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How to use this book

This book is a starting point—no more and no less—for approaching theories of art-historical interpretation and the methods that put them into practice. It is neither encyclopedic nor exhaustive—if it were, it would lose its usefulness both as an introduction and, after that, as a reference tool, the kind of dog-eared handbook kept in a pile next to the computer.

This book provides signposts, a set of possible orientations toward the field of art history, by presenting some of the theoretical perspectives most widely used in the discipline today. It tries not to over-synthesize nor to over-simplify, but to place individual arguments, controversies, and divergent perspectives in relation to each other. Art-historical theory is a forum of intense, often passionate debate. The ideas it embraces are never resolved. They will always be under development and constantly changing. For that matter, art history itself, as an academic discipline, is constantly in the process of being developed and critiqued. It has changed enormously over the last half century, and it will change just as much over the next, as both art and its history grow and stretch.

Who will be looking for and using the signposts presented and explored here? Our imagined readers will be undergraduate students of art history who are seriously interested in the practice of art history, even if they are new to it and even if they do not intend to become professional art historians. These undergraduates are interested in the world of ideas. They engage in intellectual, political, and artistic pursuits outside their coursework. They are not content simply to memorize slides—in fact, they may even actively resist memorizing slides! Because of these interests of theirs, professors may assign them readings in critical theory. Or perhaps their curiosity about critical theories mentioned in class will inspire them on their own to want more knowledge and background information for pursuing these ideas further. Even if these descriptions do not yet resonate with you, this book seeks to welcome you into the forum where they can be pondered and explored.

This book is not a history of art history, nor is it an explanation of all theories of art and its meanings. Instead, it addresses the multiple intersections of art history and critical theory. Some of the latter has been generated through the practice of art history itself, and art history has borrowed some critical theory from other disciplines. Because this