

Chapter 6. No Discipline!

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Johanna Drucker's multiple career paths took her from success as a book artist to a self-defined interdisciplinary PhD program and a major transition to a significant research and teaching career across the arts and humanities. A pioneering interdisciplinary scholar from the 1980s on, she demonstrates achievement and recognition despite administrators' difficulty in placing her within their often-anachronistic disciplinary structures. She persevered and contributed substantively to the arts and scholarship advancing the field of visual studies and visual knowledge.

In 1998, justifying his Ivy League university's decision not to retain me, my then-dean called me a "scholar without a discipline." When I met him again a quarter of a century later at a meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he made the same remark about my profile, still constrained by the categorical definitions of conventional disciplines. Clearly, he was unable to transcend his own intellectual limitations. Evidently, no box was too small for him to think inside of.

Even in the 1990s, my work crossed several disciplines—visual epistemology, alphabet studies, and graphical forms of knowledge production—in systematic and highly rigorous ways. I was also a skilled artist and letterpress printer. But the conventional, departmentally defined fields of art history and literary studies, even graphic design and information studies, did not recognize these as integral to their methods or subject matter.

Why not? Look to the disciplines and their parochialism to answer this question. Art history is one of the worst, still anxious about its authority, unwilling to embrace visual studies and graphical instantiations of knowledge as central to its own domain, so terrified of studio artists that most research universities maintain strict physical distance between the makers and the scholars. A historical and critical analysis of these fields from socio-anthropological perspectives tells us much about why this narrowness persists. But that is not my focus here. Instead, I want to tell the tale of a career with no discipline.

Range and Variety

My academic experience was shaped by continual adaptation and repeated cycles of acceptance and expulsion from institutions. I taught at six universities over fourteen years and published five scholarly books, along with dozens of articles, before I got tenure—all while also producing and publishing creative work and exhibits. Then, almost immediately, I moved into a position as a chaired, full professor.

By the time I finished my academic career as the Breslauer Professor and Distinguished Professor in Information Studies at UCLA, I had taught 85 different courses in fields and subjects as diverse as environmental design, film theory, arts and performance, studio art (mainly drawing, but also artist book production), art history, graphic design history, introduction to media studies, digital media studies, history of media, experimental poetry in the 20th century, experimental prose, material texts, individual topics classes in the history of the book (alphabet books in the children's book collection, modern art of the book, artists' books, gender and genre in 17th and 18th century books, California fine press, activist publishing in the 20th century, activist publishing, the history of the book, and literacy technologies), digital humanities, artifacts and cultures, complexity theory, and sustainability in the information professions.

My profile is unusual, particularly since I also kept an artistic practice alive throughout. My artist's books are in special collections in libraries and museums throughout North America and elsewhere, and my papers are held at the Beinecke Library. Seems like plenty of evidence of discipline, if not adhering to "a" discipline.

Early Disciplines

My first disciplines were in the studio practices of drawing and printmaking. I learned to draw while I was a student at California College of Arts and Crafts, which I began to attend in the fall of 1970. I wasn't really taught, but rather, I applied myself with diligence to the study of organic forms and rendered them in pen and ink, pencil, and watercolor.

Printmaking was another matter, and I had to be introduced to its exigencies through the expertise of others. Learning to etch, do stone lithography, and hand-set metal type happened through apprenticeships, not simply through intuitive activity. I needed to develop the skills of creating a form with the right pressure, putting acid on a stone in the correct way, grinding it at the sink, and applying a soft or hard ground to a plate. These are disciplines, not hobbies, not superficial distractions.

Ignorance

Before I was involved with university life, the term "academic" had no value for me beyond serving as a slightly pejorative adjective applied by my poet friends to work they found predictably conventional. This was in the 1970s when the creative circles in which I moved had still not acknowledged that tenure-track jobs provided benefits that no life in experimental literature was likely to supply. Some of them ultimately followed my path or entered academia on what they believed were their own terms. Others had trust funds.

I was ignorant about academic life and its parameters. My father was a commercial artist who had two years of art school training. My mother had an

undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois where she had studied German romantic literature. Later, when she decided to go back into the workforce, she took courses in microbiology and organic chemistry. Then she managed a research lab in the anatomy department of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Though both were intellectuals with strong interests in art, literature, politics, and other fields, my parents were never academics and only saw graduate work as valuable in the sciences. When a friend of theirs decided to get a doctorate in history, they dismissed the activity with a mixture of defensiveness and mockery. What could possibly justify such a degree?

Education

My early education was in the public schools in Philadelphia in a time when they were well-funded and even visionary. Through junior high, I had a good education; then in the Philadelphia High School for Girls, it faltered in the sciences. When I went to the University of Rochester for my first year of college in 1969, I found my preparation for calculus, astronomy, and physics far short of what was necessary to succeed.

I realized I had been shut out of the disciplines of science for lack of fundamental preparation. I could no sooner acquire these basics than I could fake ten years of ballet training. Intellectual discipline takes time.

So I decided to go to art school, thinking I could make a living doing graphic art and write my own creative books. At the California College of Arts and Crafts I found a wonderful mentor, Betsy Davids, who introduced me to letterpress as well as various forms of poetry, writing, and book arts.

After graduation, I pursued those activities, supporting myself as a waitress, typesetter, and temporary office worker. I worked at the West Coast Print Center for several years (1975-77) where I had access to letterpress equipment that I used to publish my own experimental works, learning about contemporary poetry in the process through immersion in a writing community.

I travelled abroad, and in Amsterdam I printed an etching portfolio with a theoretical text, *Experience of the Medium* (1978), a copy of which was purchased by the prestigious Stedelijk Museum. I returned to the United States and made my way back to California thinking I would continue an art career.

My aesthetic focus was on organic processes and the unfolding of complex systems of growth and decay. My conviction about the role of graphical instantiation of language as integral to meaning had increased through a decade of holding type in my hands. The poetry world was a competitive, combative place, and answering the demand to define your project and situate your work required intellectual rigor. We were serious writers. Our discipline was literary practice, and that meant reading the hard works (e.g., Ludwig Wittgenstein, Louis Zukofsky, Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein) and constantly clarifying and justifying our positions. Literary life is not for amateurs.

Professional Disciplines

Upon my return to the Bay Area in 1979, I found a paid internship working with the registrar in the history department of the Oakland Museum. The job was fascinating. The Museum was cataloguing its historical collections for the first time, and the registrar spent her days in the warehouse photographing and classifying the objects. Materials from the early history of California, a vast collection of artifacts from Indigenous peoples, and all kinds of ephemera, publications, costumes, and tools from every era up through the 20th century had to be identified and described.

My task was to type up the records on cards, carefully getting the information into the right subject fields. The cataloguing of cultural artifacts was in its early days, and I found the intellectual aspects of the undertaking to be a genuine education.

Structured data and metadata were not concepts to which I had been exposed previously. That these came from the discipline known as library and information science was a revelation. I had had very little exposure to this discipline's professional worlds and its specialized knowledge. Knowledge organization had rules that were very different from those of literature; it worked through consensus and administrative structures that were also part of its discipline, one organized in an entirely distinct social framework from those of the arts or even scholarship. The concept of a professional discipline appeared in my mind, building on insights provoked by learning the Dewey Decimal system in my first job, as a page shelving nonfiction books in the Philadelphia public library a decade earlier.

Research

Then, one day as I left a telephone message on the desk of the museum's history department director, my eyes landed on a truly bizarre publication, *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, created in the Bohemian circles of California. Small in format, printed on wallpaper, cut with oblique angles wrapped in a cover printed in a design that smacked of the 1890s vogue for Aubrey Beardsley, the piece was irresistible.

I asked if I could research this amazing object, find out about its identity, conception, design, author(s), and situate it within the context of what, it turned out, was its 1896 date of publication. By some miracle, the director and the registrar approved my request. I cannot believe this now, but I was allowed full and free access to the archives of the Oakland Museum to research the *Petit Journal*. Every Friday afternoon I retreated to the subterranean space next to the bottom level of the parking garage and went through publication after publication from 1890s San Francisco to understand this incredible work by this remarkably original humorist, Gelett Burgess.

What I discovered about the piece was one thing. What I discovered about myself was a passion for research. The Museum even permitted me to give a public talk on magazines in the Bay Area in the 1890s. This experience changed my life,

opening a path to pursue a graduate degree. This, too, was a discipline for which I had no formal training, just an instinct that to understand the object I had to compare it with its contemporaries, situate it in cultural practices and graphic forms. I had stumbled into the world of scholarly research and was determined to continue.

Graduate Work

I knew some faculty in the department of visual studies at the University of California at Berkeley from Print Center activities a few years earlier. I talked with them, explained my interests in studying the history of the book, writing, and art publishing as a foundation for seeking a teaching job that might combine these interests with the hands-on abilities I had in printmaking.

This all made sense to them, and I was admitted to the School of Environmental Design to pursue an MA in visual studies. No structured program curriculum existed. We had one required seminar per year; for the rest, I pursued independent study work and took classes in other departments.

Within a month of enrolling, I had met the man who would become my mentor and inspiration, Bertrand Augst. Within another few months, I realized that a master's degree would not suffice to satisfy my appetites for knowledge. Augst had introduced me to the world of semiotics and structuralist theory. A distinguished senior linguist, Yakov Malkiel, provided a basic framework in the history of linguistics, reading his seminar notes from the back of envelopes on which he had jotted names like Max Müller, or the brothers Grimm, or Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir.

Entire new universes began to open. I had no real idea of what an academic life could be, or how one went about pursuing such a career. By this point I had published more than ten creative works under my own imprint or with small presses. I kept a firewall between this work and my academic pursuits, unwilling to let my creative practice be subject to academic review. Meanwhile, I fumbled forward trying to fit my intellectual passions to academic fields that felt ill-suited to the cross-disciplinary approaches I sought. But I was cherry-picking, taking bits from here and there piecemeal, rather than understanding how fields developed, differentiated, and policed themselves.

Creating a Discipline: *Écriture*

UC Berkeley had a provision in its graduate guidelines that allowed any student enrolled in a master's program that did not have a continuing doctoral degree to put together an ad hoc interdisciplinary agenda to pursue one. With the help of my mentors, Augst and Tony Dubovsky, I cobbled together the required five-person committee. Julian Boyd, a lovely but fallen spirit in the English department; James Melchert, an artist/intellectual who became head of the NEA; and Hayden White, a critical historian at UC Santa Cruz, all agreed to serve.

I put together a proposal pretentiously titled *Écriture: The history and theory of writing as the visual representation of language*. Three fields constituted my program: the history of writing, theories of visual representation, and semiotics and signification. The justification for these was that I needed a thorough knowledge of my topic, writing as a visual form, and the history of the field from antiquity to the present. I needed to know how visual forms were understood and theorized. I borrowed approaches from art history, graphic design, anthropology, and cognitive studies. Finally, I had to have a framework for analyzing meaning production in visual signs, hence the study of semiotics, structuralism, and symbolic forms. Each of these generated its own reading list.

In pursuit of these goals, I would focus on one single, individual topic at a time. For instance, I studied the reception history of hieroglyphics, borrowing heavily on the work of Erik Iversen but also tracking his references. Then I traced the development of the International Phonetic Alphabet from experiments going back to the Renaissance and efforts of George Dalgarno in creating signs for the deaf. I read across a library shelf that contained texts in the history of phonetics from Alexander Melville Bell and Henry Sweet and their work on visible speech. In related research, I became acquainted with Bishop John Wilkins and other individuals who created philosophical languages meant to communicate directly to the eye.

I wrote my master's thesis on alphabet symbolism. That later became the foundation of *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination* (Thames and Hudson, 1995) and in more mature form, *Inventing the Alphabet* (University of Chicago, 2022).

I knew that the discipline of writing studies, and its subset, alphabet studies, needed theoretical as well as historical foundations. I set out to formalize them, building on film theory, structuralism, and semiotics.

But I didn't want to pursue any of the established disciplines. Linguistics was dominated by Chomskian theory, which seemed contrived and artificial to me. Film history was too new, too limited, too brief. I was warned away from art history because the department was so resistant to theory. Literature programs repressed or ignored the visual aspects of texts—they still do. The communications department was largely quantitative in its orientation. Environmental studies was designed to prepare practitioners for implementation. Nothing felt like it gave me the basis for historical and theoretical depth in my field, *écriture*, the study of writing as the visual representation of language.

Bibliographic and Pedagogical Training

I had access to the fantastic resources of Berkeley's library. I plundered the Doe Library stacks, finding works no one had checked out in decades, even centuries. I strived to develop a theoretical framework for the ways in which visual presentation produced meaning, building on a long-held conviction I had developed as a typographic poet.

I worked constantly, furiously, passionately. I was a teaching assistant (TA) for Augst and taught sessions on semiotics and structuralism as well as silent film, experimental film, and classic cinema. I was also a TA for Dubofsky and taught the introduction to drawing and design for all undergraduate students in the College of Environmental Design. I was a volunteer at the Pacific Film Archive and worked with their clippings files, and I eventually served as a volunteer projectionist for researchers. I taught two courses of my own design: *Image/Structure/Culture*, a grab-bag of visual epistemology, and *Environmental Typography*. I straddled disciplines with a careless disregard for the realities of academic life, unaware of the liabilities that would eventually lead that narrow-minded dean to his pronouncements.

Dissertation Work

When it came time to formulate a dissertation, I was torn. I had become—who wouldn't—enamored of Athanasius Kircher. I toyed with the idea of working on the organization of his library. Luckily, Augst advised against this, saying my Latin was insufficient, the topic too obscure, and that I should situate myself in the modern period.

He was right. I decided to write about the typographic poetry of the early 20th century avant-garde, Dada and Futurism. This prompted me to create an intellectual foundation for the arguments I had been making in my creative work for a decade. And it would make my work legible within both literary and art historical studies.

The decision was a good one, though the whole enterprise of the ad hoc degree was pure foolishness. I should have had a discipline, a department, and an understanding of how the academic world worked. Instead, I did whatever I wanted, passionately following my interests, much-indulged as well as supported by a group of professors who probably should have sat me down (at least one of them) to let me know there were no departments of *écriture* anywhere in the world. I would have answered them by saying that the university would not exist without writing, though no one studied it. That was true. But it was not a career path.

In some ways, I worked with literary studies as a peripheral discipline, learning to read texts but adding the inflection of graphical form to the systems of meaning production. But I had no formal foundation in its traditions. I could not have taught an introductory survey in English literature.

Print history in technical as well as aesthetic terms informed my work as well as graphical study, but I was not a historian. The fact that I knew how to set letterpress type meant I could read visual poetry in terms of its production and conception, but I could not teach a standard graphic design class. I had disciplines, but no single discipline.

Visual Studies

In spring 1986, I conducted a series of visits with people at MIT and Harvard

and other places to see how the discipline of visual studies, where I felt I most belonged, was being taught. I had hopes that I might craft a systematic program for Berkeley or find a place in these other environments. Meanwhile, I applied for a job the University of Texas at Dallas. The job was in an interdisciplinary arts and humanities program that seemed like a good fit for my combination of abilities. Created with upper-division and graduate programs, the interdisciplinary approach included a combination of studio practice and critical work in arts and performance. The dean at the time, Robert Corrigan, had brought his theater experience to the program. At the time I arrived, the idea of a combined academic-arts practice doctoral program was still novel in American universities. The idea now seems prescient in its anticipation of the many “research-practice” degrees that sprung up decades later.

Interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities

My eclectic interests in what I would later call “visual epistemology” were suited to certain elements of this interdisciplinary program, which had a small and rather eclectic group of faculty. Our students included a few hand-picked and gifted individuals who were funded to pursue the PhD in our program, and many individuals finishing out an undergraduate degree. Many of the undergraduates and graduate students were women, returning students who had been stranded in Dallas because of the corporate relocation of their spouses.

These graduate students in particular were wonderful students—savvy, skeptical, disciplined, and hard-working. They questioned why we would read Antonin Artaud; he was “mentally unstable,” they said. But they were thrilled to be able to render an object realistically by the end of a semester or end the year with their own artist’s book in hand. They brought their worldly experience and healthy skepticism into the classroom. They also brought their jewelry. Many days I thought that if I took them to the parking lot, relieved them of their rings and things, I could retire immediately by fencing the fat carats and heavy gold on their necks and fingers.

The teaching experience I got at UT Dallas was invaluable. I taught the basics of drawing and performance art. Social and cultural historian Harvey J. Graff, then my colleague, collaborated with me on two graduate humanities courses: *Crises in Representation in 17th Century* and a parallel course about the 20th Century. Our areas of expertise were highly complementary, and the courses exposed me to scholarly work with which I had not been familiar, as well as to approaches to teaching that Graff had developed from his own experience. This was one of the few teaching collaborations I had, and a rare moment of generous exchange within an academic environment. I taught three classes a semester for two years at UT Dallas.

During my first year, I went to UT Austin to see the art historian Linda Henderson. She had been the mentor of a friend of mine in my Fulbright year in Paris

in 1984-85. Henderson was very direct and clear. The one-hour meeting I had with her also changed my life. She said, “teach the moderns.” So obvious. But so useful.

I created a series of classes at UT Dallas designed to formalize my learning about the history of modern art and the emerging critical discourse of postmodernism. I knew art history vaguely, as one does after art school, but I did not know the art historians, their work, or the field. I undertook to teach myself so I could teach others. This revelation never left me. I could—and did—assign myself courses to teach and then plunged into the bibliography in preparation. Who had written what, when, and what was the dialogue or conversation about now? I was not trying to be an art historian, only prepare to teach art history.

Teaching as Learning

The lesson about learning in order to teach meant I acquired a wide, sometimes superficial, knowledge on topic after topic. But I rarely knew how this material was codified within curricular parameters and disciplines. I learned and taught in short cycles. Sometimes I knew less than my students.

In 1988, the summer before I left Texas, I put together a course, *A Woman's Touch: Feminism and Art History*. Though I never taught the course, it was an excellent exercise in creating a course from scratch, reviewing the existing literature, structuring a syllabus, and considering the contribution to students' understanding of the intellectual stakes. I was in Austin much of that summer and had access to the UT Austin library.

We had to Xerox everything in those days, make physical copies of readings we wanted to use and consider how we would produce slides of those many (almost all) non-canonical works. These were realities. The personal and professional stakes were higher, however, as feminist art history was still marginal and considered a non-field in many circles, as I found out in the following few years. Was feminism a discipline? An approach? Method? Theoretical framework? I wasn't sure. A confusion between discourse and discipline arose in my thoughts.

The Discipline of Art History

After two years in Dallas, I received a Mellon Fellowship at Harvard. This post-doctoral position was among the most privileged years of my life. My major focus that year was to turn my dissertation on Dada and Futurist typography into a book for publication. Thanks to access to the Bow and Arrow Press, I also extended my typesetting and printing skills through publication of *The Word Made Flesh* (1989) and then *The History of the/my Wor(l)d* (1989).

Despite not having an art history degree, I was placed in the fine arts department at Harvard thanks to the generosity of their chair. I developed a course in postmodernism for the department as part of my fellowship. In 1988-89, such a course involved a radical combination of theory and contemporary art, both

anathema in many conservative art history departments. I stepped in for a colleague who became ill and taught her feminist art history course. And in summer school, before leaving, I taught the course *Art History Since 1945*, cramming for every lecture in a vicious cycle of catch-up.

But what kind of discipline was art history at that period? Rooted in connoisseurship, the aesthetic snobbery of German classical scholars, and pushed into iconographical and psychological realms by the next generation of German-Jewish scholars, it became a field full of assertions about the sociological and political force of aesthetics in the work of 20th century scholar-critics. I came into the picture about the time Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg were being pushed aside by French semioticians, Frankfurt-school-influenced cultural theorists, and psychoanalytically inclined refugees from cinema studies. Formal reading practices were put aside in favor of studying the role of works of art in social realms and cultural history. The focus was shifting from traditional connoisseurship to the ideological critique.

While finishing my Harvard year, I applied for positions in studio art, design, art history, basically anything to keep me from returning to the personal isolation I had felt in Dallas. This included a job at Columbia, among the most sought-after positions in North America that year. When I went for the job interview, terrified by being in New York, only men were present. Those were the days. They asked how I would teach postmodernism, where would I begin, and which Critique of Kant's would I use to start the theoretical conversation. They asked if I were a feminist. "Aren't you all?" I replied. "I mean, who is in favor of the oppression of women?"

I was offered the job for what I brought *to* the discipline, not what I knew *of* the discipline. Semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism were much sought after. My job talk focused on Jackson Pollock's work, "Modernist Surface and the Hermeneutic Trace," and was structured around contrasts between phenomenological and semiotic approaches to interpretation. Doctoral students were eager for theory, though my colleagues felt it was most appropriate to contemporary art. Renaissance, Classical, and Medieval scholars in the field often remained aloof, as did those in 19th century specializations.

Heresy Against the Discipline

In my five years at Columbia, I taught courses across 20th century art at a time when modernism was largely considered European before WWII and American after. I had a broader scope, including a course on European post-WWII art called *Cobra, Lettrism, and Situationism*; *Modern Art in America 1890-1940*; *Theorizing Modernism*; *Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism*; and others. With three graduate students, I did an exhibit of Florine Stettin's then much-mocked and forgotten work.

Contemporary art was exploding in struggles over politics, identity, diversity, and work that broke with the decorum of minimalist abstraction. The field of art history was suffering various identity crises, including grappling with the reality

of living artists. The critical discussions ignored the role of markets, MFA programs, and ambition.

Careerism had replaced erudition in scholarship and in the art to which it attended. The formal analysis of objects, once central to the discipline, was sidelined. But the field was not ready to address the complicity between the realm of high art history and the market-driven discourse of supposed “critique” that dominated the 1990s.

I was expelled from Columbia’s department of art history by one of the high priestesses of the cult, Rosalind Krauss. From the time she was hired, Krauss was clear: she did not want me in the department. A former student of Clement Greenberg, she refused to entertain any disagreement with her own Adorno-ist stance which was the accepted doctrine of the time (and still persists).

Many in the field of modern art history remained convinced that artists were the research and development arm of culture, rather than the entertainment and consumer industries. They maintained this even as the rising stars of post-modernism clearly aspired to the influence and modalities of mainstream media culture. The ideological lines of the discipline were firmly drawn. So were the kinship ties and tribal loyalties. Krauss wanted my position for one of her own.

The writing was on the wall: heresy would not be tolerated within the strictly policed precincts of high art history. A job was open at Yale. They had searched the previous year and had not found a suitable candidate. They desperately needed someone who taught contemporary art. By that time, I had lectured regularly for the Whitney Museum for several years, and I was on the board of the *Art Journal*, the more nimble and contemporary-oriented of the College Art Association’s publications. I was writing bits of criticism, knew my way around the galleries, and was willing to remain in art history. Yale offered me a job before Columbia could terminate my contract.

Visual Studies

At Yale, my students had the last names of American appliances—Westinghouse, Ford, Dolby. They treated me like hired help. Faculty were only as useful as connections. But my classes were a success, graduate students knew they were getting theoretical frameworks they needed and wanted. My publication record at that point included one art history text, one study of the alphabet as a visual symbol, one volume focused on visual poetry in the avant-garde, and a forthcoming study of artists’ books. I taught courses on the critical intersections of graphic design and art history in the modern period as well as standard modern surveys, theory, and contemporary topics.

When my department wanted to advance my promotion, the administration refused to agree to approve a senior position. My three books published by the University of Chicago Press, Thames and Hudson, and Columbia University Press were too wide-ranging. I was told that the University did not trust prolific scholars.

Again, the art history mafia wanted the position for one of their own. My young colleagues in the department almost all were denied the chance for tenure. Yale's process required the solicitation of blind letters from senior scholars at comparable institutions to compile a list of suitable candidates. These people all knew I had the position at Yale, so it was not a coincidence when my name came up on none of the letters. The upshot was the appointment of Tom Crow, a conventional art historian who had studied with Tim Clark. Everyone was happy. Order was restored.

In my exit interview from Yale, the dean of Yale College called me a person "without a discipline." This was patently false. I was clearly in visual studies, but it was a discipline that did not fit their agenda. That was 40 years ago. The disciplinary rigidity and purity at Yale University was completely preserved. The renegade contrarian heretic had been expelled.

Media Studies

During a transition year at SUNY Purchase, I received a query from the University of Virginia about a position as the Robertson Chair of Media Studies. I had been to Virginia to lecture a few years earlier and fallen in love with the campus, the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance, the sublime light, and the excitement about the rapidly growing digital humanities community there.

I did several months of research in advance of the on-campus interview, studying the history of media studies from its origins in propaganda to cultural studies and science and technology as well as film, sociology, and print history. Once again, I entered a field in which I had no formal training or credentials. The reading I did was dizzying, exhilarating. Compared with art history, media studies seemed engaged with reality, economics, sociology, institutions, power, influence, technology, and the cutting-edge development of digital work in ways that felt open and exciting.

Creating the media studies program at the University of Virginia was exhilarating. My tenure line was held by the English department, and colleagues there wanted me to make media studies an extension of their particular brand of cultural studies. The art historians at the University were openly hostile to media studies, and to me personally, especially after I mounted a major exhibit at the Bayly Art Museum, *Complicit!*, about the relation between contemporary art and commercial culture—a slap in the face to the Adorno-ists and their ilk.

To create this new program, I promoted/developed a multifaceted approach that included topics such as forms, technologies, aesthetics, news, critical theory, digital studies, and the history of institutions. It became a department, the largest major in UVA's College of Arts and Sciences, though our program in digital humanities never got support from various deans (you know who you are).

When I suggested, in the context of an English department conference, that the future of literary studies was media studies (e.g., materiality, technology, audiences,

networks, production systems, and so on), I was attacked from all sides. So be it. This was an exciting time, and I had terrific collaborators and colleagues for creating the Speculative Computing Lab, building research agendas, and connecting with the community through helping build the Virginia Arts of the Book Center, passing on other disciplines to a new generation. On the Board of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities where I served several years, my non-disciplinary profile was a benefit, particularly in grants evaluation across programs.

Information Studies and Digital Humanities

The position as Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies at UCLA was never on my radar. In 1999 a graduate student in the information studies program invited me to apply. The information studies department was the current iteration of what had been, originally, a School of Library Sciences focused on professional expertise. Knowledge organization, management, reference and cataloguing, user services, archival studies, bibliography, information systems and other technical areas were its intellectual core. By that time, visual forms of information and data were my topics of study and research. I found a receptive audience for these ideas within the department and in what would become the UCLA Digital Humanities Program.

Digital humanities barely existed in 2000 or 2001, when I received the first grant ever issued by the NEH to support the design of curricular materials for the emerging activity. I was at the University of Virginia at the time and had a stellar group of colleagues and collaborators with whom to develop a series of topics (from digitization and data modelling to programming languages and intellectual property) in a syllabus outline. Each topic paired hands-on and theoretical materials so that practice and critical reflection proceeded in tandem.

That syllabus was the foundation on which I was able to launch the course at UCLA and then build an online and finally published version of *The Digital Humanities Coursebook*. Although I continue to believe that digital humanities is a suite of auxiliary skills and practices, rather than a full field on its own, the crafting of that syllabus and coursebook were creative intellectual activities that provided a template for pedagogy and research—not quite a discipline, but a useful contribution. Digital humanities was founded on principles that required making explicit the interpretative practices that were implicit in humanistic scholarship. The guiding questions were what could be parameterized and what might be made computationally tractable?

I continued writing in various fields, finishing work with Emily McVarish on *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*; in art history with *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*; *Digital_Humanities* with Anne Burdick, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp; *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production, Visualization and Interpretation*; *Iliazd: Metabiography of a Modernist*; and *Inventing the Alphabet*, among other titles produced during my

tenure at UCLA. Pushed to define my disciplinary profile at this point, I would say visual studies, with an epistemological focus, but also alphabet studies as a subset of the field of writing as a material practice. These persistent themes and areas of research have shaped my professional life in spite of academic provincialism.

I still believe that someone should have sat me down in 1982 or so and advised me to locate myself within a discipline—English, history, or art history—to secure a path forward. Instead, I got bruised and bumped around. But I had the great privilege of being able to constantly investigate new things, whole fields and topics. I also learned a great deal about the way the academic world works, its impulses toward conservatism that both preserve and destroy intellectual life and knowledge. Working only within the parameters of a single field would not have worked for me given my eclectic interests, and I was fortunate to be able to make a career that provided a view into so many areas of humanistic thought.

Conclusion

My conclusion? I think it was more important *to have discipline* than to be *in one*.

Books by the Author

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