

DESCRIPTION ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

APRIL 23-24, 2015
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



What is the relationship between description and interpretation, evaluation, argument, and critique? While description has proven to be contentious in literary studies and critical theory, it constitutes a central and prized aspect of scholarly practice in fields such as anthropology, musicology, and art history and has remained so despite critiques of objectivity and the “view from nowhere.” How have practices of description—from ethnography to ekphrasis—shifted in light of changing views of the role of the observer, scholarly ethics, and epistemology? What protocols are involved in describing people, texts, images, musical scores, and material artifacts? Speakers at the conference will both reflect on description as method and will exemplify their own scholarly and artistic practices of description.

SCHEDULE

Thursday, April 23

Wood Auditorium, Avery Hall

6-7.30 Michael Fried, "Guercino's *Anni Mirabiles*: 1619-20"

7.30 Reception

Friday, April 24

Davis Auditorium, Schapiro Center

9.00 Welcome

9.15 – 10.45 Joanna Stalnaker, "Description and Extinction"
Georgina Kleege, "Audio Description Described"
Ann Reynolds, "The Cocktail Party"
Moderator: Grant Wythoff

11.00-12.15 Kathleen Stewart, "The Point of Precision"
Liza Johnson, "OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOR 1-10"
Moderator: Brian Goldstone

12.15-1.15 Lunch Break

1.15-2.30 Jill Morawski, "Giving (Away) Description in the Psychological Sciences"
Mary Ann Smart, "The Description of Power and the Power of Description; Or, How to Listen to Music After New Historicism"
Moderator: Maggie Cao

2.45-4.00 Cannon Schmitt, "Interpret or Describe?"
Alison Bechdel, "Depiction as Description"
Moderator: David Russell

4.15-5.45 Lorraine Daston, "The Evolution of Clouds"

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PARTICIPANT BIOS

Alison Bechdel

Author, Cartoonist

For twenty-five years, Alison Bechdel wrote, drew, and self-syndicated the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. She gained wider recognition for her work with the publication in 2006 of her graphic memoir about her father, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Her second memoir, *Are You My Mother: A Comic Drama*, was published in 2012. Bechdel has drawn for many publications including *Slate*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *Granta*. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2014, a MacArthur Fellowship. She lives in Vermont.

Maggie Cao

Fellow, Society of Fellows in the Humanities

Maggie Cao is a scholar of American art and visual culture. She received her doctorate in History of Art and Architecture from Harvard University in 2014. Her current work focuses on the artistic negotiation of scientific and economic paradigm shifts during the long nineteenth century. Her book project, *Episodes at the End of Landscape: Hudson River School to American Modernism*, examines the dissolution of landscape painting as a major cultural project in the late nineteenth-century United States. By focusing the genre's unorthodox limit cases, from landscapes resembling banknotes to paintings made out of bird feathers, the book charts artistic attempts to resolve—at a pictorial level—the spatial, temporal, and relational problems arising with modernity. Cao is also at work on several new projects, including an essay on Canton Trade glass paintings and their theorization of reproduction and a longer study on painting and consumption in the Gilded Age, which explores such topics as ingestion and the still life, disposability and paper, and the materiality of gold.

Lorraine Daston

Director, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

Lorraine Daston has published on a wide range of topics in the history of science, including the history of probability and statistics, wonders in early modern science, the emergence of the scientific fact, scientific models, objects of scientific inquiry, the moral authority of nature, and the history of scientific objectivity. Books include *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment*, (with Katharine Park), *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, (with Peter Galison), *Objectivity*, and (co-edited with Elizabeth Lunbeck, *Histories of Scientific Observation*). She is Visiting Professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and Permanent Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

Michael Fried

J.R. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities and Art History
Johns Hopkins University

Art historian, art critic and literary critic, Michael Fried is J.R. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities and Art History at Johns Hopkins University. In his work, Fried engages questions of modernism, realism, theatricality, objecthood, self-portraiture, embodiedness, and the everyday. He has also written histories of modern art, focusing on Edouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, and Adolph Menzel. Recent books include *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*; *The Moment of Caravaggio*; *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon*; *Flaubert's "Gueuloir": On Madame Bovary and Salammbô*; and *Another Light: From Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand*.

Brian Goldstone

Fellow, Society of Fellows in the Humanities

Brian Goldstone received his PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University. His book project, *The Miraculous Life: Scenes from the Charismatic Encounter in Northern Ghana*, explores the incursion of Pentecostal-charismatic churches into northern Ghana, a rural, predominantly Muslim region whose population has increasingly become the target of evangelistic efforts undertaken by Christians from the south. Arranged as a gathering of disparate scenes, an approach that makes use of a wide array of ethnographic, literary, philosophical, video/photographic, and historical materials, the book charts the intimate, intensive, often precarious worlds that materialize as believers labor to make the "miraculous life" their own. Brian's current research builds on this work, examining the recent, highly controversial proliferation of Pentecostal "healing camps" as an alternative site for the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. The project situates the emergence of such psychospiritual interventions within the nexus of global biomedicine, development and humanitarianism, theologies of health and healing, and the ethics and affects of affliction. His writings have appeared in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *History of the Present*, *Theory & Event*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *The Johannesburg Salon*, *Public Books*, and the volume *Secularism and Religion-Making* (Oxford University Press, 2011). A co-edited collection, *African Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility*, is forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press.

Liza Johnson

Professor of Art, Williams College; Filmmaker and Writer

Liza Johnson is an artist and filmmaker. Her feature films include "Return" (2011), "Hateship Loveship" (2013), and "Elvis and Nixon" (in postproduction.) Her short films with nonprofessional actors include "South of Ten" (2005), "In the Air"

(2009) and, codirected with Elizabeth Povinelli, "Karrabing/Low Tide Turning" (2012). Her feature films have premiered in Cannes and Toronto and have been released theatrically domestically and abroad. Her short films have been exhibited internationally in museums, galleries, and film festivals, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Walker Art Center, and the Centre Pompidou, as well as the New York, Berlin, and Rotterdam Film Festivals, among many others. She has been a fellow of the DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm and the Sundance Institute, and has published a number of articles and interviews about art and film. She is currently the recipient of the Wexner Center Residency Award in Film. Johnson is Professor of Art at Williams College, and an affiliate in American Studies.

Georgina Kleege

Novelist, Essayist, and Translator

Professor of Creative Writing and Disability Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Georgina Kleege teaches creative writing and disability studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her recent books include: *Sight Unseen* (1999) and *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006). Kleege's current work is concerned with blindness and visual art: how blindness is represented in art, how blindness affects the lives of visual artists, how museums can make visual art accessible to people who are blind and visually impaired. She has lectured and served as consultant to art institutions around the world including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London.

Jill Morawski

Professor of Psychology, Wesleyan University

Professor Jill Morawski is a social psychologist whose research focuses on gender issues, the psychology of women, the psychological dimensions of reproductive technologies, and the history of psychology. She has served as president of Division 24 of the American Psychological Association (Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology) as well as Division 26 of the American Psychological Association (History of Psychology), and she served as Chairperson of the Wesleyan University faculty and Director of the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan. Professor Morawski has published widely in journals and edited volumes, and her 1994 book "Practicing Feminisms" received the William James Book Award from the General Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association.

Ann Reynolds

Associate Professor, Art History, University of Texas at Austin

Ann Reynolds is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History and the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. In her research and teaching, she focuses on twentieth and twenty-first century art and visual culture in the United States and Europe. Her recent publications include essays on Joan Jonas for the 2015 Venice Biennale; the experience of remoteness in relation to land art (Centre Georges Pompidou Spring 2015); Bob Fleischner, Jack Smith, and Ken Jacobs' film *Blonde Cobra* (*Criticism* Spring 2014); Zoe Leonard's Dia Beacon installation *So you see I am here after all* (Dia Art Foundation and Yale University Press, 2010); and a co-edited anthology entitled *Political Emotions* (Routledge Press, 2010). She is the author of *Robert Smithson: Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere* (MIT Press, 2003), which has been recently translated into French as *Du New Jersey au Yucatán, leçons d'ailleurs* (SIC Editions, 2014). She is currently working on a new book entitled *In Our Time*. Through this study she will address the cinematic and social circumstances of various intergenerational creative communities in New York during the 1940s through the 1960s. She and her co-curator, Michael Duncan, are also developing an exhibition focused on the magazine *View* (1940-1947).

David Russell

Lecturer in English, King's College London

David Russell is a Lecturer in English at King's College London. He obtained his PhD from Princeton University in 2011, and since then his work has been supported by the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard, and the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University. David has work published or forthcoming in *ELH*, *Raritan*, and *Victorian Studies*; his book, *A Literary History of Tact: Sociability, Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form*, is forthcoming with Princeton University Press. From Fall 2015, he will be associate professor of English at Oxford University.

Cannon Schmitt

Professor of English, University of Toronto

Cannon Schmitt is Professor of English at the University of Toronto. His primary teaching and research field is Victorian literature and culture, with a particular focus on cultural studies of science, especially evolutionary theory; the novel and narrative theory; and the novel and the sea. In his first book, *Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), Schmitt argues that Gothic novels pose as semi-ethnographic texts, representing Continental Europe, the Far East, or Ireland as fundamentally un-English, sites of depravity. At the same time, they elaborate a concept of Englishness in which, paradoxically, a threatened female figure stands

in for the globe's then most powerful nation. In *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), Schmitt investigates the Victorian engagement with South America as a site of memory. Because of the paramount role of evolutionary theory in that engagement, he attends to the works of a group of remarkable natural historians who travelled there and wrote about what they discovered: Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Kingsley, and W. H. Hudson. In their different ways, all these men encountered South America as and through memory; all parlayed that encounter into narratives about savagery and civility, race and the origins of humanity. At present he is at work on a SSHRC-funded book project tentatively titled *The Literal Sea* in which he hypothesizes that the ocean and its associated phenomena—tides, prevailing winds, marine engineering, ships under sail—constitute a privileged locus of the literal in Victorian fiction. In a recent article, for example, he treats Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an exemplary instance of fiction deploying a specialized maritime lexicon, contending that its precise articulation of tidal currents, nautical manoeuvres, and ship design signals the key role of "restraint" in that novella and throughout Conrad's corpus—as well as the need for the development of a literal mode of reading that gives unwonted attention to technical and denotative language in fiction. With Elaine Freedgood, he co-edited a special issue of *Representations* on the possibility of such a mode of reading: "Denotatively, Technically, Literally" (2014). A former editor of *Criticism* who continues to serve on the journal's Editorial Board, he is also a founding member of the North American Victorian Studies Association (NAVSA) and served for six years (2008-14) as Canadian representative on NAVSA's Advisory Board.

Mary Ann Smart

Professor of Music Scholarship, University of California, Berkeley

Mary Ann Smart is Gladyce Arata Terrill Professor of Music at the University of California, Berkeley. Her book, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (U of California Press, 2004), looked at the ways music gives signals for stage movement and acting style in repertory stretching from the first French grand operas of the 1830s to Verdi's *Aida* and Wagner's *Ring*. She is editor of the critical edition of Donizetti's last opera, *Dom Sébastien*, and of the articles on Bellini and Donizetti for the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Her book *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Italy, 1815-1848* will be published next year by the University of California Press.

Joanna Stalnaker

Associate Professor of French, Columbia University

Joanna Stalnaker is interested in the organization of knowledge, representation, and literary form in the French Enlightenment. Her work lies at the intersection of

the history of philosophy, science, and literature. She is the author of *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia*, which won the Kenshur Prize from the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University in 2010. Her current project, *The Enlightenment's Last Words*, views the end of the Enlightenment through the lens of the French *philosophes'* last works. She is also starting to think about the problem of species extinction at the end of the Enlightenment and its implications for an emerging concept of literature.

Kathleen Stewart

Professor of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin

Professor Kathleen Stewart writes and teaches on affect, the ordinary, the senses, and modes of ethnographic engagement based on curiosity and attachment. Her first book, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America* (Princeton University Press, 1996) portrays a dense and textured layering of sense and form laid down in social use. *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007) maps the force, or affects, of encounters, desires, bodily states, dream worlds, and modes of attention and distraction in the composition and suffering of present moments lived as immanent events.

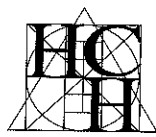
Her current project, *Worlding*, tries to approach ways of collective living through or sensing out. An attunement that is also a worlding. These works are experiments that write from the intensities in things, asking what potential modes of knowing, relating or attending to things are already being enacted and imagined in ordinary ways of living.

Grant Wythoff

Fellow, Society of Fellows in the Humanities

Grant Wythoff is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society of Fellows in the Humanities and a Lecturer in English at Columbia University interested in the history and theory of media technologies, twentieth century American literature, digital methods, and science fiction. He is currently at work on two book projects: a cultural history of the gadget and a critical edition of Hugo Gernsback's work titled *The Perversity of Things: Writings on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction*, forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press. Grant has work published or forthcoming in *Grey Room*, *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, *The Appendix*, *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*, *The Programming Historian*, and *In Media Res*.

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