, *The Methodologies of Art*, one encounters a unitary stance, one hears a monologic voice that recounts a monolithic tale that generalizes, universalizes, totalizes.

ERNESTINE DAUBNER  
Concordia University

## Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), 244 pp.
- 2 Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York, 1971), 1267 pp; Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, eds, *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee, 1986), 891 pp.
- 3 W. Eugene Kleinbauer, ed., *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1989), 528 pp.
- 4 Eric Fernie, ed., *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London, 1995), 383 pp.
- 5 James M. Thompson, ed., *20th Century Theories of Art* (Ottawa, 1990), 547 pp.
- 6 Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds, *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago and London, 1996), 364 pp.
- 7 Jody Berland, Will Straw and David Tomas, eds, *Art As Theory: Theory Rules* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1996), 320 pp.
- 8 Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, eds, *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (New York, 1991), 286 pp.; same editors, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover and London, 1994), 429 pp.
- 9 Thompson, *20th Century Theories of Art*, 268.
- 10 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, XVI, 3 (1975), 6-18.
- 11 See Griselda Pollock, "Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art Histories and Marxism," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London, New York, 1988), 18-49. Regarding the problems of writing about feminist art histories and methodologies, see also her recent "The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art History" in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts* (London, New York, 1996), 3-21.
- 12 See, for example, Griselda Pollock, "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction" *Vision and Difference*, 1-17; idem.
- 13 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native," in *The Expanding Discourse*, eds Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York, 1992), ch. 17.
- 14 "Like Roger Fry, Merleau-Ponty stressed the importance of looking at what is seen;" "[Like Gombrich,] Merleau-Ponty focused on the formal and perceptual aspects of visual signs....," 142-43.
- 15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Chicago, 1964), 17, 18.
- 16 Laurie Schneider Adams has written a book, *Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York, 1993), 366 pp.
- 17 W.J.T. Mitchell, "What do Pictures Really Want?" *October*, LXXVII (Summer 1996), 71-83.