

JONATHAN FINEBERG

*Edward William and Jane Marr Gutgsell Professor of Art History Emeritus
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

FALL 2013 LECTURE SERIES AT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

OCTOBER 8, 9, 15, 16



“THE LANGUAGE OF THE ENIGMATIC OBJECT: MODERN ART AT THE BORDER OF MIND AND BRAIN”

LECTURE 1:

**“Motherwell’s Mother: An
Iconography in Abstraction”**

October 8, 2013

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.
Reception to Follow

*Location: School of Medicine
836 Health Sciences Rd.
Med Ed Bldg (#836)
Telemedicine Theatre B001*

*Teleconference available at
UCIMC in Bldg. 22A Room 2107*

Limited to 60 participants only.

LECTURE 2:

**“The Ineffable, the Unspeakable,
and the Inspirational: A Grammar”**

October 9, 2013

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.
Reception to Follow

*Location: Claire Trevor
School of the Arts
4000 Mesa Road
Contemporary Arts Center (Bldg #721)
Colloquium Room 3201*

Limited to 60 participants only.

LECTURE 3:

**“The Nature Theatre: Art
and Politics”**

October 15, 2013

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.,
Reception to Follow

*Location: School of Medicine
836 Health Sciences Rd.
Med Ed Bldg (#836)
Telemedicine Theatre B001*

*Teleconference available at
UCIMC in Bldg. 22A Room 2107*

Limited to 60 participants only.

LECTURE 4:

“Desire Lines in the Mind”

October 16, 2013

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.
Reception to Follow

*Location: School of Humanities
1030 Humanities Gateway
Building (Bldg 611)*

First come – first serve.

To RSVP for this lecture series, please go to www1.icts.uci.edu/fineberg

Lectures are free and open to the public.

*Co-sponsored by the UCI Schools of Medicine, the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, and the UCI School of Humanities,
in conjunction with the UCI-SOM Program in Medical Humanities & Art.*



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JONATHAN FINEBERG

Jonathan Fineberg is Edward William and Jane Marr Gutsell Professor of Art History Emeritus at the University of Illinois and a Trustee Emeritus of The Phillips Collection in Washington where he was founding Director of the Center for the Study of Modern Art. He earned his B.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University, an M.A. from the Courtauld Institute in London, and studied psychoanalysis at the Boston and Western New England Psychoanalytic Institutes. He has taught at Yale, Harvard, and Columbia universities and among his awards are: the Pulitzer Fellowship in Critical Writing, the NEA Art Critic's Fellowship, Senior Fellowships from the Dedalus Foundation and the Japan Foundation, and the College Art Association's Award for Distinguished Teaching in the History of Art. His books include: *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, 3rd edition (Prentice-Hall and Renmin University Press - Beijing); *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: On the Way to the Gates* (Yale University Press/Metropolitan Museum of Art); *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton University Press); *Imagining America: Icons of 20th Century American Art* (with John Carlin, a Yale book and a two-hour PBS television documentary); *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child* (University of California Press); *Alice Aycock: Drawings, Some Stories Are Worth Repeating* (Parrish Art Museum/Yale University Press); and *A Troublesome Subject: The Art of Robert Arneson* (University of California Press). *Disquieting Memories: The Art of Zhang Xiaogang* (Phaidon) is forthcoming in 2014, and the lectures he is delivering at University of California, Irvine this October, *The Language of the Enigmatic Object: Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain*, were drafted in 2012-13 while he was The Visiting Presidential Professor at the University of Nebraska; he is now editing them for publication by the University of Nebraska Press.

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The Language of the Enigmatic Object: Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain

Humans have made images continuously for more than 30,000 years. It seems reasonable to conclude that we have made images because we need them. One of the tasks of modern art, the painter Robert Motherwell said, "was to find a language that would be closer to the structure of the human mind – a language that could adequately express the complex physical and metaphysical realities that modern science and philosophy had made us aware of; that could more adequately reflect the nature of our understanding of how things really are."

These four lectures on *The Language of the Enigmatic Object: Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain* are an effort to make an evolutionary argument for why we need images and to theorize a life's work dealing with images. The lectures examine how the language of visual thinking works, in what way it is "closer to the structure of the human mind" than verbal thinking, and how it may indeed enhance the creative capacities of the brain. Grounded in the specifics of the daily practice of certain paradigmatic artists, these four lectures frame an understanding of visual thinking and creativity. Professor Fineberg attempts to delineate the language, then parse the grammar of visual thinking in the unconscious, then illuminate the political implications of art on the basis of a deeper understanding of how art affects us, and then finally to speculate on how aesthetic experience may impact the structure of the brain and serve evolutionary and social necessity. In *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, he argued that artists use their art to bring coherence to their experience. These lectures propose an underlying theory of how the language of art enables artists to do this.

The first lecture, "Motherwell's Mother: An Iconography in Abstraction," demonstrates that abstract form can have an iconography, much like representation. Drawing on a friendship and conversations over many years with Robert Motherwell Professor Fineberg articulates a specific iconography in his abstraction. But this lecture also endeavors to define what distinguishes the person of the artist (who provides the subject matter) from the work of art, which stands on its own as an object of knowledge.

In the second lecture, "The Ineffable, the Unspeakable, and the Inspirational: A Grammar," Fineberg sets out the psychodynamics of form as a language of the unconscious, taking up the psychic mechanisms of visual thinking. Using the revelation of content contained in the materials and practices of the art of Alexander Calder and Joan Miró, he illuminates the work of art as a physical embodiment of psychic processes and content and demonstrates the particular way in which the artist can reorganize the unconscious by consciously reordering the elements in his or her work and then reintroducing that revised structure back into the unconscious. Professor Fineberg asserts the status of visual thinking as a form of conscious thought that articulates meaning which is nevertheless inaccessible to verbal language.

If we can talk about an iconography in abstract form (the way in which form articulates the ineffable content of the unconscious - lecture one), and we understand that works of art can open the unconscious to a conscious intervention in reorganizing our sense of the self (lecture two), then we can talk in a more profound way about the political and social dimensions of art. Plato remarks in *The Republic* that "the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions." Arthur Rimbaud wrote that "the modern poet comes into his own by a systematic derangement of all the senses." **Lecture three, "The Nature Theater: Art and Politics,"** focuses on

how works of art can open a broad public to unconscious reorganization in the way that Erik Erikson, in his book *Gandhi's Truth*, described Gandhi doing in mid-century India. In lecture three, Professor Fineberg takes the projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude and paintings by David Wojnarowicz, among other works, to examine how art may impact the public sphere.

The **fourth and final lecture, "Desire Lines in the Mind,"** speculates on the effects of art on the brain and sets out an argument for the evolutionary necessity of art. In a 2001 article in *Science*, the neuroanatomist Semir Zeki, points out that "variability, one of the chief determinants of evolution, is greatest in structures that evolve fastest. In humans, the brain is the most variable and fastest evolving organ. We cannot at present ascribe this variability to any well-defined structure or component in the brain. Rather, we infer it through the wide differences in, for example, intelligence, sensitivities, creative abilities, and skills. Art is one expression of this variability. Its neurological study will therefore elucidate not only the source of one of the richest subjective experiences of which we are capable but also the determinants of the variability in its creation and appreciation, and hence elucidate one of the most important characteristics of the human brain."

The function of the visual brain, Zeki argued, is to seek knowledge of the constant and essential properties of things in the world and yet the input of information through the senses constantly changes. Thus the brain has to hypothesize the defining qualities of objects. Each individual is inherently creative in making sense of visual experience. "The idea of being can no longer be held as constant; it is relative, nothing more than a projection of the mind," Jean Dubuffet explained in a letter to Arnold Glimcher. He wrote extensively about his own mental processes while in the act of painting and lecture four will draw on his account and on his last paintings to examine the implied mental structures. Though we don't yet have the technology to map these functions finely enough, we can use what is known about neuroanatomy to speculate on how works of art may alter neural pathways and change the structure of the brain, enhance creativity, and play a central role in the creation of new knowledge.