THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SEARCH

An interview with David Joselit

Architecture after the ‘Era of Art.'

David Joselit's recent book, After Art,1 presents an interpretation of art and architecture following the “image population explosion” of the 20th century. Joselit argues that we have arrived at an “epistemology of search” in which innovation has shifted from the production of objects to their contextualization, where analysis shifts from media to format. ARPA Journal editor Troy Conrad Therrien interviewed Joselit in his office at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City in August of 2014 to discuss further the implications for architecture in his thesis.

TCT: What do you mean by the term “after” in After Art?

David Joselit: The term is meant to be an alternative to the more frequently used prefix “post,” as in post-modern. Post suggests a kind of ending of a previous moment. “After,” on the other hand, can mean after another artist, in the sense of imitating or working in the tradition of such an artist. Some of the more important works I discuss in the book are those of Sherrie Levine, who made a series of appropriations titled “After Walker Evans.” The term after indicates her relationship to the artists—many well-known male figures—whose work she is reproducing. I'm very interested in the idea of repetition that comes with “after,” but also the idea that what matters is how the work functions after it leaves the studio. Finally, the term is meant to suggest a change in the nature of art production towards a more entertainment-oriented condition.

TCT: Another of the “afters” in the book is the way you situate your study after the “era of art.” What is meant by this term and how is it important for your argument?

DJ: There are two ways of defining the “era of art,” one negative and one positive. Negatively, what I try to argue is that art has entered into an economy of entertainment that isn't so different from, on the one hand, the film industry as a spectacular system of images and leisure time activities, and on the other hand, the serious pursuit of knowledge as practiced in higher education. It's more and more difficult to distinguish a practice of art that is securely distinct from these other commercial and educational institutions. The positive way of thinking about an “era of art” I take in part from the ideas of Hans Belting, the important medieval, and now modern, historian of art—Belting argues that the “era of art” corresponds to a belief in the individual artist's agency to produce an object whose singularity is derived from the values of art itself. So if art is no longer a special practice set apart, then how can we define its social utility, its political possibilities?

TCT: How do you engage with these questions of the social and political possibilities for art today?

DJ: When it comes to the political possibilities and power of art, I have two things to say. Much of political art tends to exit from the art world in order to engage with realms outside itself, such as Occupy or AIDS activism or feminism. What I try to argue in After Art is that in fact, the art world itself is an enormous source of power that goes beyond
The aesthetic. It's a huge engine of development—a network that connects billionaires to philosophers, in the sense that I think of artists and architects as philosophers. Art enables a set of configurations between, let's say, enormous wealth, highly sophisticated ideas and aesthetic practices that are centuries old. These conjunctions or formats or apparatuses can be used as real social power.

**TCT:** What are the distinctions between an artist and an architect in this schema?

**DJ:** In *After Art* I discuss both art and architecture, and I do something that I think people who work on both disciplines often do, which is look at the opposite practice as a model for thinking possibilities. As someone who works on art, and predominantly contemporary art in recent years, I've become very interested in how the legacy of conceptual art is basically about shaping information. It seems to me that the most important political issues at the moment involve access to information, including access to education and privacy around one's personal information. If we think about the aesthetics of information, it is the architect who has persuasively generated both actual and virtual space from data. An architect like Rem Koolhaas, but also many others, is conducting research and visualizing spatial, political and social information as form. This is a really interesting model for thinking about how research enters social space.

**TCT:** Is the shaping of information the end product? Is this the same in both art and architecture?

**DJ:** I think it's really different in art and architecture. Information is shaped with a different sense of utility and a different sense of flexibility within art practice. Often, artists are interested in the threshold moment when a field of things and/or data forms into an object. Whereas, it seems to me architects are interested in creating modes of physical circulation that are somehow intelligently derived from a research project, from information. Simply put, I think of architecture as creating literal circulation for information, and art as a form of questioning of how informational objects are built, made, and solidified.

**TCT:** How does this relate to your concept of “format”, and how does it articulate the difference between art and architecture?

**DJ:** The term format allows me to circumnavigate one of the most fundamental and, in some ways, most limiting terms in art history—medium. Medium suggests that an artistic practice must be understood in a genealogy of, say, painting or video or photography—in other words, a craft genealogy. And I don't use that term to denigrate those crafts, but merely to say that it's a certain notion of understanding. The term format allows one to analyze how both buildings and works of art are configured, without limiting them to a single kind of physical substrate. A format can be a combination of a community with a videotape or photograph, or it can be a set of linked urban landscapes and physical buildings. The term arose for me through Bruno Latour's notion of the assemblage in *Reassembling the Social*, a kind of assembly or configuration of the social through aesthetic means. But most importantly, it's a response to what I see artists doing, which is basically exploding the notion of medium in order to connect very heterogeneous kinds of scales, types of objects or persons.

**TCT:** What's the difference between what you call format and what McLuhan called medium?

**DJ:** The question of Marshall McLuhan hovers behind *After Art*. My previous book, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, was about how media ecologies encompass video art, media activism and commercial television, forming a complex public sphere to which citizens have different degrees of access. *After Art* is in many ways a kind of extension of those arguments into the realm of contemporary art. It's true that McLuhan is not mentioned, and of course my own publication history is not relevant to anyone reading a particular book, but it hovers in the background. I do think that McLuhan's notion of a medium, whose content is another medium, is very different from that in art history, where heterogeneity is not a constituent condition. I think there's something about McLuhan's notion of medium that is closer to my concept of format. However, what I really want to think about is a kind of coherence that is extremely heterogeneous, and that can span highly divergent scales. It can be about a globe, but also, in the case of Ai...
Weiwei's work for instance, a multitude of tiny porcelain seeds made by inexpensive Chinese labor. There can be these dizzying jumps in scale, which is another reason why Rem Koolhaas' sense of scale was very inspiring to me. What I'm most interested in is how we go from a massive global scale to a very microcosmic scale in our contemporary moment. The middle ground is what seems to fade away, and I think that's a very interesting question to try to pursue.

TCT: When you invoke epistemology – which you do explicitly and through identifying shifts and turns and tendencies – in such a small book, how do you choose your case studies and how do they function? Are they representative samples that point to something larger?

DJ: Choosing examples when you’re making a broad argument is very freighted ethically. I purposely chose well-known architects and artists who have developed a strong profile in global debates. It’s not always the appropriate choice to make, but I would stand by that choice in this particular book—when trying to diagnose a structure, it’s helpful to use examples that have a significant track record, and who have stood the test of time. When you’re working with contemporary art there’s always the huge seduction to deal with the very newest thing. I’m totally susceptible to that, but I think if you’re trying to look at a set of qualities that persist over time (even the relatively short time of a decade or two) it’s important to choose examples that seem appropriate in the sense that others have also recognized in them some kind of exemplary status. I try to mediate against that by taking exemplary figures from different fields within the art world. I do put artists together within contemporary art, such as Matthew Barney, Sherrie Levine, Tania Bruguera and Ai Weiwei, that wouldn't necessarily be brought together, even though all of them have very well established careers.

TCT: One of the diagnoses you make is of the overpopulation of images. How is this historically situated and how is it related to the advent of the Internet?

DJ: One of the terms I use is “image population explosion.” For me this has a strong bearing on art in particular, but architecture too in some ways, because the scale of our image ecology has expanded so dramatically from the late 19th century to the present. Works of art are no longer special occasions the way they may have been, because there is an image world that is so pervasive. Vast numbers of people who have access to a phone or a computer in the developed and the developing worlds alike have the capacity to easily and cheaply make and post their own images – in other words, to function in the way artists do. What I'm arguing is not a moral argument against the profusion of images, but rather to say that the value of a work of art as an image – it’s capacity to circulate and attract attention – is dramatically different in terms of how many images there are in the world. It's also true that since the 1960s there has been a vast expansion of the art world as well. In the West, we didn’t really pay attention to the aesthetic production of the global south or of the “Second World,” the Soviet Bloc and China. There has been an expansion of image worlds in general, but also an expansion of how we regard art worlds. Whether or not one can rise to this challenge, I think everyone working on contemporary art feels the need to broaden the scope beyond the Euro-American canon.

TCT: The discovery that drew us to your book for this issue of ARPA Journal was your introduction of the epistemology of search. What do you mean by this and what is its relation to this explosion of the image world?

DJ: The epistemology of search is meant to suggest a displacement in aesthetic value from the production of content to aggregation of content through research–searching in various ways. What I want to suggest is that what matters more in our contemporary digital world is not making content, but configuring it, searching for it, finding what you need and making meaning from it. Obviously, in an era of data mining we know that information collection can also function as the primitive accumulation of capital whose value is derived from creating patterns—the kind of profiling done by marketing and governments alike. It seems to me that many artists are pursuing this and making works in which the configuration or formatting of content is what matters most. Again, this goes back to the idea that in architecture, design is often a kind of shaping of a set of diagnostic informational studies.

TCT: In which registers does this methodology play out in art and architecture beyond the Euro-American canon?
DJ: The most feasible, though somewhat utopian, form of the epistemology of search is analogous to the idea that information should be a commons; that it should be open, a resource for everyone to work creatively with and through. More and more types of work are based on this, and more and more discoveries among social scientists, for instance, reveal that creativity is cooperative, et cetera. What I think is most important with regard to these issues is that information has become a kind of capital. Art and architecture has tried to theorize information at the same time as a form. The value of this resource is still unclear in terms of what its outcome will be, and what the informational economies that we live in now will end up becoming. Whether they will be extremely repressive or they will allow a certain kind of openness is still an open question.

TCT: How is your use of the term image different from the way you use information and form?

DJ: My thinking on images has developed a bit. It has sharpened from the arguments I make in After Art. My favorite definition of the image now is made by Jean-Luc Nancy who talks about the image as the disputation of the presence of things. The image, in a way, is a theorization of objects, but it's a theorization that is very singular: it's in the minds of every viewer. In After Art, when I use the term image, I really mean a picture, a quantum of visual information, which goes back to the idea of an information economy and that the image is a unit of currency in that economy.

TCT: In the book you describe the modernist avant-garde as conducting research into image innovation. How does image research work in the epistemology of search?

DJ: What I've been trying to think about with regard to questions of research is a shift from modernist innovation of form to present day contemporary art that emphasizes enunciation, the use of a language. Modern artists, to use a semiotic metaphor, tried to reinvent language, and now because the global is so pressing there is almost a kind of international style that grows out of conceptual art. What matters within this international style are the different enunciations made within that shared language–it's more about a set of speech acts, or even dialects, as opposed to a whole new way of speaking.

TCT: You wrote that “all kinds of power share a structure with electrical current... this is the structure of connections... the formula is contact + current = currency (power).” How do you equate currency to power?

DJ: I use an energy metaphor when I argue that a set of contacts with images establish a currency that equals power. What I really mean by this – I am indebted to Jonathan Crary's idea of attention – is that what's crucial in our current media economies is that an image attracts and accumulates attention. That's a form of power. I'm trying to think about what kinds of real world power art can have. Art is an enormous power structure, it's very much connected to capital and development. If we think of art's power as the power to accumulate attention in various ways, then I think we have a potentially progressive way of imagining its worldly effects.

TCT: After After Art there has been a great deal of historical moments that have changed the way we think about and understand the core issues in the book, particularly the Snowden revelations and the ensuing discourse on privacy and digital culture. How do you see the book retrospectively, now only two years later?

DJ: In looking back on After Art, what I would like to have done is to have theorized more crisply the idea of information as a kind of primitive accumulation–how it functions in a global setting as both an oppressive force, a force that can be exploited by capital, but also a force for openness, as with the release of the NSA files. Trying to understand how information functions as a resource, and how the shaping of that information by artists, as well as others, can be really efficacious. This is the kind of analysis I want to do and that's one of the things I hope to do in my next book on globalization.
David Joselit is Distinguished Professor in the Art History Department of CUNY Graduate Center and the author of *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (MIT Press, 1998), *American Art Since 1945* and *After Art*, amongst other titles.