

Book Reviews

A PHILOSOPHY OF VISUAL METAPHOR IN CONTEMPORARY ART. By Mark Staff Brandl. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 240 pp.

The word “metaphor” has a somewhat antagonistic status among many students of literature and art history. From my experience, describing a work as “metaphorical” tends to change the atmosphere in a classroom, imbuing it with a sense of hesitation. There is something about saying that a visual or textual work contains metaphors that seems to invite a correlation to inaccessibility, even a certain level of mystery, in the minds of some, perpetuating the idea that the arts are a closed community open only to a select few who are educated enough or talented enough to develop the skillset required.

Mark Staff Brandl’s *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* works to disrupt this very definition of the term. From the onset, Brandl defines metaphor as something that is open, fluid, opposing a linear correlation between the method of expression and the ideas being expressed: “I claim that artworks are objects created for multiple interpretations, wherein the form and the content are inextricably interwoven, each mirroring the other in its own terms” (49). The key term introduced by Brandl is visual metaphor, which he distinguishes from verbal metaphor by emphasizing that they are the product of a complex system of reception of tropes, another key term of the book that refers to “figurative language in general” (12). These tropes and the ideas they contain are then taken in, by artists and viewers alike, and synthesized into something different, a new arrangement of tropes that is presented in visual form, hence visual metaphor.

Where the introduction and first chapter are dedicated to setting up Brandl’s argument, chapter two gives the reader a glimpse into the bigger, practical stakes of the book. Here, Brandl discusses the matter of immediacy to visual metaphor, the moment of recognition always intentional but not always, or at least not necessarily, conscious. Brandl also emphasizes the multivalence of visual metaphors, arguing that it is possible to hold on to the associations evoked by an artwork without converting it to a textual equivalent. Although he does not use the term, affect theory hangs strongly over this chapter and the next. The association is made all the more palpable by the brief mention of James Elkins’ *Pictures and Tears* in chapter three, a book that contemplates why some works of art have such a strong emotional impact on viewers and discusses the highly debated Stendhal Syndrome. Brandl draws attention to a sense of inherent knowingness that everyone is capable of when looking at art, to the point where the knowledge becomes instinctive and transfers over into the realm of sensation. Brandl encourages his reader to tap into this feeling and well of affective knowledge in the third chapter. Taking the stereotypical proclamation that art “responds to reality”, Brandl complicates it by arguing that reality is lived experience, which makes it a distinctly flexible concept.

If these first four sections of the book can be labelled as a conversation about contemporary art’s function and what it means to see a work of art, then the following four chapters can be grouped together as a discussion on what it means to see a work of art. These are not terms nor distinctions Brandl puts forth in his book but rather a way I came to think of his discussion the further into the reeds I got. Seeing, in *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art*, involves considering the artist and the process as much as the final product, to recognize that this is, in itself, another complex system. After introducing the argument that visual metaphor has a syntax, which consists of principles and elements of design—line, shape, colour, etc.—Brandl dedicates chapter five to intro-

ducing the concept of “metaphor(m)”. Describing it as “the theory of central visual trope” (93), Brandl describes it as seeing a work of art as simultaneously an object, a process, a material, and a form. One of the most significant effects of this term is that it works against the compartmentalization that sometimes occurs within art history and comparative literature, where some scholars may choose to focus on a biographical approach of the artist and center the process, while others take more of a close reading approach, centering the object and breaking it down according to the preferred methodology, from social history to psychoanalysis. This is where the discussion in chapter six goes as well, with chapter seven serving as an example in application. Focusing on two case studies—Charles Baetschi’s “Colour Unit 24.1” (1998) and Leonard Bullock’s “Seinpost” (2001–2002)—Brandl applies his own methodology to demonstrate a close and engaged form of formal looking that recognizes that an artist’s technique and creative self-expression can co-exist with their desire to establish connections to other philosophical concepts or artistic schools through their work.

I gravitated the most to the last third of the book, beginning with Brandl’s “metaphor(m)”. In this section, Brandl’s thoughts take on a practical dimension while cultivating the conviction that art is living, rather than purely material and imbued with inherent meanings. In the final chapter, Brandl proposes thinking of art history as one large visual metaphor, to move away from the idea of a strict, linear timeline. One of the main benefits of this, Brandl suggests, is that it puts artists, not academics, first. After a necessary reminder that art historical narratives are constructs that are not universal, Brandl presents eight prominent timelines within art history and nine timelines of sequential art, a topic he admits to having strong personal engagement. Brandl’s own contribution to the topic is to propose the braid timeline because of the way it allows for parallels across cultures and decenters the cause-and-effect model.

Brandl’s approach makes *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* a valuable teaching tool. Rather than using it as a straightforward textbook, where students are expected to read, remember, and regurgitate an author’s ideas in an exam or some other written assignment, Brandl’s arguments invite discussion and further examples beyond those he selects himself. The comics at the beginning of each chapter are the biggest evidence of this. *A Philosophy of Visual Metaphor in Contemporary Art* is not a gatekeeping book. Although there is a benefit to being familiar with Deconstructivism and the different historiographic approaches within art history, Brandl’s goal is always to clarify rather than obstruct. If metaphors, according to cognitive theory, “are embodied, that is, that mental concepts are constructed tropically out of bodily experiences” (6), then relationality becomes as viable an approach to take when viewing art as it is when creating it.

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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO BEAUTY POLITICS (Paperback). By Maxine Leeds Craig (Ed.). UK: Routledge, 2023. 404 pp.

The editor, Maxine Leeds Craig, compiled, arranged, and offered the articles in this book to explore how beauty impacts issues and people in social and political ways. Even though some of the topics and concepts have a longer history, in *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, they are often situated in current practices and contexts, for example on social media and other realms. In addition to the topics, another value of this book is the breadth of locations around the world. Rather than talking about abstract concepts or issues, the authors situate them in specific cultures, including Japan, Sudan, and Turkey. And they often place these issues and concepts within specific practical contexts, such as salons, retail stores, and tattoo parlors.

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