

# Visual and Cultural Studies

Spring 2008

## Introduction: Part 2



Berenice Abbott, *Union Square, NYC*, 1936

We've come to the midway point of the semester and a moment of transition in our approach to visual studies.

In the first half of the course we focused on the formal, social, and critical components of a particular visual subculture—the world of modern art in NYC from roughly 1930-1960. We looked at the practice of painters and sculptors **both** from the perspective of the artists and the critics of the period. We saw how historical events affected the atmosphere surrounding the production of modernist art and criticism and how positions adopted by artists and critics on artistic and aesthetic issues were influenced not only by formal and stylistic interests, but also by extreme **political** and economic pressures.

One of the things I hope you appreciate even more than before we began this case study is how difficult it is to separate **what** you see in

the material object itself and **how** that object came into being.

Now I want to add another important component to this relation of the object and the external forces acting on it. The additional component is the viewer—what **you** bring to the reception and understanding of the object.

To do that, we need to examine a number of philosophical and scientific theories of human perception and cognition. There's a lot more material here than we could cover in a semester and more emerging every day. So we'll limit ourselves to a few of the most influential accounts.

We begin with one of the best known, most difficult, abstract, but incredibly interesting and suggestive attempts to explain our **aesthetic** experience—the work of Immanuel Kant. We've seen references to Kant already. Now it's time to look more closely at his attempt at constructing a theory of the beautiful and sublime that takes into consideration all of the things we find in our own experience of nature and art.

After Kant, we turn to structuralism, which comes out of the linguistic research of Ferdinand de Saussure at the start of the 20th century. We'll see how a **structuralist** framework is applied to our **visual** experience.



Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003

After Kant and structuralism, we'll be ready for Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher associated with existentialism and phenomenology, who brings us, in a sense, "back to the body". He does this by reminding us how much our being and movement in the world is an essential part of our perceptual experience.



From there we move on to recent critiques of these modernist theories clustered under the label of "postmodernism".

Now, you'll probably find all of this new material fascinating, certainly more abstract, and no doubt difficult. It will be important for all of us to read the assigned texts very carefully and several times. **And** you should expect to have **lots** of questions.

I'm giving you somewhat more freedom to find your way into this material. So you won't always have a set of study questions with each text.

Instead, I'll present additional background mate-

rial to expand on and frame your reading. I'll also draw you out more in discussions and ask you to question and discuss selected passages and concepts with me and with one another.

So be patient, inquisitive, thoughtful, and persistent. Keep in touch and let me know how you're doing. Of course, I'll be available in the discussion blog, by phone, and email, so don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions, concerns, or suggestions.

T. R. Quigley