Practices of Looking

THIRD EDITION

AN INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL CULTURE

Marita Sturken | Lisa Cartwright

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sturken, Marita, 1957- author. | Cartwright, Lisa, 1959- author.
Title: Practices of looking : an introduction to visual culture / Marita
Sturken, New York University; Lisa Cartwright, University of California at San Diego.
Description: Third edition. | New York : Oxford University Press, 2017. |
Includes index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016052818 | ISBN 9780190265717
Subjects: LCSH: Art and society. | Culture. | Visual perception. | Visual
communication. | Popular culture. | Communication and culture.
Classification: LCC N72.S6 S78 2017 | DDC 701/.03—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016052818

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by LSC Communications, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

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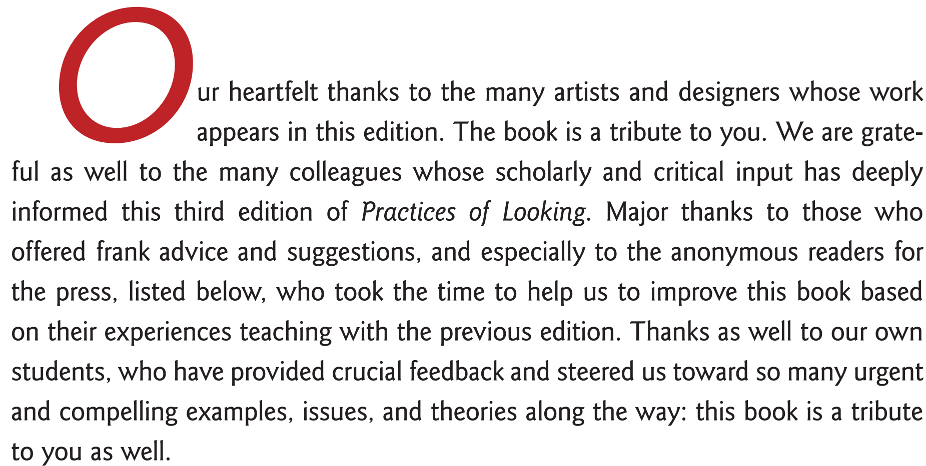

Our heartfelt thanks to the many artists and designers whose work appears in this edition. The book is a tribute to you. We are grateful as well to the many colleagues whose scholarly and critical input has deeply informed this third edition of *Practices of Looking*. Major thanks to those who offered frank advice and suggestions, and especially to the anonymous readers for the press, listed below, who took the time to help us to improve this book based on their experiences teaching with the previous edition. Thanks as well to our own students, who have provided crucial feedback and steered us toward so many urgent and compelling examples, issues, and theories along the way: this book is a tribute to you as well.

We thank Lori Boatright for her continual support and for her sound counsel on intellectual property rights. Dana Polan provided steady support to an extraordinary degree; his intellectual guidance is vastly appreciated. We thank Rosalie Romero, Nilo Goldfarb Cartwright, Inês Da Silva Beleza Barreiros, Daphne Magaro White, Jake Stutz, Stephen Mandiberg, Kelli Moore, and Pawan Singh, all of whom contributed in different ways and at different times to the ideas, choices, and writing style adopted in this edition. Elizabeth Wolfson and Kavita Kulkarni provided very important image research in early stages of this edition. We are very grateful to Cathy Hannabach/Ideas on Fire for expertly editing our prose and helping to shape the book's argument.

At Oxford University Press, we have benefited immensely from the steadfast support of Toni Magyar, Patrick Lynch, Mark Haynes, and other members of the Oxford staff who worked with us during this process. We are especially grateful to Paul Longo, who guided the book and all its details so well, and to Sandy Cook, permissions manager extraordinaire, for her extensive and expert detective work in image research. We learned so much from Sandy. Thanks to Allegra Howard for picking up the book's oversight late in the process, and to Cailen Swain for image research early on. Thanks as well to Richard Johnson, Micheline Frederick, and the copyediting and production team. Michele Laseau did excellent work on the layout and cover design for this third edition. We are grateful to them and to Estudio Teddy Cruz + Forman for granting us permission to use the dynamic graphics that grace this edition's cover.

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Introduction

How do you look? This question is loaded with possible meanings. How you look is, in one sense, how you appear. This is in part about how you construct yourself for others to see, through practices of the self that involve grooming, fashion, and social media. The selfie is a powerful symbol of this era in which not only images but also imaging practices are used as primary modes of expression and communication in everyday life. These days, you may be as likely to make images as you are to view them. How you look to others, and whether and where you appear, has to do with your access to such things as cameras, personal electronic devices and technologies, and social media. It is also contingent upon your place within larger structures of authority and in conventions of belief. Technical literacy as well as nationality, class, religion, age, gender, and sexual identity may impact your right to appear, as well as your ability to make and use images and imaging technologies. Nobody is free to look as they please, not in any context. We all perform within (and against) the conventions of cultural frameworks that include nation, religion, politics, family, school, work, and health. These frameworks inform our taste and self-fashioning, and they give rise to the conventions that shape how we look and where and how we appear. How you look, even when deeply personal, is also always political.

We can see the politics of looking, erasure, and the conventions of looking in this image. The Bahraini protesters pictured in Figure I.1 hold symbolic coffins with photographs of victims of the government's crackdown on the opposition. Some of the photographs appear to be selfies, others family photographs, and still others official portraits, perhaps workplace photographs. The faces of women are left blank out of respect for religious and cultural prohibitions against representing women in images. We might say that they are erased, but we may also note that they do appear in the form of a generic graphic that signifies them through the presence of the hijab.

How you look can also refer to the practices in which you engage to view, understand, appreciate, and make meaning of the world. To look, in this sense, is to use your visual apparatus, which includes your eyes and hands, and also technologies like your glasses, your camera, your computer, and your phone, to engage the world through sight and image. To look in this sense might be to glance, to peer, to stare, to look up, or to look away. You may give little thought to what you see,

FIG. I.1
Bahraini protesters carry symbolic coffins with pictures of victims of the government crackdown on opposition protests in the Shiite village of Barbar, May 4, 2012

or you may analyze it deeply. What you see is likely to appear differently to others. Whereas some may see the hijab graphic in the Bahraini protest photograph as a sign of women's erasure, others may see it as honoring women's presence as activists in this political context.

Practices of Looking is devoted to a critical understanding and interpretation of the codes, meanings, rights, and limits that make images and looking practices matter in our encounters in the world. Visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff tells us that the right to look is not simply about seeing. He emphasizes that looking is an exchange that can establish solidarity or social dominance and which extends from the connection between self and other. Looking can be restricted and controlled—it can be used to manipulate ideas and beliefs, but it can also be used to affirm one's own subjectivity in the face of a political system that controls and regulates looking. In all of these senses, looking is implicated in the dynamics of power, though never in straightforward or simple ways. This book aims to provide an understanding of the specificity of looking practices as social practices and the place of images in systems of social power. We hope that readers will use this book to approach making images and studying the ways in which the visual is negotiated in art practice, in communication and information systems, in journalism, in activism, and in making, doing, and living in nature and the built

environment. *Practices of Looking* supports the development of critical skills that may inform your negotiation of life in a world where looking, images, and imaging practices make a difference. Whether you are a maker of visual things and visual tools, an interpreter and analyst of the visual world, or just someone who is curious about the roles that looking plays in a world rife with screens, devices, images, and displays, you engage with the visual. This book is designed to invite you to think in critical ways about how that engagement unfolds in a world that is increasingly made, or constituted, through visual mediation. Looking is regarded, throughout this book, as a set of practices informed by a range of social arenas beyond art and media per se. We engage in practices of looking, as consumers and producers, in domains that range from the highly personal to the professional and the public, from advertising, news media, television, movies, and video games to social media and blogs. We negotiate the world through a multitude of ways of seeing, but rarely do we stop and ask how we look.

We live in a world in which images proliferate in daily life. Consider photography. Whereas in the 1970s the home camera was taken out for something special—those precious "Kodak moments" since the introduction of phone cameras in 2000, taking photographs has become, for many, a daily habit. Indeed, many hundreds of billions of photographs are taken each year. Each minute, tens of thousands are uploaded to Instagram, and over 200,000 are posted to Facebook. In one hour, more images are shared than were produced in all of the nineteenth century.

Photographs may be personal, but they are also always potentially public. Through art, news, and social media, photographs can be a crucial force in the visual negotiation of politics, the struggle for social justice, and the creation of celebrity. Increasingly, people are resisting oppression through the use of photographs and videos marshaled as a form of witnessing, commentary, and protest, as we can see in the use of photographs on protest placards.

Consider paintings and drawings. How is it different to see an original work in a museum from viewing it at home, in a print copy that hangs on your wall, or online, in a digital reproduction on your computer screen? How does it feel to be in the presence of an original work you have long appreciated through reproductions but never before seen in its original form? What does it mean to have your culture's original works destroyed or looted in warfare or as a political act of iconoclasm? Meaning, whether in relationship to culture, politics, data, information, identity, or emotion, is generated overwhelmingly through the circulation and exchange of visual images and icons. The idea of the original still holds sway in an era of rampant reproduction. Meaning is also generated through visuality, which we perform in the socially and historically shaped field of exchange in which we negotiate the world through our senses.

That we live in a world in which seeing and visuality predominate is not a natural or random fact. Visuality defines not only the social conditions of the visible but also the workings of power in modern societies. Think about some of the ways

FIG. I.2
Ken Gonzales-Day, *Nightfall I*, from *Searching for California Hang Trees*, 2007–12 (LightJet print on aluminum, 36 × 46")

in which seeing operates in everyday dynamics of power. Take the classroom, a space in which many people look at one person, the instructor, who is assumed to have knowledge and power. Consider government buildings and the ways in which their design features lead you to notice some features and restrict your access to others, maintaining national defense and government secrets while promoting a sense of their iconic stature. As a pervasive condition of being, visuality engages us, and we engage it, through practices of looking. These practices are learned and habitual, pervasive and fundamental. We engage in them in ways that go well beyond our encounters with images.

We must understand not only what we see, but also what we cannot see, what is made absent from sight. Take this work, *Nightfall I*, by the artist Ken Gonzales-Day. It is a large-scale print depicting the simple lines of a leafless tree framed against a jet black sky. The work is from the series *Searching for California Hang Trees*, in which Gonzales-Day documents trees throughout the state of California on which individuals, many of them Mexican, were hung by lynch mobs. Gonzales-Day invokes absence on a series of levels: the body that was hung from this tree is no longer evident. Its absence gestures to the larger absence in history books of the fact that over 350 lynchings of young Mexican men took place in California, a history Gonzales-Day chronicles in his book *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935 (Duke 2006)*. The artist uses the "empty" icon of the extant lynching tree to represent the very conditions of making a fact invisible. Whereas in the first image we showed (the Bahraini protest march) those people erased in political killings are made present through images, in this series the empty trees stand in for the people killed. Visuality is about the conditions of negotiation through which something becomes visible and under which it can be erased. How invisibility is "seen" and made meaningful is an important question for visual studies.

Consider as well the visual dynamics of built environments—the ways in which design, whether by choice or through making do with what is at hand, impacts the meaning and use of a place. Consider the cultural conventions through which looking creates connections and establishes power dynamics among people in a given

place, such as a windowless government building surrounded by walls and protected by guards and surveillance cameras. We might ask who has the right to see and who does not, and who is given the opportunity to exercise that right—when, and under what conditions.

Of course, having the physical capacity to see is not a given. But whether you are sighted, blind, or visually impaired, your social world is likely to be organized around an abundance of visual media and looking practices. Its navigation may require adaptive optical devices, such as glasses, or navigational methods that substitute for sight, such as echolocation. The practices we use to navigate and communicate in this heavily visually constituted world are increasingly important components of the ways in which we know, feel, and live as political and cultural beings. We might say that our world is constituted, or made, through forms of visuality, even as it is co-constituted through sound, touch, and smell along with sight. Visual media are rarely only visual; they are usually engaged through sound, embedded with text, and integrated with the physical experience of objects we touch.

Practices of Looking draws together a range of theories about vision and visuality formulated by scholars in visual culture studies, art history, film and media studies, communication, design, and a range of other fields. These theories help us to rethink the history of the visual and better understand its role after the digital turn. These writers, most of them working in or on the cusp of the era of digital media and the Internet, have produced theories devoted to interpreting and analyzing visual culture.

Defining Culture

The study of visual culture derives many of its primary theoretical approaches from cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that first emerged in the mid-1960s in Great Britain. One of the aims of cultural studies, at its foundation, was to provide viewers, citizens, and consumers with the tools to gain a better understanding of how we are produced as social subjects through the cultural practices that make up our lives, including those involving everyday visual media such as television and film. A shared premise of cultural studies' focus on everyday culture was that the media do not simply reflect opinion, taste, reality, and so on; rather, the media are among the forms through which we are "made" as human subjects—as citizens, as sexual beings, as political beings, and so on.

Culture was famously characterized by the British scholar Raymond Williams as one of the most complex words in the English language. It is an elaborate concept, the meanings and uses of which have changed over time among the many critical theorists who have used it.[1] Culture, Williams proposed in 1958, is fundamentally ordinary.[2] To understand why this statement was so important, we must recall that prior to the 1960s, the term *culture* was used to describe the "fine" arts

and learned cultures. A "cultured" person engaged in the contemplation of classic works of art, literature, music, and philosophy. In keeping with this view, the nineteenth-century British poet and social critic Matthew Arnold defined culture as the "best which has been thought and said" in the world.[3] Culture, in Arnold's understanding, includes writing, art, and other forms of expression in instances that conform to particular ideals of perfection. If one uses the term this way, a work by Michelangelo or a composition by Mozart would represent the epitome of culture, not because these are works of monetary value but because they would be believed to embody a timeless ideal of aesthetic perfection that transcends class.

The apparent "perfection" of culture, according to the late twentieth-century French sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, is in fact the product of training in what counts as (quality) culture. Taste for particular forms of culture is cultivated in people through exposure to and education about aesthetics.[4] Bourdieu's emphasis on culture as something acquired through training (enculturation) involved making distinctions not only between works (masterworks and amateur paintings, for example) but also between high and low forms (painting and television, for example). As we explore in Chapter 2, "high versus low" was the traditional way of framing discussions about aesthetic cultures through the first half of the twentieth century, with high culture widely regarded as quality culture and low culture as its debased counterpart. This division has become obsolete with the complex circulations of contemporary cultural flow.

Williams drew on anthropology to propose that we embrace a broader definition of culture as a "whole way of life of a social group or whole society," meaning a broad range of activities geared toward classifying and communicating symbolically within a society. Popular music, print media, art, and literature are some of the classificatory systems and symbolic means of expression through which humans organize their lives. People make, view, and reuse these media in different ways and in different places. The same can be said of sports, cooking, driving, relationships, and kinship. Williams's broader, more anthropological definition of culture leads us to notice everyday and pervasive activities, helping us to better understand mass and popular forms of classification, expression, and communication as legitimate and meaningful aspects of culture and not simply as debased or crude forms of expression.

Following from Williams, cultural studies scholars proposed that culture is not so much a set of things (television shows or paintings, for example) as a set of processes or practices through which individuals and groups produce, consume, and make sense of things, including their own identities. Culture is produced through complex networks of making, watching, talking, gesturing, looking, and acting—networks through which meanings are negotiated among members of a society or group. Objects such as images and media texts come into play in this network of exchange as active agents. They draw us to look and to feel or speak in particular ways. The British cultural theorist Stuart Hall stated: "It is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events. . . . It is by our use of things,

and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them a meaning."[5] Following from Hall, we can say that just as we give meaning to objects, so too do the objects we create, gaze on, and use for communication or simply for pleasure give meaning to us. Things are active agents in the dynamic interaction of social networks.

Our use of the term *culture* throughout this book emphasizes this understanding of culture as a fluid and interactive set of processes and practices. Culture is complex and messy, and not a fixed set of ideals, tastes, practices, or aesthetics. Meanings are produced not in the minds of individuals so much as through a process of negotiation among practices within a particular culture. Visual culture is made between individuals and the artifacts, images, technologies, and texts created by themselves and others. Interpretations of the visual, which vie with one another, shape a culture's worldview. But visual culture, we emphasize, is grounded in multimodal and multisensory cultural practices, and not solely in images and visuality. We study visual culture and visuality in order to grasp their place in broader, multisensory networks of meaning and experience.

The Study of Visual Culture

Visual culture emerged as a field of study in the 1980s, just as images and visual screens were becoming increasingly prevalent in the production of media and modes of information, communication, entertainment, and aesthetics. The study of visual culture takes as one of its basic premises the idea that images from different social realms are interconnected, with art, advertising, science, news media, and entertainment interrelated and cross-influential. Many scholars no longer find viable the traditional divisions in academia through which images in different realms (such as art history, film studies, and communication) have been studied apart from other categories of the visual. The cross-fertilization of categories is the result of historical shifts, technological developments, and changing viewer practices. Through digital technology, media are now merged in unprecedented ways. We may view art, read news media, receive medical records, shop, and watch television and movies on computers. The different industries and types of practice inherent in each form are no longer as discrete as they once were.

Our title *Practices of Looking* gestures to this expanded social field of the visual, emphasizing that to understand the images and imaging technologies with which we engage every day, we must analyze the ways in which practices of looking inform our ways of being in the world. *Practices of Looking*, in its first edition in 1999, took as its distant inspiration John Berger's 1972 classic *Ways of Seeing*. The book was a model for the examination of images across such disciplinary boundaries as media studies and art history and it was influential in disparate social realms such as art and advertising. The terrain of images and their trajectories, and the theories we use to interpret them, have become significantly more complex since

Berger wrote his book and since our first edition was published. At that time, the information space known then as "World Wide Web" was a fairly recent innovation, and it was difficult to transmit image files online. Digital reproduction was not very advanced, and transmission speed and volume were prohibitive. Technological and cultural changes in place by 2008, when the second edition of *Practices of Looking* was produced, had introduced new modes of image production and circulation. The mix of styles in postmodernism and the increased mixing of different kinds of images across social domains prompted us to further enhance the interdisciplinary approach at the center of this book. At the same time, the restructuring of the media industry through the rise of digital media had blurred many of the boundaries that had previously existed between forms of media. Media convergence had changed the nature of the movies and transformed television and the experience of the audience. In the first edition we proposed that an interdisciplinary approach encompassing art, film, media, and the experience of looking was merited because these domains did not exist in isolation from one another. By the second edition, those social domains were even more interconnected, and digital technology had created increased connections between academic fields of study.

By this third edition, in 2017, cultural meanings and image practices had undergone significant further transformation. Most significant was the rise of social media as a platform for visual culture. The Internet, screen culture, mobile phones, and digital technology dominate modes of communication, political engagement, and cultural production. Even classical and historical works are impacted as digital technologies are increasingly incorporated in preservation and display strategies. This edition has been updated to address changes in the contemporary visual culture landscape in a host of ways. Images and media now circulate more frequently and more quickly than ever before. This is reflected in the proliferation of prosumer and remix cultures, the ubiquitous presence of smartphones with cameras, the popularity of the selfie, the use of social media images to advance social movements as well as to promote brand culture, and the increased intermixing of categories such as science, education, leisure, and consumerism. Consider this example of science "edutainment": a Lego model of an MRI machine. Created by Ian Moore, a technical support consultant for Lego in the United Kingdom, the toy was designed to help hospital personnel better explain the procedure to children at Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading. Design innovation, biomedical imaging, popular consumer culture, and science education converge, and the story is circulated globally on social media, promoting the Lego brand's social contributions across all of these categories of culture.

Ways to Use This Book

Practices of Looking is organized into ten chapters divided into subsections that can be used in a modular fashion. While the first two chapters are the most introductory, there is no "right" order in which to read this book. Each chapter is

FIG. I.3

Lego MRI suite model built by Ian Moore for the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading, United Kingdom

designed so that it is comprehensible apart from the whole. Each accommodates different emphases and trajectories depending on the focus in a given area of interest or course focus. *Practices of Looking* was written to work in courses on visual culture, design, communication, media studies, and art history. At the same time, this is not a generalist book. We present multiple theories drawn from critical theory, visual studies, media studies, and other fields of study to offer here a range of concepts through which to arrive at new ways of engaging with the visual in the social worlds in which we interact. *Practices of Looking* does not offer a unified methodology for making art or for empirically studying engagement with the visual. Rather, the book offers a varied set of tools for critical thinking, interpretation, and analysis—tools intended to be tried in different combinations to inform how you think about art, design, and visual culture, how meaning is made, and how you make art, media, and things. The book concludes with an extensive glossary of terms used throughout the book. Each chapter ends with a bibliography for further reading.

Chapter 1, "Images, Power, and Politics," introduces many of the key themes of the book, defining concepts such as representation, ideology, image icons, and photographic truth. It provides an overall introduction to the basic principles of visual semiotics. In this third edition, we have incorporated some important updates to the discussion of photographic meanings and strategies. We discuss body cameras and their use as evidence in police work and law and, here and in other chapters, we expand upon the use of photography in social media and the rise of citizen journalism.

Chapter 2, "Viewers Make Meaning," focuses on the ways that viewers produce meaning from images and explores the complex dynamics of appropriation,