



MFA

Art Writing



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Situated in the heart of New York City

and at the intersection of words and images, the MFA Art Writing program offers writers the opportunity to bring their language into a complex meeting with the visual arts and the ideas that inform it. This program is not involved in “discourse production” or the prevarications of curatorial rhetoric, but rather in the practice of criticism writ large, aspiring to literature.

The practice of criticism involves making finer and finer distinctions among like things, but it is also a way to ask fundamental questions about art and life. The MFA program in Art Writing is designed to give students a grounding in the philosophical and historical bases of criticism, to improve both their writing and their seeing, and to provide sources that they can draw on for the rest of their lives.

Critics need a broad base of knowledge, so our curriculum is wide-ranging. In addition to the foundation seminar, Bases of Criticism I & II, three levels of Writing Practicums, and the Thesis Seminar, we offer an array of continually changing electives taught by prominent writers and critics.

We concentrate on the essay as form, as well as on shorter forms of review, and learn criticism by doing it. The thesis that students write at the end of their course of study is intended to be a substantial piece of criticism. We want students to come out of this program better prepared to write in the world.

From its inception, this program has had a special emphasis on the history and current transformations of the image. The critics of tomorrow must study images, in all of their manifestations, in order to better understand how we are subject to them.

In addition to our exceptional core faculty, we invite many artists, writers, critics, philosophers, editors and art historians in each year to give lectures and to meet with our students individually or in small groups. It is obviously a big advantage to have such a program located in the middle of New York City, amidst the greatest concentration of artists and art activity in the world.

—David Levi Strauss, chair

A letter from the chair

The following letter from Chair David Levi Strauss to the American art critic, art historian and educator Irving Sandler was a response to Sandler's question about the state of art criticism today, for *The Brooklyn Rail*.

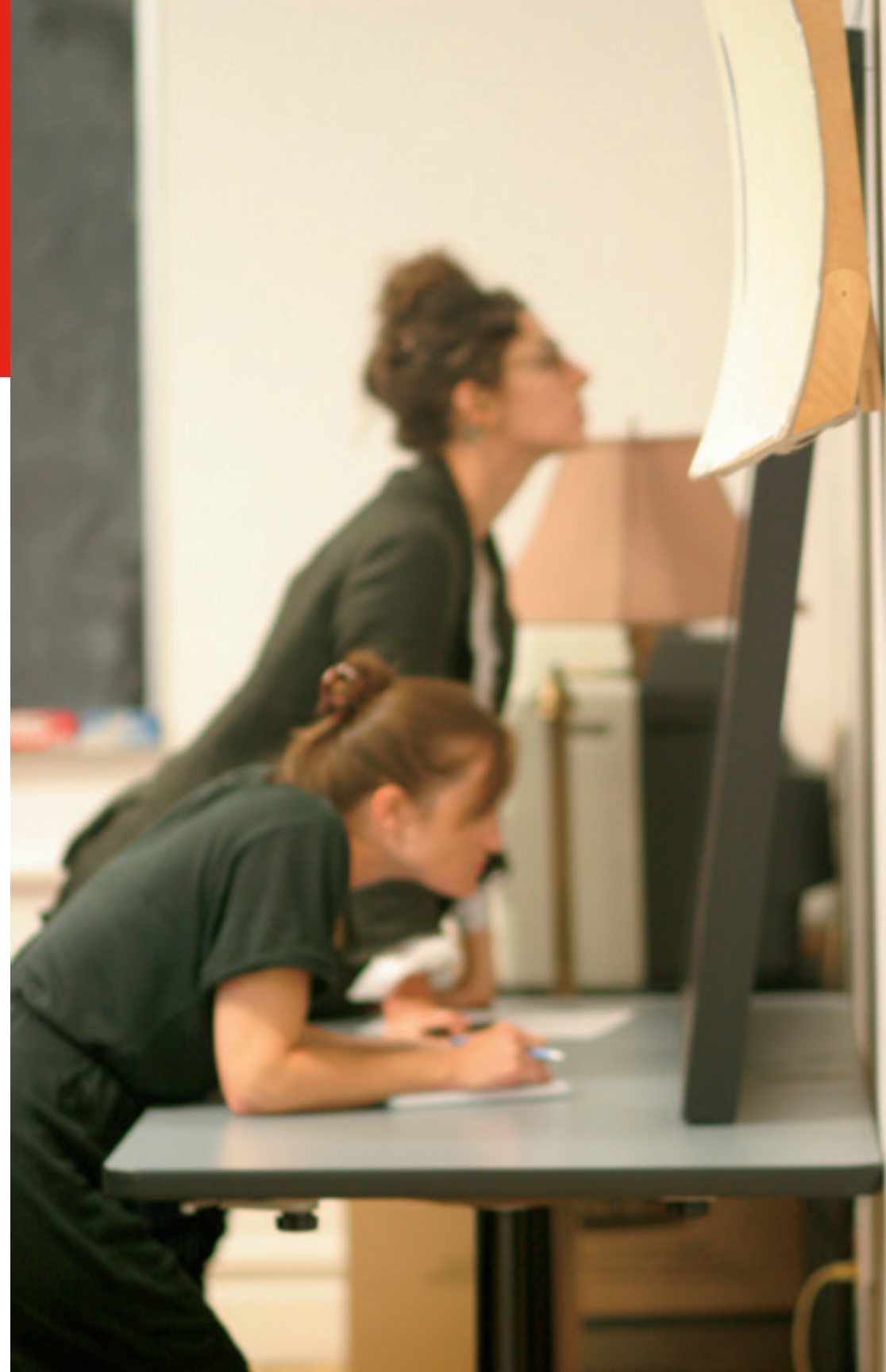
Dear Irving,

If it's not good writing, it can't be good criticism, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin in "The Author as Producer." That's the basic premise of my graduate program in Art Writing at the School of Visual Arts. The real history of art writing and criticism is vast, including everyone who has ever written well on art and its relation to the rest of the world. The discipline of art history has its own traditions, methodologies, terminology and biases. Criticism needs a new "expanded field" of its own, now, and this expanded field has to be grounded in radical literature and philosophy.

Criticism is not in crisis. Criticism *is* crisis. That's what it means. And crisis leads to change. There are many pressing social and political crises in the world that criticism needs to address. When the art world tries to buy out or subsume and subdue criticism, or to tame it into irrelevance, there is a tremendous loss of energy. Trying to remove risk from the system doesn't make it stronger; it enervates it.

Our communications environment is changing very rapidly, and I believe that this change is part of a larger epochal shift, from linear writing and literacy to the image, and this shift will affect the relation between writing and art, and between texts and images, in profound ways. Writers and artists are going to be increasingly shaped by, and intimately involved in, this transformation.

Best,
David Levi Strauss





The department's library space also hosts the Lecture Series.

Interview with David Levi Strauss

Excerpt from an interview with the chair by Amelia Rina (graduate of the MFA Art Writing program in 2015), published by *Daily Serving*, September 10, 2015:

Amelia Rina: Can you talk about your relationship with teaching writing and your own education as a writer?

David Levi Strauss: The Art Writing program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York is really modeled after the Poetics Program at the New College of California in San Francisco, in the 1980s. It was built around the teachings of the poet Robert Duncan and the other poets that gathered around him, including Diane di Prima, David Meltzer, Michael Palmer, and Duncan McNaughton. It was pointedly not a creative-writing program,

but a program in poetics, the study of how things are made. The poets who taught there intended to give us an intellectual base that we could build on for the rest of our lives and to give us sources we could continue to draw on as we built our own network of sources. I think that's probably even more important today. We now live in the Golden Age of Search, where a vast amount of material is accessible, so the need to develop ways to make distinctions among these disparate sources is crucial.

AR: Something that seems integral to the MFA Art Writing Department's mission is that it isn't in the business of "discourse production." Can you elaborate on what you mean by that? And if it's not in the business of discourse production, what is it in the business of?

DLS: I don't know when the term "discourse production" was first used, but I think it was imported from cognitive neuroscience. To me, it always sounded like a needless bureaucratization of writing and thinking. Our approach is very different from this. We look at writing as a way of thinking—and a way to live, actually—and, at the same time, as a craft.

AR: Well, what I was thinking of is a distinction that Vilém Flusser makes in his text *Post-History*. He writes about the difference between discourse and dialogue. Flusser writes that discourse is like a pyramid scheme where information is disseminated from one point, but the information only goes in one direction. Dialogue, on the other hand, is more like a roundtable discussion with an exchange that allows for new information to be produced and added to the broader conversation.

DLS: Right, that sounds like writing to me. I mean, writing has always been a way of thinking for me. I never know what I think about something until I write it. And part of that process is the invention of the reader. The writing imagines the reader into existence. So it's not that you have ideas and then you put them in writing to transmit them to a passive consumer (to "produce discourse"). That's not the way it works. The process of writing is a way of knowing and making the world—especially writing about art.

The distinction between art writing and other kinds of writing is that we always have an object. I started out as a poet, and I also write fiction. But with critical writing, you have an object that you keep going back to,

and it keeps the dialogue grounded. Having an object to return to is a real advantage.

Judgment was always the least interesting part of criticism for me. It's necessary, and I do it, but it's not what keeps me in it. What keeps me in it is actually engaging with works of art and trying to produce writing that can dance with them and not do violence to them. And that's very difficult to do.

Every time I sit down to write something, I really have to make myself up again, so I change as a person with every piece that I write. When you're writing, you're making yourself up; you're making a new person. And that can be painful.

AR: So what motivates you to continue subjecting yourself to such a painful process?

DLS: Writing is painful, but having written is ecstatic, and the ecstasy induces amnesia, so you're willing to do it all over again. Like falling in love.

AR: Was the dedication to rewriting something that came from your own intuition? Or did you pick it up from your peers?

DLS: No, not from my peers—from my superiors, living and dead. I read dead people.

AR: Were you working with other people for edits?

DLS: Almost never. It was an interactive process affected by my reading of writers who I respected. Writing is a built thing: It has architecture; it has a shape. I was imitating the writers who I looked up to. John Berger was a tremendous one, but there were many others. I imitated Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Valéry, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Clarice Lispector, Simone Weil, Heiner Müller, Samuel Beckett.

Sharpening Critical Writing Skills on the Way to Becoming a Tenured Professor

Tatiane Schilaro came to the MFA Art Writing program

at SVA well-prepared. In her native country of Brazil, she studied architecture and worked for five years in a non-profit urban planning organization. When she moved to the U.S., her first academic milestone was to complete a master's in art history at Sotheby's Institute. Next came jobs at MoMA and the Whitney before she felt ready to tackle a course of graduate study in

writing. "I was also accepted at Columbia University for ▶

After graduating from SVA in 2015, Tatiane Schilaro moved to California to pursue a PhD at the University of Santa Cruz.

non-fiction. It was a hard choice but I decided to come to SVA because I wanted to focus on art," she says. "The Art Writing program is unique. It gave me the tools to become an art writer and incorporated my previous experience as an architect."

She now lives in California, where she is pursuing a PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is a visiting faculty member at the San Francisco Art Institute. An assignment to devise a syllabus during the Art Writing program turned out to be a great warm-up for organizing her thoughts and readings into a syllabus for the graduate course on Latin American Art that she's currently teaching at SFAI. She says, "I'm well connected from my time at SVA; the program helped me get onto the full-time tenured professor track. When I applied for my doctorate, I had just gotten my MFA and Santa Cruz took a close look at my writing output, reviews and the list of my publications from my time in the Art Writing program, and that changed the way they saw me." Schilaro is also a writer for websites such as Hyperallergic, Art Critical, and ArtNews, and curated a show with one of her former classmates for the summer of 2017 at New York's A.I.R. Gallery.

The Art Writing program's curriculum considers the way we view images plus the way we write about them, and trains its students to integrate a well-informed knowledge base with personal opinion and interpretation. "We spent so much time in our first two semesters on basic critical writing and reading, from Plato through Walter Benjamin leading up to the present moment, people such as Vilém Flusser, who was like a magician of image theory," says Schilaro. The class took field trips to museums and galleries to look at art together and then produced papers afterward in writing workshops, building a sense of a community of writers. "The workshoping process was super rich," Schilaro says. "We wrote three short papers during the semester, which we circulated beforehand so everyone could have a look prior to the in-class discussion. Writing can be a lonely activity so this really helped me; I was very shy. When I moved to the U.S. from Brazil, at that point I wrote only for myself. This process of having everyone look at and talk about the work is so important to feeling that you have a voice, that you have a certain power over your own words."

Schilaro feels strongly that beyond a wide-ranging knowledge of art and critical theory, she became empowered with political and ethical consciousness at SVA. "The program takes you as you are and looks into your heart and soul and future as a writer," she says. "The process is not mechanical or academic, it is personal. It gave me a rigorous intellectual background and it made me into a real writer. Before that, I was rehearsing to become a writer."

Curriculum/ Sample Program

Degree candidates must successfully complete 60 credits, including all required courses and the thesis, with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. A residency of two academic years is required.

First Year

FALL	CREDITS
Bases of Criticism I	4
Writing I	4
Electives (2)	8
SPRING	
Bases of Criticism II	4
Writing II	4
Electives (2)	8

Second Year

FALL	
Writing III	4
Electives (3)	12
SPRING	
Thesis Seminar	4
Thesis	8

Required Courses

BASES OF CRITICISM I

Instructor: David Levi Strauss

Required of all first-year students, this course will provide background to the history, theory and criticism offered through the elective courses. Foundational texts and other sources will create a base for further studies during the two-year program. This course will also assist students in understanding the prominent theoretical positions of art criticism—past and present—and their sources.

WRITING I

Instructor: Emmanuel Iduma

Why are you here? What are your values, your ethics, your politics, your agendas, your limitations, your beliefs, your blind spots, your fears, your loves? These are big and changeable areas for investigation—people spend their whole lives tangling and untangling their answers. If these people are writers, they do it on the page. This, I think, is what it means to find your voice: to gain a singular authority and point of view. To discover the art of living, and the art through which you will communicate your aliveness to others. You will have weekly writing and reading assignments; the former will be workshopped.

BASES OF CRITICISM II

Instructor: David Levi Strauss

Seeing is believing. We live in an age when images have an inordinate power over us—the power to influence public opinion, to direct or even create desire, to inflame, comfort and assuage. How does this work? Why do we believe technical images the way we do? We'll search for answers (and more questions) in the history of images—from Lascaux to Byzantine icons to photography and cinema to the digital jitter and flow—and consider relevant contemporary approaches and counter-practices.

WRITING II

Instructor: Nancy Princenthal

Regular writing assignments and weekly readings will allow us to consider several different forms and styles of criticism. Our objective is to identify the components of good art criticism—of writing that is compelling, challenging, informative and useful. Each week, one student will introduce discussion of that week's reading. Students will also review and discuss each other's written assignments (generally two per week). Most of the written assignments will address current exhibitions at galleries and museums.

WRITING III

Instructor: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

This course will lead to the writing of the thesis in the final semester of the program. Students will read examples from different styles of critical writing. Brief texts, in the nature of reviews of current exhibitions, will be assigned. As the process advances, students are encouraged to dig more deeply into ideas without ever losing sight of the value of clarity. Some students will choose to express themselves poetically and others analytically; the common goal will be clarity of expression.

THESIS

Students will meet with their thesis advisor and work on a one-to-one basis throughout the semester. Meetings are used for the instructor to respond to drafts of the thesis and discuss its development.

Emmanuel Iduma, alumnus and faculty of MFA Art Writing, spoke at the program's lecture series in fall 2017.



Course Offerings

A sample of our elective course descriptions follow. All course descriptions can be found online at sva.edu/artwriting/curriculum.

AESTHETICS AND THE NATURE OF IMAGE

Instructor: Charles Stein

We will read classical and modern texts on aesthetics, tracing the passage from the Platonic notion of the artist as “demiurge” to the contemporary interest in “emergent” art—art whose very nature comes into being in the process of its production. Inquiry into the nature of image readily involves us in the study of the nature of “form.” Is form imposed on inchoate matter? Or does it rather derive therefrom? Are there fixed archetypes—physical, psychological, metaphysical, or mathematical—that dictate its possibilities? Does form flow organically from the material world? Is there an ontology of the image that can be drawn from our reflection on form? These and many other questions will concern us as we entertain texts from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Goethe, Blake, Ruskin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Jung, Olson, Duncan, et al. Writing assignments will be tailored to individual interests and guided through personal conferences.

IN THE PROCESS: THINKING ABOUT HOW ART IS MADE

Through reading essays by artists, critics and historians about the process of making art, this course will consider the importance of close attention to a work’s material as well as conceptual qualities. Subjects will range from traditional studio practices resulting in discrete paintings and sculptures to the development of work that is based in ideas and realized as ephemera or in time-based media. The goal of the course is to gain a broader understanding of how process can shape not only physical outcome, but also meaning. We will begin with two texts on Alberto Giacometti (*A Giacometti Portrait* and *Looking at Giacometti*). Further readings will include texts by artists Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Yvonne Rainer, Rackstraw Downes, Carroll Dunham, David Humphrey, Andrea Fraser and Frances Stark, as well as writers Robert Storr, Richard Sennett, David Levi Strauss and Patricia Phillips.

THE LANGUAGE OF COLOR

What language do we use to write about color in art? This course will explore the descriptive, critical and poetic terms that signify color. Through observation, reading, discussion and writing, we will examine the science and philosophy of color, the historical and literary development of color language, and the cultural and political significance of color in modern and contemporary art. Museum and studio visits, discussions with artists and critics, experiments in color identification and mixing, and regular writing workshops will be included. Readings will range from scientific and philosophical texts (Aristotle, Isaac Newton, Goethe, Michel Eugène Chevreul, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Josef Albers) to fiction/memoir and poetry (Rainer Maria Rilke, William S. Burroughs, Barbara Guest, Frank O’Hara, William Gass, Maggie Nelson) to contemporary criticism (David Batchelor, Yve-Alain Bois, Esther Leslie, Kathryn Tuma). Students will develop a language of color through descriptive writing, response to critical texts and subjective encounters with color in art.

ON THE LINE: DRAWINGS, DIAGRAMS AND WRITING

Instructor: Dejan Lukic

There are all kinds of lines: linear, broken, zigzagged; there are those that connect, initiate or deviate; there are lines (threads) that bind and lines that escape (into flight). Indeed, lines are the first aesthetic gesture found in prehistory. They are also the foundation of contemporary artistic production, from drawing to installation, from performance to architecture. Philosopher Baruch Spinoza even went so far as to say that human actions and desires should be considered as if they were lines and planes. In short, lines are at the core of things. In this course we will unravel fascination with lines and their power for creating contours of reality. To this end we will study artists such as Gego, Kandinsky, Horwitz, Dürer, Anastasi, Boetti and Klee, coupled with insights from composers Xenakis, Cage and Bussotti; philosophers Nancy, Groys, Flusser and Deleuze; and anthropologists Ingold, Taussig and Bateson. Finally, we will try to determine, by doing it, what kind of line is writing itself, both in its critical explanations and in its enigmatic fragmentations.

HOME IS A FOREIGN PLACE: WRITING ON ART, CONFLICT AND ESTRANGEMENT

Instructor: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

What does it mean to write about art in relation to conflict? This class will grapple with the difficulty, intensity and promise of capturing the work that artists do in times and places that are deeply troubled, whether by political upheaval, economic collapse, epidemic illness, armed struggle or outright war. Through case studies, close readings and lively discussions, we will scrutinize the forms of writing—including the dispatch, the daybook and the diary—that document the urgency of art in moments of extreme or slow-burning crisis, in the face of subtle or sensational violence. Drawing on the work of John Berger, Cynthia Carr, Jace Clayton, Joan Didion, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Yasmine El Rashidi and Susan Sontag, among others, we will, in our own writing, experiment with a mix of criticism, narrative and reportage to shake up how we look, what we see and why we write about a thing so fragile (and magical) as art in brutal circumstances.

CRITICAL STRATEGIES

Instructor: Debra Bricker Balken

With the rise of postwar artistic movements such as the New York School, critical writing in the United States attained a certain urgency. How to define the radical meanings of mid-century art? This class will consider the varied responses of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg and others and how their essays and reviews either refined pre-existing formalist strategies or turned to philosophical models such as Marxism or existentialism. As their positions became increasingly entrenched in the late modernist period, a certain fallout ensued with the result that academically trained writers such as Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens eventually questioned once cornerstone beliefs in originality and the artist's subjectivity. Others, such as Michael Fried, Philip Leider and William Rubin, maintained their devotion to formalist criteria. In a post-modern era where little or no critical consensus prevailed, a rich, diverse body of discourse emerged that will be examined in depth through these and other key critics such as Arthur C. Danto, bell hooks and Dave Hickey.

AGAINST INTERPRETATION

Instructor: Nancy Princenthal

A subjective overview of strategies for resisting criticism, this class will look at the perennial efforts artists have undertaken to resist the authority, and the conventional formats, of criticism. From Dada, Fluxus, and Conceptualism, to the Bruce High Quality Foundation and other collectives dedicated to rewriting art history's curriculum (or pedagogical practice), usurping the critical role has been a recurrent motive. Because the subject is so broad, this course will be organized in part around examples of particular interest to the students who enroll. Susan Sontag's essay will be one starting point; Sol LeWitt's sentences and paragraphs on Conceptual art will be another.

THE OCULUS: THE LIGHT AND THE CIRCLE

Instructor: Dejan Lukic

Sight has been the preferred and dominant sense in the history of aesthetic perception. Besides the critique of this domination, this class will delve into two particular qualities of the seeing experience: a) the light as the agent that stimulates the organ (the eye) and b) the circle as the preferred geometric form of seeing objects. Through these two portals we will address theories of perspectivism, animism, and vitalism. Our discussions will include politics of transparency (from satellite surveillance to micro-drones), cross-cultural conceptions of the "evil eye" phenomena, photosynthetic properties in nature, the impact of darkness and shadows as immanently belonging to the sphere of light rather than being its

opposites, etc. To this end we will study contemporary artists that use light as their preferred medium, such as James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, Ann Hamilton, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Furthermore, we will couple these studies with the reflections of Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Giordano Bruno, William James and Baruch Spinoza on the physiology and metaphysics of the eye (and the circle). In light of this, our goal is to, on the one hand, diagnose, politically and aesthetically, the present state of vision and, on the other, to unravel its necessity for a more expansive understanding of what constitutes space, creation and inspiration. Finally, we will try to define what "luminous writing" should look like in the sphere of art criticism.

Notable Alumni

Kareem Estefan

class of 2013, PhD Candidate in the department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University. editor-at-large, *Creative Time Reports*

Will Fenstermaker

class of 2016, editor of digital content, Metropolitan Museum of Art; associate editor, *The Brooklyn Rail*

Juliet Helmke

class of 2012, editor, *Observer.com*

Alexandra Nicolaides

class of 2014, PhD candidate at Stony Brook University

Tatiane Schilaro

class of 2015, PhD candidate, Visual Studies, History of Art and Visual Culture Department, UC Santa Cruz

Charles Schultz

class of 2011, managing editor, *The Brooklyn Rail*

Elizabeth Sultzer

class of 2015, academic planning specialist, Harvard University

Terence Trouillot

class of 2014, oral history fellow, *BOMB* magazine; art editor, *Blunderbuss Magazine*

Faculty

To learn more about the faculty members and to read their biographies visit: sva.edu/artwriting/faculty.

David Levi Strauss

chair, MFA Art Writing; writer; critic;

Debra Bricker Balken

writer, curator, critic

Emmanuel Iduma

writer, critic

Dejan Lukic

writer, scholar

Siddhartha Mitter

writer, scholar

Nancy Princenthal

critic, author, editor

Charles Stein

poet, essayist

Lynne Tillman

novelist, essayist

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

writer, scholar

Lecturers

Below is just a sample of guest lecturers who have spoken with our students.

Bill Berkson	Cuauhtémoc Medina
Michael Brenson	W.J.T. Mitchell
Susan Buck-Morss	Linda Nochlin
Phong Bui	Avital Ronell
T. J. Clark	Luc Sante
Teju Cole	Elaine Scarry
Holland Cotter	Peter Schjeldahl
David Graeber	Carolee Schneemann
Boris Groys	Leo Steinberg
Dave Hickey	Robert Storr
Ann Lauterbach	Michael Taussig
Lucy Lippard	Anne Waldman
Sylvère Lotringer	McKenzie Wark

Application Process

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

For detailed instructions, visit: sva.edu/grad/howtoapply

- Online Application and \$80 Application Fee: sva.edu/apply
- Statement of Intent/Personal Statement
- Résumé
- Letters of Recommendation
- Official College Transcript

Some applicants may be required to submit the following:

- Proof of English Proficiency
- Copy of Permanent Residency Card
- Declaration of Finances
- Verification of Finances
- Foreign Transcript Evaluation

DEPARTMENTAL REQUIREMENTS

For specific guidelines about these requirements, visit: sva.edu/grad/deptreq

- Writing Sample
- Interview

DEADLINES

For information on application deadlines, visit: sva.edu/grad/timeline

IMPORTANT LINKS

- FAQ: sva.edu/grad/faq
- International students: sva.edu/grad/intl
- Tuition and fees: sva.edu/tuition
- Visit SVA: sva.edu/grad/visit

Contact Us

We encourage applicants to visit our department. Contact us directly to schedule a department tour or sign up to attend an Information Session. For more information and to register, go to: sva.edu/grad/visit.

If you have any questions about the application process, contact Graduate Admissions at 212.592.2107 or email: gradadmissions@sva.edu.

David Levi Strauss, chair
Annette Wehrhahn, assistant to the chair

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Department site: artwriting.sva.edu

“The program makes you think about

the act of writing, how one exists in the moment of the experience, and to be thoughtful and careful in the use of words.”

—Christine Licata, MFA 2008

ACCREDITATION

The School of Visual Arts has been authorized by the New York State Board of Regents (www.highered.nysed.gov) to confer the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts on graduates of programs in Advertising; Animation; Cartooning; Computer Art, Computer Animation and Visual Effects; Design; Film; Fine Arts; Illustration; Interior Design; Photography and Video; Visual and Critical Studies; and to confer the degree of Master of Arts on graduates of the programs in Critical Theory and the Arts; Curatorial Practice; Design Research, Writing and Criticism; and to confer the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching on graduates of the program in Art Education; and to confer the degree of Master of Fine Arts on graduates of programs in Art Practice; Art Writing; Computer Arts; Design; Design for Social Innovation; Fine Arts; Illustration as Visual Essay; Interaction Design; Photography, Video and Related Media; Products of Design; Social Documentary Film; Visual Narrative; and to confer the degree of Master of Professional Studies on graduates of the programs in Art Therapy; Branding; Digital Photography; Directing; Fashion Photography. Data required by the U.S. Department of Education on “Gainful Employment” for each of the above programs may be found on each individual program page at sva.edu/ge.

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The School of Visual Arts is an accredited institutional member of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (nasad.arts-accredit.org).

The Interior Design program leading to the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design is accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (accredit-id.org), 206 Grandville Avenue, Suite 305, Grand Rapids, MI, 49503-4014.

The Master of Arts in Teaching in Art Education program is accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

The Master of Professional Studies in Art Therapy degree program is approved by the American Art Therapy Association, Inc., and as such meets the Education Standards of the art therapy profession.

CREDITS

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School of Visual Arts

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