

INTRODUCTION: MATTERS OF FACT

By Aron Vinegar

This special issue on *Matters of Fact* is concerned with the fact family of terms in relationship to art, art history, aesthetics, and visual culture. Assumptions and attitudes about fact, factuality, and facticity provide much of the armature for the practices and premises of art history, art criticism, and visual culture. Intuitively, we probably think of ‘facts’ in art history as comprising the chronological, stylistic, formal, and documentary evidence that serves as the given basis for further interpretation. They are the accomplished body of facts uncovered by research, which refer to and are confirmed by “evidence” either external or internal to the work of art. For the sake of simplicity, let’s call this a certain empirical and positivist tradition of facts. This tradition cannot simply be waved away as merely a naïve positivism or simple empiricism, nor can it be attributed solely to the drive for art history to legitimate itself as a scientific discipline, nor as an attempt to counterbalance art’s perennial connection to subjectivity, creativity, imagination, and fantasy.

In one of Heidegger’s early lecture courses, *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, he wrote a detailed and prescient consideration of the field of art history, which he considered to be at the forefront of the historical human sciences.¹ In the early 1920s, Heidegger considered art history to be a perfect amalgam of a historiological consciousness and modern life philosophy. These were the two nineteenth-century achievements that Heidegger simultaneously admired and submitted to trenchant critique in his early writings. His engagement with both prepared the way for his alternative hermeneutics of facticity, and his analytic of ‘Dasein,’ which he brought to fruition in *Being and Time*. But what he had in mind here was the discipline of art history as an exemplary exploration of what he called facticity as opposed to the factual accumulation of data based on an understanding of history in terms of objective notions of time coupled with a visualizing and aesthetic mode of classifying and comparing the objects and objectifications of psychosocial ‘expressions’ via concepts of style, morphology, and culture.² At its best, the work of art, and potentially art history, was an exemplary form of being-in-the world in its onti-

¹ Martin Heidegger: *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* [1923/1995], trans. by John van Buren, Bloomington 1999, 28–37. I have explored issues of fact, facticity, and factuality drawing on and critiquing these early lecture courses in: *Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography*, in: *Photography After Conceptual Art*, ed. by Margaret Iversen and Diarmuid Costello, Oxford 2010, 853–873, and *Reluzenz: On Richard Estes*, in: *Heidegger and the Work of Art History*, ed. by Amanda Boetzkes and Aron Vinegar, Farnham 2014, 249–268.

² For a fleshed out version of Heidegger’s relationship to art history, including an analysis of his account of art history in *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity* see my co-authored *Introduction to Heidegger and the Work of Art History*, ed. by Amanda Boetzkes and Aron Vinegar, Farnham 2014, 1–30. Phenomenology has always traditionally been about “intuiting essences” as opposed to establishing facts or empirical evidence. For a good account of the intentional structure at the

co-ontological structure and as such differentiated itself from all the other objectively present at hand ontic objects “within-the-world.” Simply put, the work of art was a disclosive event that revealed the full facticity and historicity of being and a primary example of world-making.

But art history was always on the verge of “falling” away from its own ontology and facticity towards the mere accumulation of ontic facts; an ongoing temptation towards the most extreme version of the underlying scientific ambitions of the historical human sciences, manifesting itself in the accumulation, tabulation, classification, and comparison of ‘past’ styles, forms, periods and biographies in and as the disciplining of art history. For Heidegger, that ambition would simply result in an empty husk of what was the vital, contingent and absolutely historical life-worlds and modes of being that artworks potentially are no matter how tinged they are “by [...] world withdrawal and world decay.”³ It was precisely the fact that works of art continue to exist in our present and into the future to come – the fact that they are “never merely past” – that generates their way of being-in the world in terms of a complex temporality and materiality that is both the limits and grounds of interpretative possibility.

As we can see, the words fact, factuality and facticity have a remarkable range of inflection: they indicate the accumulated and accomplished ‘objective’ truths about the world; the empirical facts of scientific and positivist enquiry; a phenomenological account of the particular, concrete, contingent, and finite ontological ways of Dasein’s *facticity* – its “Being-in-the-world” in contrast to the *factual* nature of other ontic entities’ existence “within-the-world”; the Kantian transcendental dimensions of the “fact of reason” that creates its own proof of existence in contrast to the facticity of phenomenal experience and the given possibilities of phenomena; the Humean conception of “matters of fact” as an inference not directly given in experience, and thus constructed; and the relationships between human making and the resultant objects produced and the beliefs and values that link them, such as in the concept of the fetish, that has been thought about in anthropology, religion, and political economy. A rehearsal of many of these dimensions of fact – almost an encyclopedic account of its many inflections – can be found in the American critic Clement Greenberg’s work: references to “facts of reason,” (a clear reference to Kant); art versus “aesthetically arbitrary objects or facts” (empirical phenomenon); or the “sensuous facts” of pictorial art embracing its own medium” attest to how intrinsic issues of fact are to art, aesthetics, art history, and visual culture. All of the essays in this volume engage with the tradition of thinking about facts from Kant, Hume, Habermas, Heidegger, and Deleuze to the recent invigoration of thinking on fact in the work of Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour,

heart of phenomenology see Tom Sparrow: *The End of Phenomenology – Metaphysics and the New Realism*, Edinburgh 2015, 8-14.

³ Martin Heidegger: *The Origin of the Work of Art* [1950], in: id.: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter, New York 1971, 15-86, 75.

and Quentin Meillassoux among others. For many of these thinkers – as well as for the artists discussed in this volume – art is the domain where one can question the givenness of fact and the fact of givenness itself.

Some of the more productive engagements with the phenomenological tradition have been oriented towards rethinking the relationships between facticity and factuality, the ontic and the ontological, Being and being in Heidegger. These relationships take on their most forceful and determining role in his notion of “ontological difference.”⁴ The primary relationship of facticity to Dasein, and the privileging of the human-world relationship, is epitomized in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “phenomenology [...] does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity.’”⁵ In terms of works of art and perception, this means that the work of art is not only “in” a world, it is an act of world-formation, in which issues of reflection and perception are grounded in the contingencies, opacities, and ontologies of material and historical existence. This has tended to foster what Tom Sparrow has characterized as phenomenology’s “rhetoric of concreteness and realism.”⁶ This is usually articulated in terms of an interest in embodiment, lived experience, finitude, immediacy, and how meaning is always fringed by the materiality of the world and its opacities, invisibilities, and regions of the “unthought.” This has been salutary in many ways, in its emphasis on the singularity of the artwork that resists and critiques any appropriation and possession in and as ground or origin by a transparent and transcendent subjectivity. But that inability to appropriate grounds or origins can tend to look like a ‘negative’ epistemological limitation, rather than a possibility for a generous and speculative ontology.

No matter how radically singular, resistant, or excessive the work of art or perception is, it always seems to find its way back to human facticity and away from the factuality of existence. It is hardly surprising then, that art in art history always seems to be a correlate of intentionality, and that art history is dominated by the concept of worlds elucidating realms of meaning, sense, and perception that are given to us. Perhaps the most far reaching intervention in the Kantian-Heideggerian tradition of facticity has been Quentin Meillassoux’s radical rethinking of facticity in terms of what he calls “factuality” and which he considers to be the speculative core of the former. Through the notion of “factuality” the contingency

⁴ The term “ontological difference” first appeared in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* published in 1927, and is further developed in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929–30). However, its basic premise was articulated through different terminology in his early lecture courses and *Being and Time*.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. by Colin Smith, London 1962, vii.

⁶ Tom Sparrow: *The Rhetoric of Realism in Phenomenology*, in: id.: *The End of Phenomenology* [note 2], 69–85. A similar point is raised by Peter Wolfendale, in his concept of “exoteric concreteness,” which he uses to critique phenomenology’s “immanent concreteness,” and its emphasis on embodiment and lived experience. See id.: *Object-Oriented Philosophy – The Noumenon’s New Clothes*, Falmouth 2014, 352, fn. 445.

of facticity is prised away from its connection to finitude, Dasein and the correlation between being and thinking towards the infinite, the absolute, and the necessity of contingency.⁷

The empirical tradition has taken on new legs with rise of new and speculative realisms, as can be seen in the increasing attention paid to the “factual” domain of objects and things, and a renewed interest in an aesthetics that resonates with and is invigorated by ontology and vice versa. These developments can be seen in differing ways in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Steven Shaviro, Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, Levi Bryant, and Graham Harman.⁸ This reinvigoration of empiricism is also apparent in a very different way in Deleuze’s rethinking of the “pictorial fact” or “matter of fact,” drawing on a ‘constructive’ rethinking of the Humean empirical tradition, a radical ontological interpretation of the phenomenological aesthetics of perception in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Henri Maldiney, and an engagement with artists such as Michelangelo, Francis Bacon, and Jackson Pollock.⁹ In a totally different domain, Bruno Latour attempts to “renew empiricism” by moving closer to facts instead of moving away from them into critique by developing a realism that is primarily interested in what he calls “matters of concern” rather than “matters of fact”.¹⁰ This attempt to overcome the hoary divide between empirical facts of nature and social construction of reality has resulted in neologisms such as the “factish” (Latour), or “artifactuality” (Derrida).

All of the essays in in this volume imaginatively engage with the positivist, empiricist, transcendental, and phenomenological traditions of fact and facticity that have permeated art history through and through. Some of the authors have chosen to explore the phenomenological notions of “factuality” and “facticity,” and subsequent critiques of these terms opened up by various strands of speculative realism and object oriented ontology (Jackson, Thomas, Vinegar), while others are interested in the work of Hume on “matter of fact,” and Deleuze’s engagement

⁷ Quentin Meillassoux: *After Finitude – An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* [2006], trans. by Ray Brassier, London 2008.

⁸ Unfortunately this embrace of aesthetics in new and speculative realism, and object oriented ontology, has often been accompanied by a denigration of judgment. The following thinkers are the only ones I am aware of who explicitly write about judgment as an ally of a rich and speculative ontology: Steven Schaviro, Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy.

⁹ For example see Gilles Deleuze: *Francis Bacon – The Logic of Sensation* [1981], trans. by Daniel W. Smith, Minneapolis 2005, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *What is Philosophy?* [1991], trans. by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, New York 1994. The most original reinterpretations of Hume after Deleuze is to be found in the section “Hume’s Problem” in Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* [note 7], 82–111.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour: *Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004), 225–248. These issues are further explored in the exhibitions (and exhibition catalogues) *Iconoclash – Beyond the Image Wars in Science*, exh. cat. Karlsruhe, ZKM, ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Cambridge /London 2002, and *Making Things Public – Atmospheres of Democracy*, exh. cat. Karlsruhe, ZKM, ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, Cambridge /London 2005.

with that term as an inspiration for his notion of the “pictorial fact” (Vellodi and Wells), while others are interested in the “visual communication of facts” and how facts travel in terms of stability and variation across different mediums and institutional spaces (Golec).

But the real pleasure and joy of the essays in the volume is that they do not simply rehearse the historical issues of facticity – even the ones that seem to be manifestly “about” art history. All of them put pressure on traditional art historical frameworks for identifying and interpreting objects, artworks, and artifacts and their contingent situatedness in spatio-temporal frameworks. In doing so, they explore new modes of thinking about how matters of fact, facticity, and factuality can offer exciting new ways of thinking about art, art history, visuality, and visual culture. They show that issues of facticity are crucial to exploring new modes of art, ethics, and politics, instead of the “givenness” of things as they stand. Indeed, all the essays are involved in a relentless interrogation of the status of the “given” and “givenness” in relationship to the fact family of terms, and the possibility of things, worlds, art, attitudes, beliefs, existence, politics becoming otherwise ... or not changing at all. This infinite groundlessness is perhaps not a very comforting thought for art history, but it really opens things up.

SUMMARY OF PAPERS

By Kerstin Thomas

In analysing Lester Beall's posters for the US government between 1937-1941, *Michael Golec* demonstrates the twofold character of facts in art and design appearing even when they are applied to guarantee distinct messages. Commissioned by governmental agencies to develop a series of posters to increase the electrification of rural farms, Beall introduces pictograms in his first series to represent electrification as "facts of the future." Their simple forms facilitate the travelling of facts without loss of their integrity. The same holds true for the use of photographic images for the second campaign of 1939. Following the reevaluation of photography as a means for the documentation of social reality, as represented by the FSA photographers under the guidance of Roy Stryker, the medium served here as the authentication of facts. Golec contends, that by reducing the complexity of the photographic images in order to create a pictorial integrity within and across his posters, despite the use of a seemingly documentary medium, Beall reinforces the ambivalent factual character of the pictures. Paradoxically, by heightening the communicative character of the design and hence stressing the idea of facts as integral realities outside of artworks, Beall's posters reveal the ambiguous character of pictorial facts creating their own specific qualities. Golec concludes that facts in works of art and design have a twofold character resulting from their belonging to different spaces, which although meant to accomplish and address different facts, inevitably travel, overlap and bleed into each other. Thus these facts refer to or represent reality and, simultaneously, are a thing made (*factum*) that presents and evidences its own pictorial reality.

Rachel Wells turns to the examination of three recent artistic practices, which integrate facts in their work not as an antagonistic other but as a constitutive element to their efficacy and ethics. She argues, that in introducing news, factual actions, or objects with traces of factual events, Alfredo Jaar, Jeremy Deller and Martin Creed use facts in order to retract from the position of art as an expression of artistic freedom and subjectivity and thus as the opposite of fact. Instead, she states that by introducing the factual these artists emphasize, each in their own way, the instability of given epistemological and ethical frameworks. Far from being a mere relativist pose, Wells understands this denial of a stable subjectivist position as a reconfigured sense of "decision" – perhaps in the sense of Nancy's articulation of a "decision of existence" – that lets the factual take precedence over control in and of the artwork as a heightened form of responsiveness and responsibility. Whereas Jaar uses the factual to engage overt political action, Deller presents facts that avoid taking an overtly critical perspective forcing the viewer to think about political events. In contrast, Creed seeks an interpretation of the past, which would avoid the responsibility of taking a position. Whereas David Hume stated famously that reasoning

concerning matter of fact is founded in causality, and Immanuel Kant concluded that responsibility and freedom begins where causality ends, Wells understands the positions of Jaar, Deller and Creed as an attempt to reconcile the realm of the factual and the realm of the moral. Responsibility would then arise exactly out of an insight into the impossibility of grounding moral stances in rationality and causality, and an attempt to use causality to demonstrate this impossibility.

Robert Jackson examines the work of the German artist Florian Slotawa. Beginning with his first works, “Hotelarbeiten,” Slotawa recomposes and reconfigures the order of ordinary objects – in this case, hotel room furnitures. In reconstructing these rooms in another order without altering the objects in any way, photographing them, and then subsequently restoring them to their previous configuration, the artist simultaneously reveals their ordinary function and by withdrawing from their function shows their material and factual character. To elucidate the specificity of Slotawa’s intervention, Jackson critiques Heidegger’s conception of facticity in its exclusive account of Dasein and its being-in-the world, in contrast to the factuality of “things-within-the world.” Drawing on Harman’s extension of finitude beyond Dasein to all things, he encourages us to see Slotawa as engaged in “facticity of things” that is characterized by dispossession, lack of reason, and radical contingency. As Jackson argues, Slotawa is trying to find a way to dwell in a world that has no room or possibility for the given coordinates of dwelling; a world that is a fact without reason. In concluding, he offers a reading of Slotawa that explores the intersecting yet radically different approaches to thinking about a speculative realism in the work of Harman and Meillassoux, and their differing attitudes to the finite and the infinite, facticity and factuality, contingency and necessity, without presuming to assume that either of these accounts cover the speculative facticity of things revealed in Slotawa’s work.

Kerstin Thomas reevaluates the famous dispute between Martin Heidegger, Meyer Schapiro, and Jacques Derrida, concerning a painting of shoes by Vincent Van Gogh. The starting point for this dispute was the description and analysis of things and artworks developed in his essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In discussing Heidegger’s account, the art historian Meyer Schapiro’s main point of critique is Heidegger’s claim that the artwork reveals the truth of equipment in depicting shoes of a peasant woman and thereby showing her world. Schapiro sees a striking paradox in Heidegger’s claim for truth, based on a specific object in a specific artwork while at the same time following a rather metaphysical idea of the artwork. Kerstin Thomas proposes an interpretation, which exceeds the common confrontation of philosophy versus art history by focussing on the respective notions of facticity at stake in the theoretical accounts of both thinkers. Schapiro accuses Heidegger of a lack of concreteness, which he sees as the basis for every truth claim on objects. Thomas understands Schapiro’s objections as motivated by his demand for a facticity, which not only includes the work of art, but also the investigator in his concrete historical perspective. Truth claims under such conditions of facticity are always relative to historical knowledge, and open to critical intervention

and therefore necessarily contingent. Following Thomas, Schapiro's critique shows that despite his intention of giving the work of art its autonomy back, Heidegger could be accused of achieving quite the opposite: through an abstraction of the concrete, factual, and the given to the type, he actually sets the self and the realm of knowledge of the creator as absolute and not the object of his knowledge. Instead, Thomas argues for a reevaluation of Schapiro's position through a recognition of the arbitrariness of the artwork, by introducing the notion of factuality as formulated by Quentin Meillassoux. Understood as an exchange between artist and object in its concrete material quality, as well as with the beholder, the truth of painting can only be shown as radically contingent. Thomas argues that Derrida's critical intervention, which discusses both positions anew, is precisely motivated by a recognition of the contingent character of object, artwork and interpretation. His deconstructive analysis can be understood as recognition of the dynamic character of things, and hence, read alongside Meillassoux, better reveals their character of facticity – or factuality.

In her contribution, *Kamini Vellodi* reflects on the possibilities of a methodological shift in the discipline of art history, that might result from an expanded rethinking of fact by concentrating on the notion of the "pictorial fact," or "matter of fact" in Gilles Deleuze's transcendental empiricism. Vellodi argues that Deleuze's matter of fact can help us to overcome the still prevalent self-conception of art history as discipline, which has to trace historical facts, understood as given entities that "represent" already accomplished events, and that provide the foundations and target for subsequent interpretation and elaboration. Following these assumptions, facts are antecedent to art historical investigations; they are seen as empirical material, independent from the art historian, something which he or she has to collect in order to reconstruct the authentic essence of the artwork. This reductive notion of facticity in art history dominates not only our understanding of the material and historical facts of artworks, but also an understanding of their formal qualities. In the representational regime, as Vellodi calls it, forms in artworks are reduced to a primary function of representing an antecedent "fact," hence an external meaning. Instead, Vellodi augments this regime of fact – which might be important concerning questions of technique, dates etc. – by a second conception of fact that foregrounds the dynamic and material qualities of artworks, which cannot be explained by their representational function, but are 'evident' in their sensual presence. Vellodi proposes to follow Deleuze's notion of "matters of fact" as proper pictorial ligatures acting as living forces and hence affecting the perception of art by challenging prevailing notions of the artwork. Facticity in this sense is understood as the material quality of the artwork realized in sensation and hence radically dynamic and contingent. As Vellodi demonstrates, this notion of "matters of fact" bears important ramifications for a philosophy of painting as well as for art history. Art historical practice would, in consequence, need to take account of the difference of each artwork acting as dynamic force beyond and even against already acquired facts. If one follows Vellodi's analysis, one could draw the consequence,

that art history should be practised as an ongoing and never completed activity, in its attempts to create facticity by forming differentiated new relations to, within, and between each work of art in its specific material dynamics.

Aron Vinegar's essay explores art history and visual culture's dependence on a phenomenological conception of world, which is based on a hermeneutics of facticity, intentionality, and ontological difference. He argues that the 'basic concept' of world has structured the field of art history and visual culture in implicit and explicit ways, thus dictating many of its commitments and concerns. One of the primary limitations of this commitment to world, is that it has resulted in art history and visual culture's tendency to concern itself with a very small portion of existence, usually human existence, in its emphasis on hermeneutics and facticity, thus foreclosing on a more generous and speculative ontology, ethics, and politics. The concept of "world" suggests an overarching totality, an interconnected field of meaning and sense, often indicated by a tacit and resonate tonality. But there is no overarching "world" or "world-view" that can provide us with an overview of or container for the myriad worlds of things. An art history that is willing to consider that the world does not exist would acknowledge and embrace the fact that there is no overall focus, which can encompass things and events in all their spatio-temporal complexity. It would entail a practice attentive to a "supple and inflected bathmology" (Vinegar prefers this phrase to "flat ontology") in its refusal to emphasize "privileged ontological scenes" predicated on hierarchies of ontological difference, and subsuming things and experience within the structures of phenomenological intentionality. To initiate such a practice, Vinegar suggests an embrace of what he terms "ontological indifference," a robust notion of habit, and a temporal logic that would be fully attentive to a pluriverse of multiple existences and eruptions of substance, which extend well beyond 'our' realms of significance and meaning, cares and concerns, laughter and joy, losses and mournings.