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## Digital Art History “Beyond the Digitized Slide Library”: An Interview with Johanna Drucker and Miriam Posner

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### Abstract

Johanna Drucker and Miriam Posner were two of the organizers of the Getty/UCLA Summer Institute in Digital Art History “[Beyond the Digitized Slide Library](#)” that took place in the summers of 2014 and 2015. With their extensive expertise in the field, they developed a program that challenged participants to think about the broad theoretical implications of their respective projects and to gain practical tools in digital art history. In this interview, they will describe some of their thinking behind the institute and the state of the field of digital art history, including a discussion of the impact of network visualizations on the discipline.

### Résumé

Johanna Drucker et Miriam Posner étaient parmi les organisateurs de l'Ecole d'été en histoire de l'art digitale organisée par le Getty et UCLA, intitulée « [Beyond the Digitized Slide Library](#) », en 2014 et 2015. Partant de leur expertise dans le domaine, elles ont invité les participants à réfléchir sur les implications théoriques de leurs projets, et à acquérir des outils pratiques de l'histoire de l'art numérique. Dans cet entretien, elles évoquent quelques aspects de la réflexion à l'origine de cette Ecole d'été, ainsi que la situation du champ de l'histoire de l'art numérique, en particulier l'impact sur la discipline des visualisations en réseaux.

*\* Miriam Kienle is Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Kentucky. She specializes in modern, contemporary, and American art, with a particular focus on network theory and analysis, new media studies, and theories of gender and sexuality.*

This interview took place following the 2015 Getty/UCLA Summer Institute in Digital Art History, "[Beyond the Digitized Slide Library](#), which was organized by Johanna Drucker and Miriam Posner, as well as Todd Presner and Steven Nelson. As this volume grew out of the discussions held at the Summer Institute and several of the contributors were participants (myself included), Drucker and Posner generously agreed to be interviewed about the thinking behind the Institute and important questions in the increasingly significant field of Digital Art History.

Johanna Drucker is the Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies at UCLA and internationally known for her work in the history of graphic design, typography, experimental poetry, fine art, and digital humanities. In 2014 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and awarded an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts by the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2017.

Miriam Posner is an assistant professor at the UCLA School of Information. She's also a digital humanist with interests in labor, race, feminism, and the history and philosophy of data. She is at work on two projects: the first on what "data" might mean for humanistic research; and the second on how multinational corporations are making use of data in their supply chains.

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**Miriam Kienle:** To begin, perhaps you could describe how you conceived of "Beyond the Digitized Slide Library." What were some of the key issues that you sought to address in the field of Digital Art History? And what did you see as the defining or distinguishing features of your program?

**Johanna Drucker:** I think the Getty wanted us to consider how to jump-start digital humanities research in art history. Text-based computational processes were in the forefront of DH in the first decades, and text lends itself to data mining, topic

modeling, sentiment analysis, network diagramming in ways that images do not. But art historians are concerned with many aspects of the historical record and critical discourses, so thinking about how to introduce DH methods into the field was one of our primary goals. I think we are all interested in the pedagogical foundations for research, as well as in research approaches. So, for me at least, one working question was consideration of what a methods class in DH would look like if it served Art Historians, and what kinds of smaller modules of methods might fit in a larger curricular frame. I think our approach is broad, critically-informed, and attempts to integrate theoretical issues and reflection into practice—and to consider the essential character of visual, spatial, physical objects as well as textual ones.

**Miriam Posner:** As Johanna says, our feeling at the inception of these workshops was that digital humanities research on texts has been really active and visible, but that work with images, and visuality in general, was relatively under-discussed. I like to think that one of the hallmarks of UCLA's approach to digital humanities is our ability not only to teach the technology that currently exists, but to help people imagine research paths that are not yet defined. So I hope that our institute offered a critical, searching, rigorous approach to digital humanities.

**MK:** At the beginning of the institute, one of the big questions addressed was, what happens to the digital information age when we bring it into dialogue with the millennia-old traditions of the humanities? What can these traditions offer the digital age and vice-versa?

**JD:** Not everyone will share my view, but I believe the humanities are constituted by interpretative methods, not just the "things" of the cultural record and human expression. So, an interpretative approach to epistemology is essential for a humanistic inquiry—and this pits us against many of the underpinnings of quantitative methods, which are fundamentally empirical, observer-independent (or presumably so), and assume an object of study that is independent of critical

engagement. Humanistic methods are rooted in the assumption that epistemologies *constitute* their objects of inquiry; they do not simply encounter them as self-evident and autonomous objects. This means, however, that making computational models of interpretative activity has to change approaches to data structures and their expressions. We are a long way from achieving this, but the point is to insist on such explorations within the conception of digital projects, not simply bracket them out, shrug, and accept computational efficiencies and expediencies on their own terms of disambiguation and discreteness. Capacity to tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, to see the historical situatedness and constructed character of knowledge, is essential to the humanities. Finding ways of working with these concepts within a digital environment is a challenge. The complexity of visual objects and expressions, whose own situatedness is often quite elaborate, poses other challenges, and that is in addition to the basic problem of remediation of art historical artifacts for them to become computationally tractable.

**MP:** Part of the reason I find digital humanities interesting is that I'm not actually sure what will happen. I feel increasingly that there is a terrible problem at the heart of the digital humanities endeavor: namely, that the operations necessary to divide sources into data are in some ways antithetical to the humanistic enterprise, as Johanna's expressed it. One must adopt a relatively comprehensive ontology in order to divide objects into data, but part of the point of the humanities is that one person's ontology won't be the same as another person's. I nevertheless think that it's important to wrestle with the limits of data because it's of such obvious importance in our current moment, and we risk abandoning the problem to people who aren't trained to deal with it. So what will we do: create ever more detailed and complicated data models, like a Borgesian map, or develop some kind of formal approach to data that surfaces its otherwise hidden limitations? (I tend to favor the latter approach.)

**MK:** Building on that question, what do you see as the impact of the digital humanities on the field of art history? How do you see digital tools helping us to ask important art historical questions in new ways? And how might the skills and perspectives of art historians be useful to the development of the digital humanities more broadly?

**JD:** I see a few benefits to art history. The first is that, as in all DH work, a benefit occurs at a large scale when a corpus can be searched, filtered, and patterns within it discerned. For example, if you want to look through a corpus of modern art historical critical work and see when certain terms came into use, how movements or artists were characterized, and where the major conversations were developing, this can be done computationally in ways that just are impossible at the human scale of close reading we had to use in the past. Text or data mining and other analytics do not rely on structured data, they can be used on unstructured materials. The second is the analysis of structured data—records, catalogues, metadata and description, which are all themselves expressions of critical epistemology. The [Getty Provenance Index](#) is a dramatic example of structured data, but it is important to keep in mind that these resources do not make themselves. They are authored, their digitization requires enormous amounts of work, upkeep, and investment of infrastructure. Image-based search working with feature recognition is becoming increasingly useful, though; here again it is important to keep in mind that the fundamental act of digitization remediates visual information in ways that are not inherent to the original and may be artifacts of the process, not features of a work. Very elaborate work in material sciences, combined with new forms of imaging analysis that constructs computationally rich versions of damaged or partial works, promises to be extremely useful ahead, as it makes objects available for study that simply cannot be read with a human eye. Much work remains to create and explore intellectual models of historical processes, influences, careers and social forces, reception history, as well as

production history in ways that will combine large scale analytics and close reading.

**MK:** In the field of art history, there are very few of us whose teaching and research have not been affected by digital technologies in some form. However, during the Institute, we talked a lot about the difference between simply employing digital tools and thinking through them with “born digital” projects. What do you see as particularly significant digital art history projects in recent years? And how has the landscape of digital art history shifted since you first conceived of “Beyond the Digitized Slide Library”?

**JD:** I still think that the [Getty Provenance Index](#), [Mapping Gothic France](#), and the [Western Semitic Epigraphy project](#) are exemplary. So is the [Chaco Canyon project](#), the [Perseus Digital Library](#), and the [Chicago Columbian Exposition project](#). But I cannot claim exhaustive, or even extensive, knowledge of this field. Many museums are doing very interesting work integrating their collections management and their public outreach and educational initiatives, and this, also, seems very important for getting beyond the canonical frameworks of blockbuster art history. But the challenge of thinking digitally, computationally, is still an obstacle to many scholars who think mainly of access, rather than research. I think the study of economic factors—values, markets, also materials of production, labor, shipment, etc.—will be an area where digital modes will be beneficial. Fun to imagine some agent-based modeling of careers and critics in predictive ways for contemporary art. Mainly, however, I think the integration of techniques of structuring research—using a spreadsheet from the beginning of a project, figuring out how “data” can be constructed from analog inquiry, and what the use of this is over the course of a project, or a scholar’s career—into work habits and flows will make an enormous difference, if adopted. The whole shift from discursive practice to analytic practice such that research is conceived in computationally tractable terms will be one seismic shift, if it happens.

**MK:** While humanists tend to value ambiguity, heterogeneity, and irregularity, computer and

social scientists employ data-centered methods that stress pattern, clarity and regularity. What are some of the ways that you think digital humanist can navigate these seemingly conflicting priorities?

**JD:** More complex data models, engagement with statistics, and invention of new modes of visualization and digital expression.

**MP:** My sense, in speaking to database designers and statisticians, is that they’re aware of and interested in many of the same problems that preoccupy us. We’ve recently seen work on flexible ontologies, for example, as well as things like fuzzy dates. So I wonder if there’s more common ground than we sometimes assume. I also think, though, that we as humanists need to come to some sort of consensus about what we actually think data can do. Do we actually *trust* something called “data” to yield some approximation of ground truth? The answer, to judge from citation patterns of DH work, is probably no. So if not, we’ll need to decide if we can arrive at more convincing data models, or if we should just abandon data altogether.

**MK:** In looking back through the group notes from the Institute, one of the things that I appreciated most was the healthy level of skepticism that you had about visualizations produced with new digital tools. What is lost and gained in translating a painting into a digital image or an art dealer’s records into a social network graph? Perhaps you could describe some of the problems and promises you see with such visualizations, particularly as they relate to network visualizations.

**JD:** Well, I could write and have written extensively on this topic, as you know. I can boil this down to a few statements. 1) Most visualizations we use are borrowed from fields whose epistemological premises assume an observer-independent relation to their objects of inquiry. Modeling the co-dependent relation between observer and phenomena is crucial. 2) Information visualizations are almost all representations (elaborately constructed, historically and culturally inflected, images) passing themselves off as presentations (statements of fact). Emphasis on the

constructedness of the image, on the life-cycle data, and on the conventions that elide partial information into apparently coherent visual forms is also crucial. 3) Almost all humanities information is partial, discontinuous, subject to interpretation, and non-discrete. Find ways of showing these qualities and make them into legible conventions. We are working on it....

**MP:** I'm glad that we conveyed that. There's so much lost—a huge amount of context and perspective. But in my own work, I've found that I gain things, too, not only from the finished product of, for example, a network diagram, but from the iterative process that goes into making it. When one has to think systematically about how to delineate boundaries between various properties, or how to categorize one's sources, one realizes how much it's possible to elide the details of these decisions in narratives. Sometimes this tension between what goes unsaid in text-based scholarship and what needs to be made explicit in a data-based project becomes the real question at the heart of your work. To make that more concrete, my students and I worked last quarter on building a database of silent race films. The question of what constitutes a "race film" is so thorny as to be nearly un-addressable, but in the end, we found that very inscrutability to be the most fascinating part of the project. How can a community of practice have no reliably enumerable qualities, and yet, without a doubt, constitute a community? Mysterious!

**MK:** Now that the Institutes have concluded, what do you see as some of the important outcomes? What did you learn and what do you hope that students took away?

**JD:** I learned an enormous amount from reading the application pool. We saw a wide range of topics, but realized there was a limited, finite, number of types of projects, particularly in terms of their adoption for DH work. Networking projects, mapping projects, data visualization/analysis, and text mining were foremost, as were archive, collection, and 3D modeling projects. These are all quite tractable and can be managed without custom solutions, in most cases. From the specific cases we

engaged with in our actual sessions, I think we learned a lot about the ways scholars will need to change their training and work habits to succeed in a digital environment. The amount of work, sheer hours of labor, involved in doing digital projects is daunting. And the question of whether the digital adds an intellectual dimension that would not be present in a conventional print format has always got to be kept in mind.

**MP:** Yes, as Johanna says, we learned a lot by sitting around a table and reading and discussing people's applications. We discovered that we were often drawn to those projects that had really thorny qualities to them, and we had fun talking about what directions these projects might help to chart for digital art history. In my mind—as I tried to convey to the participants--it's much less important to me that people leave with a viable or successful project, and more important that they leave with a determination to keep trying stuff and learning on their own and building capacity at their own institutions. I think I'm always, to my own dismay, an example of how to keep moving, despite enormous gaps in one's own knowledge. I hope participants felt that these methods are interesting, intellectually challenging, and something they might actually *do*. Like Todd [Presner] and Johanna, I'm so interested in where DH can go, and I think it'll be people like the participants in the summer institute who define what's possible.