

# A Letter from the Editorial Team

## Fine, Art History?

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In 2020, our department changed its name from The Department of Fine Arts to Art History. It saves department staff a lot of time in answering numerous inquiries about if students can take studio art courses here, and also triggered my curiosity in answering these grand questions: What is art history? Why we call ourselves art historians? Art history is becoming increasingly inclusive in its subject matters and the boundary between disciplines is getting more obscure. For example, many scholars embrace new (sub)fields such as visual culture and material culture as part of their art historical writing. The diversity of subject matters is directly reflected in the different names and structures of art history departments and programs in various universities, for example, art history/theory/criticism (UCSD), history of art and visual culture (Oxford), history of art + architecture (Harvard), and archaeology & history of art (Sorbonne), to name a few.

I have not yet found the best way to explain what I am studying within a few sentences in a casual conversation with people who do not study humanities. It seems easier to answer more specific questions such as “How is it different from history?” “Do you do archaeology or art conservation?” “Do you have to paint a lot?” After speaking with many classmates, I found that such confusion in defining our discipline is shared among us. Hence, it is crucial for us to circulate our ideas and speak for our subject and our own “academic identity,” and the most direct way is to distribute what we write.

The idea of starting our own journal came to me when I failed to find an academic platform for me as an undergraduate student to share my work, as many journals state their scope of submission as “university faculties, curators, independent scholars, and graduate students.” Inspired by other undergraduate student publication such as HASTA (University of St Andrews) and Columbia Undergraduate Journal of Art History, I had the vision of filling the gap by starting our journal in HKU for students, especially undergraduates, to circulate their writings. It is true that the time dedicated to research, often counted by years, and the experiences gained in the process of editing and publishing are prominent for the growth of a scholar. However, our undergraduate student status does not necessarily mean that our works are not worthy

to be published. Neither does it indicate an absolute lack of originality and innovation in our research. Practicing writing as a student is the only route to become a scholar and every expert has once been here. Thus, our position now cannot stop us from seizing every opportunity to make our works more visible and eventually find our voices as both a writer and an individual.

Our journal is predominantly an academic one that includes book reviews, exhibition reviews, and research papers. Meanwhile, commentaries, art-related internship experiences, and our unique section, artist of the issue, are also indispensable to our journal. The primary goal is to create opportunities for students to engage in the academic writing and publishing process for both art historical research and art criticism. In other sections, we also aim to cultivate our abilities to write in different forms for a variety of audiences, from scholars to those without prior knowledge of the field. Based in Hong Kong, whose vibrancy as a global art center is attested by the recent opening of M+ and Hong Kong Palace Museum, our journal aspires to align with both the local and international art scene, and therefore encourage submission of writings on art from all regions and time periods.

The publishing practice of a journal creates a more active and interactive experience of writing that involves proofreading, editing, and reviewing, which prepares students for their future career in the art world or the academia. It is particularly challenging to study art history at a time when humanities subjects are generally shrinking at an institutional level and surviving the academic world has become exceptionally hard. Nevertheless, there are rising opportunities for art historians to explore, for the art world is becoming increasingly integrated with contemporary economy and lifestyle. In the age when exhibitions can be distorted into spectacles of Instagram stories and YouTube videos like “Understand Mona Lisa in 1 Minute” are getting millions of hits, it is art historians’ mission to reclaim the intact art viewing experience and writing as the medium in response to it. Our writings published with open access online testify our dedication to art history as a subject that demands constant interrogations on its definition, methods, and theories. No matter how much influence we can make, I hope that our writings can at least raise some meaningful

questions that push the development of our discipline further.

Without the tremendous efforts of those who engaged in and helped with our initial founding process, the journal is impossible to exist. Though it is impossible to list every name here, I hereby represent the editorial team to express our sincerest gratitude to all of you. It is my great fortune to have an extremely passionate editorial team initiated by my friend and co-founder Lan Chang who joined us without hesitation. Our department demonstrator Ms. Nicole Fung gave us valuable support by guiding us to the archives of the former HKU Fine Arts Society student journal. Special thanks go to Dr. Vivian K. Sheng, who generously offered help with fundings and advice on our editorial process even when our idea was not yet on paper. Last but not least, I am more than grateful to the caring, supportive, and encouraging environment created by every student and teacher in HKU Art History Department, which made it possible for us to build a safe and open platform for sharing our works.

The reason why we study art history, perhaps, includes the ambivalent nature of writing about artworks that may or may not have the right interpretation, as different approaches and theories usually lead to diverging conclusions. However, the writings should be visible to make it possible for scholarly debates to happen. Here comes the platform for us to write, share, and review. As Roland Barthes famously argued, “The fact is...that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’; rather, it designates exactly what linguists...call a performative, a rare verbal form, in which the enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered.”<sup>1</sup> Where my words end, the journey of our journal commences.

## Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by S. Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.

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1 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.