

**Editorial: 24 Years of Visual Culture in Britain: The Relaunch
Issue**

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24 years of Visual Culture In Britain: The Relaunch Issue

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The twenty-four-year history of *Visual Culture in Britain* has coincided with numerous transformations to the economic, social and political conditions under which our intellectual labour takes place. As incoming editors, we are mindful of remaining attentive to those substantial histories, legacies and possible futures. We are relaunching the journal at a moment in which the geopolitical pressures on scholars working in particular fields or from specific locations feel distinctly acute: we are compelled to examine Britain's role within this global picture and to seek ways of articulating solidarity with scholars globally. Angela McRobbie (2024) recently asked how the UK's cultural disciplines can engage with the shocking and violent events of the present, arguing 'that the field of cultural studies has its origins in a notion of postwar peacetime, and this has created a vocabulary deficit in relation to war, genocide and state violence'. This incisive analysis is something we will be keeping in mind as the journal moves forward and we reflect on how its decidedly transdisciplinary focus – crossing visual and material culture, art history and cultural studies, broadly speaking – might allow us to knit together understandings or directions for the pressing ecological, geopolitical and social questions beyond such deficits.

In considering new directions for the journal, we reviewed past issues. Many of these earlier volumes and the articles within informed our early understanding of the field and sharpened our perspectives on what visual culture could and should be in the context of a national framework with global ties (see figure 1). In looking back, certain tendencies have emerged throughout the journal's publishing history, indicative of changing editorial interests and intellectual trends. Special issues and research articles have focussed on constructions of Scottishness and Northern regional identities, Victorian- and Edwardian-era art production, painting, television studies, graphic satire, and migration, with important analyses of arts and the economic recession, and the visual culture of colonial India. Both 'visual culture' and 'Britain' look very different in 2024 than in 2000, but an attentiveness to borders, nationhood and identity continues to animate the journal's readership.

Insert image figure 1 here

Caption: A screen grab of the promotional launch of issue 1, volume 1 circulated by Ashgate who published the journal for the first 6 years (2000 – 2006).

In addition to highlighting certain thematic and regional tendencies, the journal also has a tradition of periodically inviting contributions from invested parties and stakeholders who are

interested in current events and methodological approaches to call upon what Visual Culture in Britain is, or could be, in response to particular moments. The first example of this was in issue 1. Journal founder and editor, Ysanne Holt, invited feedback on the original proposal for the journal. Respondents were 'specifically asked to act as devil's advocates for what they felt would be likely objections and arguments, as well as to range freely across their own particular interests and preoccupations' (2000: 2). Presented as a 'chain-letter debate', each of the nine interlocutors picked and probed at a range of topics that reflected the necessity for such a publication, as well as cautioned about its role and scope.

A second roundtable was initiated in 2014. Titled 'Wet Paint' and published in 2015, Craig Richardson solicited reflections from scholars based at British universities, galleries, libraries, archives, and museums sector (GLAM) and research centres in response to the idea of a changing Britain through the prism of British art and visual culture, using cogent examples wherever possible, and bringing to the fore the authors' observations, understandings and positions within this rapidly developing context. This reflected the political climate of the time, which was rife with debates concerning regionalism, Scottish Independence, the emergence of Brexit and what that meant for visual and symbolic belonging, national identity and Britishness. Ten years later the newly formed editorial team felt it appropriate to revive 'Wet-Paint' in order to provide an additional compass reading for the topics and challenges ahead. 'Wet-Paint 2: Visual Culture in a Changing Britain', published right after our editorial, follows a similar process to its predecessor. Chaired once again by Richardson, the roundtable can also be read in the same vein as Holt's inaugural 'chain-letter debate' 24 years ago. In these ten years much has changed, in particular the rise of populist politics and rhetoric as well as the way we share, receive and trust images. With this in mind, respondents were asked: how does Britain look in 2024 and how do we see these shifting landscapes through a multiplicity of mediums?

It is in the vein of these conversations that we relaunch the journal. Using a similarly open invitation, we canvassed ideas and reflections from scholars across a range of disciplines and career stages as well as geographies and institutions. The list of participants is below, while the call for participation to this relaunch issue, published in full, opens the contributions proper. The aim here was to stretch and test the limits of visual culture. The visual has been incredibly effective in shaping people's understanding of their environment, their pleasures in it, and their threats and obligations to it (Boylan, 2020). Our role as editors is to ensure we include and consider as many environments as possible.

The responses gathered in this issue reveal much about the state of the UK's cultural disciplines today. As editors we seek not to engineer but to facilitate these directions, generating a space that supports creative exploration, conversation and allows for trial and error. Rather than focussing on content or on defining disciplinary boundaries and behaviours, *Visual Culture in Britain* seeks to contribute positively to the vexed cultural landscape of this present moment through its methods, practices and – most of all – *attitude*. We aim to foster a space of 'epistemic generosity' as recently defined by Rachelle Chadwick (2024) as a stance or mode of intellectual critique that remains avowedly '[o]pen to surprise, wonder and connection, it is fundamentally an orientation to thinking and knowing rooted in hopefulness.'

This hopefulness surfaces too in the changing political landscape upon which we find ourselves, harbouring a cynical optimism that the recently elected Labour government will do

something to improve the perilous state of higher education and the cultural sector more generally in the UK. It is notable that all three co-editors are based in former polytechnics (Birmingham, Northumbria, Westminster) and we remain mindful of the possibilities demonstrated by that late-twentieth-century period of investment, expansion and diversification in education, along with the explosive, energising approaches to culture that emerged in these spaces as academics and students identified new objects and avenues of study. By embarking on this new venture with a special issue of roundtables and responses, we intend to establish a tone of abrasive, joyful multiplicity and to encourage our authors and readers to take pleasure in the heterogeneous work of visual culture.

As the journal relaunches under new co-editorship, we are very grateful for the guidance of our board of expert advisors, which includes postdoctoral to professorial scholars and practising artists. Although it is a journal of culture in Britain, this international board currently comprises academics from across the UK, Ireland and North America and we aim in future to further enrich the geographical scope of the board. Subject expertise encompasses art and design history, museum and cultural studies, lens-based media and periodical studies, with specific advisory knowledge across visual activism, borders and regions, feminist approaches, Black British history and decolonising the arts disciplines. It is our hope that the expansive tenor and texture of the board's research will shape the journal's character as it becomes reestablished as a voice in UK visual culture studies.

Our aim is to unite critical inquiry and social practice, taking an expansive understanding of the constituencies who can speak to visual culture's past, present and future histories. In doing so, we propose several new formats. We will continue the journal's tradition of publishing original articles and thematic Special Issues. For these, we welcome submissions spanning the pressing priorities of our disciplines to research on seemingly niche topics, but which can also do much for stimulating intellectual curiosity and help us look at our world with fresh eyes. And in the spirit of facilitating collaborative ways of understanding our field, the journal relaunches with three new ventures: Visual Culture in Britain Focus, thematic Special Sections and, with its own dedicated editor, Visual Culture in Britain Reviews.

Visual Culture in Britain Focus will host shorter contributions of typically 2,000-4,000-word in a flexible range of formats and styles – from dialogues to fieldnotes and beyond – to accommodate, as much as a page-based format allows us, the wider possible range of voices. The intention is to offer a platform to experiment and challenge ideas, to address pressing concerns and to rethink the relationship between form and content in published academic writing. We hope that this will stimulate cross-sector conversations between those who have a stake in understanding and shaping visual culture in Britain today, especially heritage institutions and their publics, higher education scholars and non-academic experts, grassroots communities, policy makers, visual artists, gallery technicians and more. In doing so, we wish for the journal to expand the notion of who is a visual culture 'expert' and, in turn, to become of interest to a wider spectrum of readers.

We are conscious that doing this within the framework of a global corporate publishing company poses stringent limitations, if only because we cannot make the journal's content available in open access in perpetuity for free. We also recognise that, as editors, we write from the position of insiders to a publishing industry that is motivated by often different goals from those that generally drive academic pursuits. To this effect, we propose Visual Culture in

Britain Focus as a pragmatic step to experiment with scholarly publications from the inside, and have negotiated terms of access so that all contributions will be made free to view for six months with no costs to the authors. To maximise their reach and impact, these contributions will also be highlighted via the journal's social media channels.

Whilst we will continue to support thematically framed Special Issues that typically take up an entire issue (6-8 articles), the **thematic Special Sections** will be half that number. With this venture our aim is to foster a space for the rigorous development of new and cutting-edge scholarship on novel ideas, themes and developments where a full complement of articles might be unrealistic. The Special Section is open to anyone but, like the Focus, it is hoped that this format may also appeal to groups of practitioners from outside the traditional scope of academic institutions and networks such as small, specialised departments and teams, along with collectives and working groups. In both cases, we welcome proposals for Special Issues and Special Sections, recognising that the formation of knowledge exchange is sometimes best addressed through a polyvocality and breadth of ideas offered from those beyond the conventions of a traditional editorial team.

Our third new feature will be the ***Visual Culture in Britain Review***. We envision the reviews section as a place to critique, challenge but also celebrate the journal's remit. Here 'visual culture' refers to aesthetic and critical inquiry that may cover, but need not be limited to: publications, exhibitions, digital media, film, television, public art, architecture, performances, events, networks. Our understanding of 'in Britain' encompasses both the UK as a site of production and reception, but more importantly as an idea that continues to have a lasting impact across the world through the history of the British Empire and its ongoing legacies. In reviewing works on such themes, we seek to confront and contest the ways in which 'Britishness' has shaped aesthetic modes within and beyond its shores, while also cultivating space to consider visual forms that complicate it as an identity or conceptual framework. This can be realised by exposing its internal contradictions and ideological constructions, by puncturing its real and imagined borders and also by offering alternative imaginaries and practices.

Reviews play a key role in the prospect of dismantling and rebuilding the journal's conception of both visual culture and Britishness: a part of the publication which, in particular, interrogates the underlying imaginative or material infrastructures that shape its subject. As Reviews Editor for *The Art Bulletin*, Stephanie Porras (2023) argues, a 'review expands a book in a way the author may not have imagined ... [to] draw out the conceptual underpinnings'. Such a process, Porras explains, is fundamentally about 'provoking new questions and links to areas outside of the original author's scope, or prompting historiographic reflections on how a subfield has shifted over time'. In our journal, reviews will bring recent cultural artefacts or publications to new audiences, recording intellectual developments and aesthetic movements in our disciplines, while challenging received wisdom by unpacking the deeper politics or methodological stakes at play.

THE RESPONSES

The responses to our call are presented in a loosely thematic order that moves from those that we felt speak more incisively about *how* to study visual culture today, to those that

poignantly take visual culture as an object of study in itself by exploring its mechanisms, effects and legacies. The sharp reader will at this point object that all our contributors are doing both – how could method be separated from the object of its study? - and we would emphatically agree. However, our proposed change of optics from method to object of study is an invitation to pay attention to *who* gets to do the research, and *how* such research is conducted, as the *sine qua non* for understanding the work of visual culture in Britain, today and in the past.

Richard J. Williams opens this section by taking us out under the southern end of the Kingston Bridge in Glasgow. In his piece, he articulates urban visual cultures as an “attitude” that is “capacious and open minded”, the work of a subject who experiences their surroundings directly while also researching them through their archival traces. This attention to rethinking methods is shared by **John Beck and Matthew Cornford** who, writing about their Art School Project, reflect on taking an “art and research” approach. They invite us to consider how the act of moving beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, which they do by combining research, fieldwork and practice, offers “an openness to the unpredictable”. **Richard A. Carter**’s work on AI and ecology, an evocative human-machine investigation of the out-of-sight infrastructures of visual culture and its very conditions of possibility, similarly demonstrates how the “uncertainty and associative play” afforded by working at the intersection of art and research can fuel critical and creative imagination.

This urgency to develop a scholarship that questions visibility returns in several of the contributions; this is motivated, for instance, by the recognition that some essential features of visual culture are not visible, by the limits of representation, and by the invisibilisation of minoritised groups in the historical record. **Gregory Salter** reflects on the politics of visibility in relation to the HIV/AIDS crisis and the recent proliferation of ‘queer’ art and visual culture initiatives. Visibility can be disrupted, Salter proposes, by “non-visual” but highly evocative works that can “transport viewers to new positions.” **Antigoni Memou** turns to the tension between the made visible and the made invisible in the production of cultural memory by focusing on the archives of the Miners’ Strike of 1984-1985 in its 40th anniversary. Giving public visibility to the photographs of the political solidarity between miners and groups of women, gays and lesbians, Memou writes, can both challenge dominant visual narratives of the strike and act as an important moment of recognition for the role of solidarity in the present. The miners’ strike returns in **Nicky Bird**’s multimedia project *Mineworkings* (2023-2024), a collaboration between Bird and former Scottish miners and their families that offers a poignant example of visual culture as shared, co-creative practice. Paying attention to working-class experiences and perspectives, Bird writes, shaped her methodology, expanding what was initially designed as an image-led project to include oral and material culture.

The relation between the artist and the community also features in **Elizabeth Robles**’ examination of Nina Edge’s work *Nothing is Private* (2006), a response, the latter, to the controversial regeneration of Liverpool’s Welsh Street as a part of the New Labour Housing Market Renewal (HMR) initiative. Robles draws attention to the significance of the site of the work – in Edge’s case, this is the liminal home window – in enacting critical and political action. The importance of considering the place of visual culture also echoes **Michelle Henning**’s contribution, which shifts our attention to the situatedness of both viewers and images taking the coal tar industry as its guiding thread. The editorial that launched *Visual Culture in Britain* remarked that “Visual experiences ... are as significant for us as their materiality and the conditions of their production” (2000: 2), and as Henning points out, the relationship between

material and visual culture is especially crucial for understanding the ecological impact of visual modernity and its ramifications in our present. The attention to the material infrastructures of visual culture, broadly conceived, is also at the centre of **Samuel Bibby's** reflections on the impact of digital humanities in publishing practices. Bibby invites us "to question, if not hold to account, the different apparatus with which visual culture as a field of investigation is today made manifest," an important reminder that form shapes meaning-making practices.

We move, with **Eamon Carrabine**, to explore the intertwined histories of punishment and art through the work of the eighteenth-century artist William Hogarth. As his contribution indicates, an "aesthetic sociology" reveals the complex interrelations between visual culture, individuals and society and has the potential to be fruitfully applied to the study of state-citizen relationships and, particularly relevant to this journal, of shifting notions of Britishness. **Freya Gowrley** makes the case for an historical approach to the visual construction of the social field in her analysis of early nineteenth century conceptions of the fat body, a piece evocative of WJT Mitchell's influential *Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture*. As Gowrley demonstrates, our understanding of current dominant perceptions of fatness cannot be divorced from an appreciation of the history of its visibility.

The relationship between visual culture and the vexed concepts of 'Britain' and 'Britishness', which vigorously ebbs and flows through all the contributions to this volume, is in **Sam Rose's** contribution applied to rethinking the outmoded high-modernism/visual culture divide. Through the analysis of Edward Bawden's *Tree & Cow* wallpaper (1927), Rose outlines the framework for a "vision of conjunction" that resurfaces the more problematic ideas of nature, tradition and national identity in Britain. **Annebella Pollen's** longitudinal study of how, since the 1930s, the British Council has put the visual arts to work in support of British national identity is a discerning example of how such identity has been historically negotiated between governments and its people. Pollen's text also underscores the visual arts' ability to complicate perceived ideas and, in turn, that it is from visual culture that we might start to understand how we make sense of our world, today and in the past. The process of reflection and realisation of what constitutes Britishness can be greatly enriched, as **Rachel Warriner** shows by centering Northern Ireland, through analogising with external perspectives. Warriner elucidates how American political activist Jimmie Durham's *Four Scenes for the British Army* (1988), which took place in Derry city in 1988, offers a model of community-care and international solidarity for working with others beyond Britain in the knowledge-making process.

The disturbing and disingenuous use that far-right movements make of photographs of migrants versus the deployment of visual imageries made by solidarity groups is the subject of **Simon Faulkner's** text. Such practices compel us, Falkner writes, to keep applying critical pressure to the relations between visual culture and work of politics. **Nicholas Mirzoeff's** contribution, a manifesto for our highly volatile geopolitical times, articulates the practice of visual culture as the direction of travel for our field. Challenging the spirit of that "undefeated despair" that John Berger saw in Palestine, as Mirzoeff reminds us, doing visual culture can set a model of political engagement with the past that, blending thought and action, has the potential of shaping the present. The volume culminates in art historian and illustrator **Hardeep Singh Dhindsa's** discussion of whiteness as a construction and its insidious role in feeding colonial systems, followed by his demonstration of how creative practice can be harnessed to

unveil the unreflective acceptance of a social reality sold off as normality. Dhindsa, whose work also met you on the cover of this volume, does this by using digital illustrations to mock the fictitious perceived normativity of white classical sculptures.

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