

Jeanette Kohl

## “Work hard, dream big:”\*

### Whose Renaissance?

The University of California’s reputation as one of the top public University systems in the world, albeit currently jeopardized by the state’s dramatic financial crisis, stems largely from its excellence in the Humanities. On its ten campuses, UC has some very fine Art History Departments with considerable strengths in Early Modern Europe, among them UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Riverside, the university where I teach. Its largest flagship is the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), which on its webpage claims “A Century of Optimism” beneath iconic California palm trees. UCLA boasts to be “the most applied-to University in the nation” with the incredible number of 72.000 freshmen applications in the year 2012 alone – and I like to believe it is not just because of the LA lifestyle and its 329 days of sunshine a year. UCLA can afford to be highly selective. It also has the largest art history department in the UC system (and one of the largest in the USA).

The diversity of its faculty is impressive and reflects a global spirit: There are several positions in Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture, in American, Ibero-American, African, Korean, Chinese, South Asian, Japanese and Buddhist, Pre-Columbian, Postcolonial, Ancient Mediterranean, and Near Eastern Art; there is also one position in Medieval, one in Byzantine, one in 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Art, and one in Conservation and Archeology. Yet the University of California’s largest Art History department does not have a single European Renaissance position. It was not filled again after the Renaissance professor retired in 2010. Other UCs like Santa Cruz and San Diego have shifted away from *Art History* towards *Visual Studies*,

with close ties to the Art Departments on the one hand and an emphasis on theory on the other. These departments offer interesting new perspectives on how to redefine the discipline, with or without the Renaissance.

With 21,000 students, UC Riverside (UCR) is one of the smaller universities within the UC system. Yet it is the ‘global village’ in a nutshell. *U.S. News* ranked UCR as the third most ethnically diverse university in the nation with the 15th most economically diverse student body. Our students are 40 % Asian American and Pacific Islanders, 28 % Chicano/Latino, 17 % White, 8 % African American, 0,5 % Native American, and 6.5 % other. In its ethnic composition, UCR is utterly Californian, and in that it obviously differs from Universities and Colleges in other parts of the country, in particular those of the ‘education belt’ in the Northeast. The large majority of our students are from California, most of them are children of immigrants, a high percentage are first generation college students. Not many of them have been to Europe or even outside of the country. In this ethnic and academic environment, Asian and Latin American Art History are by far less exotic than Italian Renaissance Studies. Hence, its appeal is great – but so are the concerns of not being prepared enough for such an ‘exotic’ and highly academic field as the European Renaissance.

Our own department does not reflect our University’s ethnic breakdown. UC Riverside’s Art History Department has a clearly articulated European focus (formerly five out of ten, since 2011 four out of nine positions are in European

Art History), with the traditional and admittedly somewhat old-fashioned split between Northern Renaissance and Italian Renaissance, with Medieval Art, and European/British Art of the 18th century. We also have positions in American Art, Architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Post-Colonial Theory, the History of Photography, and Modern and Contemporary Art, plus a currently vacant position in East Asian Art and Architecture.

Our strength in Early Modern European Art and in the Renaissance enables us to collaborate intensively with two of the world's leading Research Institutions for European Art History: The Getty Center and Research Institute and the Huntington Library and Art Collections, both in the Los Angeles area and roughly 50 miles away from campus. There are vivid and regular collaborations in the form of joint workshops, guest lectures, and classes held in both institutions. These are also excellent research facilities for those of us working in European Art History and many other fields of art and intellectual history. The majority of our graduate students come with a strong interest in modern and contemporary art rather than a preference for the more 'historical' periods. But even in the short two years of our MA program, some change direction and develop an appetite for history and the Renaissance.

On a geo-cultural level, the current trend to move away from European Renaissance Studies in California reacts to three West Coast factors: the international ethnic mix of the population in Southern California, a less historically and more theoretically engaged cultural setup with the co-presence of very diverse cultural heritages, and a dominance of modern and contemporary art, architecture, museums, exhibitions spaces, artists' studios and the film industry. Southern Californian culture – even though Woody Allen famously denied there is such a thing – is particularly contemporary, media- and future-oriented, and even its own history is not very 'historical.' Two other ingredients to the trend are the apparent need to react to

Globalization – "Contemporary Art is Global Art"[1] – and considerations regarding the regional job markets in California. Renaissance positions still form an "upper crust" segment in academia and the museum world, and students who focus early on Renaissance Studies already need to make a much more consequential choice about their future career path than those in modern and contemporary art with its broader spectrum of job opportunities.

The revamping of a considerable number of Art History Departments away from the traditional dominance of European Renaissance Studies has indeed become a trend, and for all the reasons mentioned above it makes sense and has long been overdue. Yet I doubt that this indicates a "downfall of the occident." With such cultural beacons promoting European cultural and art history in Southern California as the Getty, the LA County Museum and the Huntington Library I think there is a consensus that even a globalized world is still in need of qualified studies in Early Modern European Art History. The trend is a course correction, which bears great potential and might be a beneficial one if developed with consideration and a critical eye on academic trends. There were other 'Renaissances' than the one associated with the Medici and Machiavelli, in other places than Florence, and in different times. The recent preference for more globally composed Art History Departments on the one hand and a shift from the history of 'art' to the history of 'visual cultures' on the other will only pose a threat to Renaissance Art History if we miss to redefine and restructure it from the inside – and perhaps not even then. At any rate, no matter how we envision the future of Renaissance Art History, to think territorial and defensive is the wrong thing to do.

From a contemporary point of view, which is shared by many students, the *longue durée* of the capital role of European Renaissance Studies within Art History is as astonishing as it is disqualifying, in light of the fact that its primacy is anchored in an overwhelmingly male, western, white, elitist, and largely euro-

centric thinking. The historical period's traditionally close link with key movements in 20th century Art History, above all Iconology, seems like an extension of the western Renaissance's frame of mind in those who wrote about it some 400 years later – European, male, humanistically educated intellectuals, equipped with the special knowledge to unveil Renaissance Art's 'disguised symbolism' – practicing hegemonial hermeneutics of the past. On this obvious level, there are plenty of reasons why our students find other areas and time periods more attractive and turn to the more 'up-to-date' theories and concepts of modernism and contemporary culture. Yet while the academic interest in traditional fields of the European Renaissance might not be at its peak, the Renaissance is vehemently marketed to a wider, non-academic audience, as can be seen by the recent wave of books (Dan Brown & consequences) and popular TV-series (The Tudors, The Borgias), which in their shallow, affirmative myth-making mix the commercially infallible ingredients of conspiracy, Machiavellian ruthlessness and female beauty to reproduce sticky clichés. Who would have imagined that in the early 21st century film producers and directors would fall back behind movies like Carol Reed's 1965 Oscar-winning 'The Agony and the Ecstasy,' with Charlton Heston as Michelangelo and Rex Harrison as Julius II., a movie whose historical research seems thorough compared to the current bombast of retro-fictions.[2] Are we losing the Renaissance to popular culture then?

The 'Gretchen question' is, of course, our relation to history. I think it is safe to say that the students' much lamented lack of interest in Renaissance Art History is clearly less motivated by a disinterest in European cultures than by an apathy or perhaps even an amnesia of history (before the 20<sup>th</sup> century) – a phenomenon among students from all ethnic backgrounds on the graduate and undergraduate levels, and one that can be observed, I am sure, far beyond the State of California. It is fairly obvious that the onslaught of information circulating as 'knowled-

ge' and constantly available on the world-wide-web has created new strategies of perception, of structuring and filtering (also of copying and pasting) information. 'Knowledge' is extracted and processed from a thicket of information clusters – a procedure that promotes simultaneous perception and rhizomatic intellectual operations in a zone of historical oblivion ('*Zeitvergessenheit*'). Historical comprehension and interpretation, because of the dense net of unfamiliar thoughts, contexts, and temporalities, require a time-consuming, focused and causal processing of knowledge from different source materials whose critical evaluation is crucial and based on comparison and experience. To understand historically absorb and aptly interpret cultural documents and artworks is related to a process of *Bildung* and the constitution of memory. *Bildung* is more than collecting information and matching things with a theory. *Bildung* itself takes time, a time most of the academics of my generation still had (or so we think) – time to process, sort, revise, and rearrange knowledge so it can create a solid base of *experience*; time to evaluate the influence it has on us as human individuals working in the field of art history and actually shaping this field. Our students, however, hardly have this time during their tightened academic education. If we do not find a way to reinvent a reasonable, updated concept of *Bildung*, history will have to wait all the way back in line – and I doubt that is what we want.

The more pragmatic questions springing from the 'Gretchen question' of history therefore are: How will the historical disciplines – and that is how will *we* – in an age of ubiquitous and largely unfiltered circulating information position ourselves as an academic discipline? How do we position ourselves within the Humanities? How do we continue to transform the educational canon inherited from the 19th and 20th century? How do we sensibly and moderately integrate new interdisciplinary and intercultural questions of what it means to be human and create art under a variety of different cultural, geographical and societal circumstances? And,

most importantly, into which direction are we willing to transform the traditional discipline of Renaissance Art History, given the obvious pragmatization of knowledge through the restructuring of universities and the revised goals of higher education?

For the future of European Renaissance Art History this means to conduct research along the lines of a systematic inquiry of our discipline's own past, an inquiry that must incorporate institutional critique. This inquiry will lead to another set of questions about what significance the European Renaissance still has (or should have) in the 21st century, for us and for our students. Why and how can the European Renaissance still occupy a central position in the History of Art (and should it)? What notions of both ‚History‘ and ‚Art‘ were attached to it for what reasons, and how do we need to rethink them, now? What epistemic value and what social, moral, and intellectual lessons does this particular period offer – for us as researchers and teachers and for our students? In which ways can we read it afresh without hastily following intellectual trends and fashions? And how exactly does it fit into the much larger panorama of different visual cultures in the patchwork of the Early Modern World? We also need to continue to ask: Whose Renaissance was this? And whose is it?

Some noteworthy attempts to productively question and reframe the Renaissance have already been made. I mention only two enterprises out of a multitude of others: Claire Farrow's *Reframing the Renaissance. Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), and, more recently, James Elkins' and Robert Williams' Cork round table and publication *Renaissance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Renaissance Art History has opened up towards the history of science, anthropology, the social sciences, the history of medicine and other disciplines; it has shifted away from its almost exclusive focus on Europe, and the art of Renaissance Italy is now seen under aspects of trade, cultural encounters, and in-

tellectual exchange across the Mediterranean and with the New World; diachronic and trans-cultural questions focusing on topics such as repetition and reproduction, materiality and agency, animism and image theory, to mention only a few, have embedded the European Renaissance Art in the larger narratives of the Early Modern world. Attempts like these clearly help to make the discipline more attractive and need to be continued and branched out.

Yet it would be foolish to sell out other strong and perhaps more traditional strands of research. Don't we agree that the European Renaissance was about more than what was thought and produced in the courts and city-states of Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands? And don't we, on the other hand, also agree that it was about more than the exchange of artifacts and the establishing of new systems of display and knowledge in the Mediterranean and beyond? Was there really something like a ‚global‘ Renaissance? While both „The Mediterranean“ and „Artistic Exchange“ seem to be the new magic formula in (and perhaps beyond) Renaissance Studies, I see reason to doubt that the idea of a global early modern period is the magic bullet.<sup>[3]</sup> It is a welcome addition though – as long as we make sure that it does not tell more about our own projections and wishes than it tells us about the historical period proper.

I plead that we must not give up the cheese and the worms<sup>[4]</sup> in favor of trans-cultural studies and an art history without boundaries – because ‚local or global‘ is not a viable alternative; that we instead need to continue to pursue ‚micro-histories‘ in geographically smaller areas, both well known and less studied ones; that we focus on diachronic questions, again asking them first within particular geographical, geopolitical, social or cultural environments before proceeding to questions of exchange in larger contexts. Our students, most of whom do not bring a great deal of historically detailed knowledge (honestly, they did not when I started as an undergraduate in the 1980s and

they still do not today), would probably benefit if they were first familiarized with cultural microclimates, some of which are still better studied than others, and among those better studied are the Italian city states and courts. In didactic terms this means that before we can proceed to studying and teaching trans-cultural art history, it might be quite helpful to thoroughly know what exactly it is that we want to bring in touch and analyze under the angle of exchange. To understand one complex, cultural microclimate certainly helps to make art history tangible, lively, and understandable. Trans-cultural studies involve the understanding of even more 'complex contexts' than let us say the Renaissance in Venice, complex as it already is, and students need to have more than theories at hand to pursue such studies. They need *historical* comprehension in order to be properly equipped to then scrutinize this knowledge and their own take on it. And such comprehension can only be generated properly if we use both the magnifying glass and the wide-angle lens. Their sensitivity for differences in styles, media, and contexts needs to be sharpened through knowledge based on objects, their immediate contexts and traditions of production and reception.

For me, the 'Renaissance in Italy' still has its very own and strong attraction. It is a time of intellectual experiments and new forms of verbal and visual communication, of exciting asynchronicities, of new philosophical, medical, and artistic investigations into what it means to be human, of boisterous scientific curiosity, booming new media and of provocative slip-pages in religious and profane thinking; a time of ambiguities and ambivalences that are closely tied to the nature of images and the works of art produced during the period. This reactive mixture poses an array of particularly difficult and interrelated historical, theoretical and aesthetic challenges. The Renaissance seems so familiar in many ways, not least because of its many iconic images, yet it is also utterly different from Modernity. Ulrich Pfisterer has recently under-

scored in this series that European Renaissance Studies, even if they traditionally represent a geographically and historically well defined field within art history, only appeal to those students who do not choose the path of least resistance and instead are willing to cope with a considerable amount of difficulties and complexities:<sup>[5]</sup> the amount of literature already written, which requires a detailed historical and methodological understanding of the discipline; the complexity of both historical contexts and texts, most of which are theoretically, rhetorically, and linguistically difficult to grasp; the prerequisite of skills in foreign languages; eidetic skills and a visual sensitivity to see and understand differences and nuances in style and media. *Bildung* arises from exposure to these complexities.

Let me come back to the idea that the Renaissance is the cradle of modernity. Now while this might be true for an array of intellectual and economic concepts, our modern notions of 'history' did not exist in the Renaissance, nor did our concepts of 'art.' Teaching the Renaissance is therefore also a training in understanding the culturally and historically crucial 'differences' of a time that in many ways seems similar to ours and anticipated modern thoughts. In order to comprehend the historical dialectics of the unknown within the known, the old within the new, the European Renaissance still provides us with the most abundant and fascinating textual and visual material. The paradigm shifts in early modern concepts of representation and mimesis, concepts of the human mind and notions of the 'self,' the description of the laws of nature and the developments of early forms of science – and perhaps above all the key role of visual culture and theories of perception are what makes the Renaissance modern and alive. One might ask, for example, how the 'iconic turn' of the Renaissance relates to the 'iconic turns' of our own time, the media age. These complexities and modern traits, I am sure, will guarantee the future of Renaissance studies. Western European Renaissance and the plenty of written documents and artworks that were

produced and survived have put it in a privileged spot within the historical disciplines. Yet history is a mercurial force, and visual works of art continue to live their own lives. They produce different meanings over time because of their visual ambiguity, their surplus of meaning beyond documentation. Historians and art historians revive them differently, leaving – in the best case – self-aware and self-reflexive reevaluations of their visual complexity against questions deemed relevant in a given cultural discourse of their time. Art history is a visual laboratory whose participants need to constantly scrutinize the conditions under which their laboratory works. (My vision of the future of Renaissance Art History, which it will certainly have within the Humanities, is a combination of thorough explorations of cultural and artistic microclimates in a much broader geographical range within Europe and its bordering regions and of diachronic questions relating these different art-histories. Thus, questions of cultural exchange between Europe and other parts of the world and the further exploration of regional or local 'idioms' more or less resistant to factors of import and export can illuminate each other.)

Apart from creating a heightened awareness for the importance of historical reflection in a cultural climate of relative historical amnesia, teaching the European Renaissance in Southern California also incorporates something else: It means to 'untrain' the eye of the contemporary beholder; an eye so clearly conditioned to follow a multitude of moving images in a culture traditionally dominated by views out of cars, onto flickering billboards, the omnipresent TV screens and the movies. It means teaching students to take their time to watch and understand the motionless and still power of images, slow food for the eye. Most objects and works of art from the Renaissance are more or less encrypted tableaux, and they are works to be perceived with an informed sensitivity for their elaborate aesthetics. They cannot be fully unwrapped unless we know how to 'scan' them visually, intellectually, and aesthetically in order to unearth

their immanent clues and traits and make sense of them. They are more than documents, more than colorful illustrations of a historical period. Visual analysis in its more sensory (and sensual) aspects of understanding the inert stylistic and artistic qualities of a work of art is perhaps the most challenging task for a professor of Renaissance Art in California. It is fundamentally different from teaching the Renaissance in Germany, or Italy, for example.

To write about the state of Renaissance Art History today, as I have done here, means to think about the place of history in contemporary society and how we can keep it a productive force, but also to critique the history of our own discipline for a reformulation of future goals. While this is not the place to discuss the perhaps unlucky alliance of the two terms 'art' and 'history' (are they still appropriate or already part of the "Renaissance issue"?), we must learn to understand better why and how the framing conditions for the possibility of Renaissance art history have changed. In looking back into art history's history, we might then want to pay closer attention to topics, fields, places, artists, works and approaches omitted (why?) that need to be addressed or re-addressed, differently.

I am not sure if we can ever do full justice to the past. But it is not a closed book, and whenever we open it, we will read it differently. The combination of profound knowledge and experience, which is something utterly personal and makes a personality, enables us to better understand the past. The historically oriented humanities have the great advantage of fusing the 'poetic' and productive powers of history with the autopoietic process of *Bildung*. Walter Benjamin, in a letter of March 1937 to Max Horkheimer, contradicts Horkheimer's apodictic notion of history as something that "has occurred and is completed." For Benjamin, "the consideration that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance (*Eingedenken*)" is central.[6] As art historians of the Renaissance we should understand this responsibility and train our students' facility for re-

membrance and an informed sustainment of the past.

Last week, Michael Asher passed away. He had not much to do with the Renaissance. Yet the Californian doyen of conceptualism and modern institutional critique was an artist who claimed critical and alert perception of the art histories we have created and continue to create. In 1989, when the post-histoire had just been proclaimed, Asher called for a revision of history: "Historical objectification ought to be sped up while there is still a collective experience and memory which can assist in the clarity of an analysis while, simultaneously, opening up a space to ask fundamental questions regarding history-making." [7] I am convinced that these questions about the roots and conditions of history-making and the related role of images and memory are exactly the ones that will keep Renaissance Art History in the center of gravity of the historical disciplines – if we work hard and dream big, in California and elsewhere.

largely exists for remembrance for his *Arcades* project. The passages in question are quoted from *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 94.

7. Michael Asher in: *L'art conceptuel, une perspective*, ed. by Claude Gintz, ex. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), 112.

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### Title

Jeanette Kohl, "Work hard, dream big:" *Whose Renaissance?*, in: *Teaching the Renaissance III*, ed. by Angela Dreßen and Susanne Gramatzki, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Nr. 4, 2012 (7 pages), [www.kunsttexte.de](http://www.kunsttexte.de).

### Notes

\* Invitation to the UC campuses, online: <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/>.

1. Hans Belting, <http://globalartmuseum.de/media/file/476716148442.pdf>.
2. See Volker Reinhardt's comments about possible reasons of the 'intellectual misery' obvious in such 'historical' mainstream productions. Volker Reinhardt, *Das Ende der Renaissance?* In: *Teaching the Renaissance I*, ed. Angela Dreßen and Susanne Gramatzki, in: *kunsttexte.de*, 2/2012, [www.kunsttexte.de](http://www.kunsttexte.de).
3. See Avinoam Shalem's engaged plea for the Renaissance as a period of trans-cultural encounters: *Wieder Renaissance? ... heute?* In: *Teaching the Renaissance I*, ed. Angela Dreßen and Susanne Gramatzki, in: *kunsttexte.de*, 2/2012, [www.kunsttexte.de](http://www.kunsttexte.de).
4. Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976).
5. Ulrich Pfisterer, *Renaissance als Dinosaurier?* In: *Teaching the Renaissance I*, ed. Angela Dreßen and Susanne Gramatzki, in: *kunsttexte.de*, 2/2012, [www.kunsttexte.de](http://www.kunsttexte.de).
6. Benjamin excerpted passages of Horkheimer's refusal of the idea that the past is incomplete and