



Podium Issue 1: Visual Culture

Visual Culture Questionnaire [視覺文化問卷調查](#)

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Respondents: [Lee Weng Choy](#), [Yeewan Koon](#), [Gala Porras-Kim](#), and [Iftikhar Dadi](#)

In 1996, the journal *October* published the Visual Culture Questionnaire—four questions about the study of visual culture—alongside responses from art and architecture historians, film theorists, literary critics, and artists. These four questions are being republished in both Chinese and English by *Podium*, with *October's* permission, to reflect on how the understanding of visual culture has changed since this 1996 enquiry. A new group of respondents is invited to respond to these questions, and their answers are published as part of [Podium Issue 1: Visual Culture](#).

OCTOBER 77, Summer 1996, 25–70:

1. It has been suggested that the interdisciplinary project of 'visual culture' is no longer organised on the model of history (as were the disciplines of art history, architectural history, film history, etc.) but on the model of anthropology. Hence, it is argued by some that visual culture is an eccentric (even, at times, antagonistic) position with regard to the 'new art history' with its socio-historical and semiotic imperatives and models of 'context' and 'text'.

2. It has been suggested that visual culture embraces the same breadth of practice that powered the thinking of an early generation of art historians—such as Riegl and Warburg—and that to return to the various medium-based historical disciplines, such as art, architecture, and cinema histories, to this earlier intellectual possibility is vital to their renewal.

3. It has been suggested that the precondition for visual studies as an interdisciplinary rubric is a newly wrought conception of the visual as disembodied image, re-created in the virtual spaces of sign-exchange and phantasmatic projection. Further, if this new paradigm of the image originally developed in the intersection between psychoanalytic and media discourses, it has now assumed a role independent of specific media. As a corollary the suggestion is that visual studies is helping, in its own modest, academic way, to produce subjects for the next stage of globalised capital.

4. It has been suggested that pressure within the academy to shift towards the interdisciplinarity of visual culture, especially in its anthropological dimension, parallels shifts of a similar nature within art, architectural, and film practices.

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Respondents

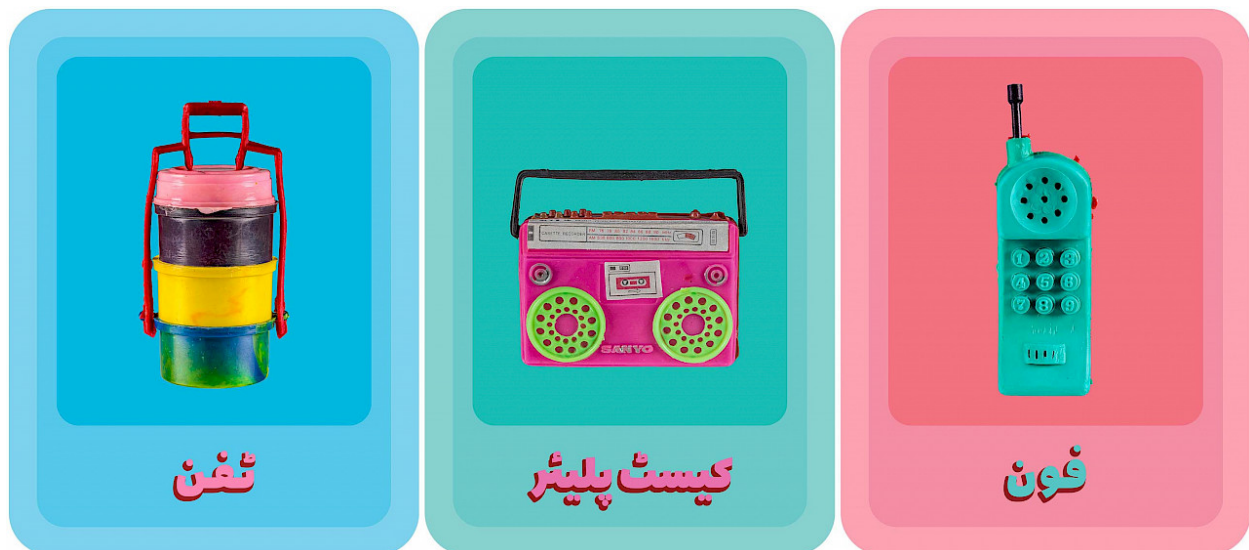
- [Iftikhar Dadi](#)
- [Gala Porras-Kim](#)
- [Lee Weng Choy](#)
- [Yeewan Koon](#)
- More coming soon...

Image at top: Martin Parr, *Hong Kong (LON156562)*, 2013. Pigment print. M+, Hong Kong. © Artist and Blindspot Gallery

Visual Culture and the Popular

Iftikhar Dadi

My years in the doctoral program at Cornell University during the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with extended debates on campus and beyond regarding the rise of visual culture as a disciplinary formation. My own investments in these discussions were somewhat divided. During graduate school and after, I always wanted to work under the discipline of art history rather than visual culture, for the reason that the former was a well-established discipline that was ripe for rethinking from within. However, the visual culture debates had the salutary effect of enabling the study of modern art beyond the Western canon *within art history itself*, in ways that no longer had to conform to existing paradigms. Art history at that time was quite congealed and hermetic. Scholarship on modern art seemed to be afflicted by an even narrower tunnel vision. Barring honorable exceptions, the established and emerging modern art historians in the United States were indifferent or hostile towards developments beyond the Western canon, even those who worked with critical methodologies, such as the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis, postmodernism and poststructuralism. Thus, the opening up of the analysis of modern art history to works and methods beyond these closures was a tremendous gain, in some measure a consequence of the challenges posed by visual culture studies.



Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, from left to right: *Tiffen #1*, *Cassette Player #1*, *Mobile Phone #1*, from the *Tilism Series*, 2018. Archival pigment prints on diasec, 49 x 37 inches. Courtesy of the artists Courtesy of the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary

The 1996 *October* Questionnaire is by now, long in the tooth, and best read as a symptom of the anxieties of those who had never seriously engaged with developments outside the western world or ventured beyond the fields of high modern art, cinema, and architecture. Despite being posed in a passive voice, the tone of the four questions is hardly neutral. The

second question is schizophrenic in claiming both breadth and disciplinary fidelity for art history itself. For a journal broadly associated with Marxism, it assumes the peculiar stance of claiming that the analysis of capitalist modern culture is better addressed by the work of early twentieth-century art historians whose expertise was not in modern art—rather than offering any generosity towards emerging paradigms. The third question is also loaded, claiming that the so-called ‘disembodied image’ floating free of media specificity forges a subjectivity devoid of media-specific criticality. And what to make of the comical accusation that visual culture was ‘helping ... to produce subjects for the next stage of globalized capital’, as if older disciplinary formations—especially art history’s complicities with the art market—had remained resistant to late capitalist instrumentalisation in the neoliberal university?

However, the limitations of claims made for visual culture as a field of study in the United States were becoming more visible to me. As a graduate student working on South Asia and its diaspora, I was aware of two other intellectual formations unfolding at the time: Cultural Studies in the UK, and Subaltern Studies on India and Latin America. Both drew from Gramsci and were interested in questions of ‘history from below’, and indeed of questions on historicity more broadly, as well as hegemony and its relation to struggles for enunciation. They were much more advantageously placed to address marginal experiences in ways that were not formulaic, but open-ended. By contrast, American visual culture studies seemed conceptually impoverished and inattentive to questions of form. It was too presentist in its approach, almost exclusively analysed media and advertising, focused primarily on reception and consumption, and above all, relied on already formulated categories of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationalism, et cetera.

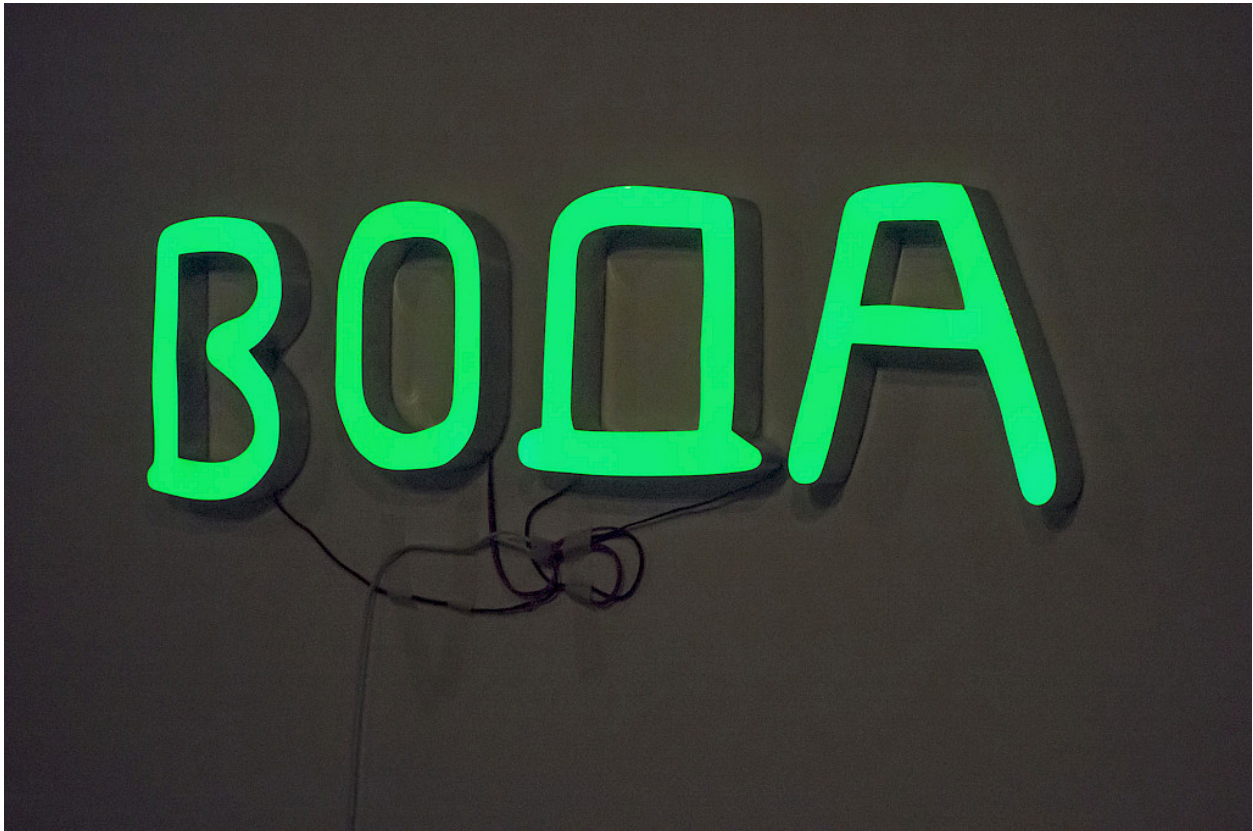


Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, *Cosmos*, 2019. Pigment prints on wall, LED signage. Installation view: Ríos Intermitentes at the Palace of Justice, Matanzas, as part of the 13th Havana Biennial (15 April–12 May 2019). Courtesy of the artists

Today, art history has become far more open and hospitable in its methodology and focus, primarily because of sustained feminist, queer, and postcolonial work during the past few decades. The study of modern art beyond the canonical West no longer needs to be justified, and is indeed one of the most vital research areas in art history today. And the ecology of art in Asia and Africa is immensely larger today than it was a few decades ago, in terms of institutions, patronage, and practice, so that these can no longer be seen merely as lesser imitations of Western developments. On the other hand, the importance of popular cultural

forms in the Global South has only increased during the last few decades, with accelerated modernisation, the uncontrolled growth of the Asian and African megalopolis, and multiplying media production and circulation. Seemingly local craft practices and design are increasingly shaped by transnational forces as well as efforts by city and state authorities eager to brand these under the rubric of 'creative economies'. In the cities of South Asia, one encounters a dense juxtaposition of artistic and sensory forms, many with distinctive medium specificities and genre characteristics, but which also resonate with one another to attenuate or amplify various facets. Contemporary art also traffics easily with the domain of the 'popular' in its visual language, as well as in its mode of address.

I posit that the 'popular' has emerged as an important term for thinking about recent developments in the Global South, and needs to be understood as possessing a specific valence that partly overlaps with, but cannot be equated by, other terms such as the 'informal' and the 'public' that are also important to flesh out. Here, due to space limitations, I offer merely a few provisional and schematic comments on the 'popular'.



MYCIL

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Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, from top to bottom: *BODA*, *MYCIL*, *lahoot* from *Homo Ludens Series* (2014-ongoing). Metal, acrylic, LED. Asia Art Archive & Spring Workshop Residency Programme, Hong Kong, 2014. Courtesy of the artists

The term 'popular' is a palimpsest bearing multifaceted connotations that have become layered historically. A lineage can be traced via the German thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder, who died in 1803. Von Herder conceived of cultural specificity in terms of national 'folk' traditions, which remains salient today when regional cultures of the modern nation-state are taxonomised. But with the emergence in the West of 'mass' forms of media, such as sophisticated print advertising, radio, cinema, and television, a new social body emerged in the early and mid-twentieth centuries: the 'mass society', which was understood by theorists of the Frankfurt School as being coopted by consumer capitalism on the one hand, and by fascism on the other. For this reason, many mid-century thinkers, including Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, denigrated the popular as kitsch, and sought instead to valorise artistic modernism precisely for its difficulty in being instrumentalised. On another front, Raymond Williams, a founding theorist of Cultural Studies in the United Kingdom, characterised the term 'popular' with a critical valence in his important book *Keywords*. He observes that the older meaning of 'popular' as denoting something 'low' or 'base' shifted over the course of the centuries to a more neutral or positive sense, to that of connoting what ordinary people might like to make or enjoy.

These theorisations were primarily developed to account for Western historical experiences. The question as to how they translate over into contexts of decolonisation, uneven development, and with multiple traditional ideas of the 'popular', is a complex one that cannot be fully fleshed out here. Nevertheless, it is evident in South Asia that the 'popular' encompasses mass culture as well as folk, vernacular, and religious modernities. All these acquire new significations and amplified trajectories of circulation through reproduction by mechanical and electronic means. And certainly, the 'popular' has possessed political valences in regions where struggle for political representation continues, as in popular mobilisation for social justice and autonomy. Nevertheless, popular forms are neither simply socially progressive nor regressive. Rather, their riven and divided character provides insight into the tensions and struggles within a social formation.

This becomes more evident today, when ongoing transformations in electronic and social media over the last two decades continue to alter society at a dizzying pace. Cell phones, small cameras, multiple television channels, and social media have engendered new capacities for production, circulation, and consumption of 'culture', increasingly incorporating those who were previously marginal to the production of mass 'industrial' cultural forms. What is the role of piracy and informal economies in creating new infrastructures and aesthetic forms? Does a plural media space provide new possibilities for engendering vernacularisation? We cannot ascribe a singular valence to these powerfully transformative decentered and networked forces, and must situate their 'popular' social and aesthetic facets in terms of social fractures, dynamic processes, infrastructural recodings, multiple publics, and emergent subjectivities.

Contemporary artists also intervene in this field for legibility, and jostle for visual and relational space. But artists also need to be attentive to the privileges of literacy, class, and social voice they possess. They may not simply reproduce an image of the ‘popular’ in representational fidelity—this is a false gesture of authenticity because it does not account for the discrepant subject position of the artist, nor does it seriously examine valences of the ‘popular’ that one might not wish to celebrate or reproduce. Instead an artist might reflect upon how their work offers a critical intervention in the rich, but fractured terrain of the ‘popular’.

Footnotes:

1. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
2. The first question contends that visual culture purportedly draws from ‘anthropology’ rather than ‘history’. I imagine that this is supposed to flag a methodological shortcoming, but I remain mystified as what this means exactly. Nevertheless, I would like to interpret this in an enabling manner, as offering an opening towards previously unstudied cultural forms that can be situated, for example, to the way the concept of culture had been articulated by Franz Boas and his students—that every society has a ‘culture’ (rather than only ‘advanced’ societies or cultural elites possessing it). See: Louis Menand, ‘How Cultural Anthropologists Redefined Humanity’, *The New Yorker*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/26/how-cultural-anthropologists-redefined-humanity>
3. Categories such as race do not have an exact analogue in South Asia for example, so the US approach to visual culture seemed to me to be too narrow and prescriptive.
4. Recent studies include, Pedro R. Erber, *Breaching the Frame: The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Elizabeth W Giorgis, *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019); Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); *Ming Tiampo, Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
5. All these conceptions must be tracked temporally and relationally. The relation between the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘popular’ has the subject of an extended research project at the University of California, for example. ‘The Subaltern-Popular Workshop’, <http://www.ihc.ucsb.edu/subaltern/>
6. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 198-199.
7. Williams notes, ‘the familiar range of senses, from unfavorable to favorable, gathered again around this. The shortening gave the word a lively informality but opened it, more easily, to a sense of the trivial.’

8. For an important study on Delhi, see Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (Routledge, 2010).

[Iftikhar Dadi](#) is an associate professor in the department of art history at Cornell University, where he received his PhD. He is the author of *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010) and the edited monograph *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (2015). He has co-edited *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (2012) and *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (2001). Dadi is advisor to Asia Art Archive and serves on the editorial and advisory boards of *Bio-Scope: South Asian Screen Studies*; *Archives of Asian Art*; and previously *Art Journal* (2007–11). He has been a recipient of grants from the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Getty Foundation.

As artists, Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi have collaborated in their practice for twenty years. Their work investigates memory, borders, and identity in contemporary globalisation, the productive capacities of urban informalities in the Global South, and the mass culture of postindustrial societies. Recent exhibitions venues include Art Gallery of Windsor, Canada (2013); John Hartell Gallery, Cornell University (2015, 2018); Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai (2015 & 2018); Dhaka Art Summit (2016); Office of Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo (2017); Lahore Biennale 01 (2018); Havana Biennial at Matanzas (2019); and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK (2019).
