

Afterword

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This collection of essays has its origins in the Visual Scholarship Initiative (VSI), a graduate student organization based at Emory University. Primarily located within the Institute of the Liberal Arts, one of the oldest interdisciplinary programs in the United States, VSI evolved from a constellation of interests initially focused around ethnographic film. It quickly expanded, however, to include a broad range of practices that included photography, performance, curation, collage, and soundscapes, among others. While diverse, what these different practices shared was an experimental edge and departure from existing academic conventions.

In this brief narrative, I want to chart the emergence of VSI and identify several features that make it significant as a case study in scholarly innovation. Specifically, it raises questions relating to graduate education and contemporary academic culture. Graduate students often find themselves discouraged from criticizing or deviating from the established norms and expectations of their discipline. They are strongly advised to stick with established ways of working. A refusal to follow well-trodden paths is considered risky and students are warned against pursuing unorthodox approaches until they have the security of tenure. But VSI was formed precisely to challenge this sort of professional conservatism. What did it enable Emory's graduate students to accomplish? How might it help us think more critically and expansively about questions of scholarly practice?

VSI was started by a small group of graduate students who mostly had studied the history and practice of ethnographic filmmaking. I had offered such courses following my appointment to Emory in 2004. They were always run successively – the history came first, so that the subsequent development of practice was shaped by a familiarity with the long tradition of ethnographic filmmaking within anthropology and the fierce debates associated with it. Students were asked to use the camera as a tool of exploration- that is, not to think of it as a technology for gathering data, or a means to represent what was already known. Instead the camera was intended to be the central element in an open-ended investigation of contemporary life. Such an approach was founded in a commitment to working with, rather than against, the distinctive qualities of the medium. Filmmaking was not understood as illustrative, popularizing, or a preliminary to anthropology proper. Instead it was acknowledged as a particular kind of knowledge practice and mode of inquiry in its own right.

Although my own background and training had been in anthropology, I had long been interested in the discipline's more experimental wing and in the possibilities of collaboration across existing boundaries of practice. Emory's Institute of the Liberal Arts, affectionately known as the ILA, offered rich ground for the development and extension of these concerns. The notion of inter-disciplinarity that stood at its center necessitated a fundamental questioning of established scholarly practice. Understood in its most profound and radical sense, interdisciplinary work is not an additive endeavor but a transformative one. It entails not merely the bringing together of different disciplines, but it involves a complete re-orientation of scholarly perspective.

Founded in 1952, the ILA had garnered a distinguished reputation as a site for innovative scholarship. Over the decades, it had become known not just for the work of its faculty and graduate students, but also for its role at Emory as an incubator of new fields of study and academic departments. For example, the departments of art history, film studies, women's studies, and comparative literature began within the ILA as constellations of intellectual interest, eventually spinning off into fully-fledged, independent academic units.

At the heart of the ILA, however, stood its graduate program that attracted an unusual cohort of students. Perhaps more than the faculty, such students grasped the generative possibilities of eschewing the traditional well-worn paths of academic work. They sought out the ILA because they were unwilling to confine their interests and questions – conceptually, methodologically, or formally – within the established disciplines. Set against the certainties of the latter, their projects often seemed improbable or willfully unfocused. But ILA students were consistently bold and much more willing to take risks than their peers in conventional departments. In particular, they were committed to incorporating their previous creative practice (music, art, journalism, photography, poetry, curation) into their graduate work.

That VSI quickly found its center within the ILA was not then surprising. But it was always diverse, quickly establishing itself on the Emory campus as a place where students could meet to share work and discuss the challenge of scholarly practice. In addition to the ILA cohort, it drew students from anthropology, art history, film studies, religious studies, women and gender studies, education, and history. VSI was a place where they could openly express their frustration with the constraints of their particular disciplines and explore ways of making a convincing case to their advisors, committees, and peers for working differently. Hitherto such students felt they had to leave their creative practice at the door of graduate school. If they attempted to continue to pursue such interests outside their formal studies, they tended to keep quiet about it for fear of being perceived as lacking academic purpose and seriousness.

At the core of VSI was the sharing and critical appraisal of work in progress. Meeting regularly over the course of a semester, students formed an ongoing discussion group that took specific examples of practice as its point of departure. VSI followed an art school “crit” approach – that is, everyone except the presenter responded to the work, and only after everyone had spoken was the presenter allowed to speak. Comments focused on the formal and substantive aspects of the work under review and the particular choice of medium. The varied backgrounds and academic locations of participants yielded lively exchange and laid the foundation for subsequent exchange among participants. This second stage of discussion focused around an assessment of where the work stood in relation to existing forms of scholarship and what kinds of argument might be made as to its academic respectability.

Students supported each other in experimenting with different approaches and media. Collectively they worked toward establishing an intellectual context for non-traditional work and the grounds for its evaluation as legitimate scholarly practice. For ILA graduate students such issues were crucial. The very nature of their work – its interdisciplinary scope and reach – meant there were no clear models to follow. Students were, in significant ways, making it up as they went along. There was no pre-determined shape for their inquiries. A set of initial questions functioned as a point of departure and projects evolved in response to whatever avenues – formal, methodological, conceptual – seemed the most generative.

Although experimentation is inherent to interdisciplinary work, it is rarely acknowledged as a central issue. VSI became a way of acknowledging its centrality, offering a place in which students could openly engage questions of scholarly practice. For graduate students at Emory located in disciplines and departments with clearly articulated scholarly norms and conventions, VSI enabled them to take risks without consequence and to explore new approaches in conjunction with existing ones.

Over the last few years, the profile of VSI has steadily grown across the Emory campus and beyond. It represented something unusual and significant in contemporary academic culture. First of all, the impetus for its foundation came from the students themselves, and its distinctive character and concerns were defined by the particular problems they encountered in their graduate work. VSI was never a formal program (like Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Laboratory, for instance) with institutional expectations and, as a consequence, students could experiment with a range of different media and approaches without fear of failure or professional sanction.

Secondly, VSI was an expression of the intellectual seriousness and creative energy of graduate students. This may seem an obvious statement to make. But the prevailing academic climate is conservative and graduate students are all too frequently discouraged from any departure from the traditional procedures of their disciplines. Moreover, they are made to understand that their place is at the bottom of the academic ladder. In an intensely status conscious context (much more so than in Britain), graduates are reminded that conformity, not independence, is rewarded.

VSI stood against the prevailing climate of academic discourse that emphasized “training.” Here the focus is on learning the ropes, so to speak, rather than thinking expansively and critically about the nature and purpose of scholarly praxis. VSI graduate students, instead of simply following exhortations to professionalize and to uncritically adopt established ways of doing things, challenged such expectations. They actively resisted the pressures of specialization and disciplinary conformity. In their place they sought to catalyze an expansive discussion about scholarship as a creative practice. It is important to point out that this did not mean repudiating the familiar forms or embarking, somewhat foolishly, on a wholesale rejection of academic values. Quite the contrary. The work pursued by VSI students necessitated a deep and critical understanding of disciplinary norms and conventions, since this knowledge served as the indispensable foundation for improvisation and experimentation. Their commitment to pushing at the boundaries of existing academic forms was about working with and against recognized approaches. As VSI developed, it became apparent that there was never a clear distinction to be drawn between creativity and scholarship, or art and academia as is often assumed. What was more challenging and satisfying – intellectually, ethically, formally – was to find ways of bringing new kinds of approaches into dialogue with the established ones.

Thirdly, at the center of VSI, was practice – that is, students sought to work things out

by doing them. Students took seriously the particular qualities of different media and were attentive to the social, intellectual, and ethical context in which their work was being developed and presented. Conceptualized in this way, scholarly practice was understood to be a process shaped by ongoing dialogue with others – with VSI, peers, faculty, research subjects, and audiences. It was an example of what might be called situated practice. At its center was an improvisatory impulse – work unfolded and was shaped by the context of its making rather than tailored to fit into a pre-existing framework.

Ironically everything that made VSI unusual and significant – its student-led agenda, its open, unstructured, interdisciplinary, experimental character – was also what made it vulnerable to the pressures of contemporary academic culture. This quickly became evident at Emory with the arrival of a new Dean and the beginning of institutional restructuring. Central to the latter was the elimination of the ILA and its graduate program. In some ways, this danger had been reflected in an ongoing debate within VSI from the outset about whether or not to seek legitimation through establishment of a Certificate of Practice. It was an acknowledgement of institutional vulnerability, at the same time it was recognized that such a move would undermine the very purpose of VSI.

The fate of VSI remains uncertain. Despite the ubiquity of “interdisciplinarity,” there is little evidence that the genuinely radical possibilities of such work are compatible with the current state of academic culture. The closure of the ILA graduate program meant that the core constituency of VSI disappeared and, although small numbers of graduate students in conventional departments remain interested in experimentation, there is not the same urgency in addressing questions of scholarly practice. In many ways, the ILA was an anomaly. The climate of academic professionalization militates against speculative and innovative scholarship. Certainly at Emory, recent changes have strengthened disciplines and removed the conditions that fostered bold and ambitious work – not least because so much of it was animated by the creative energies and intellectual expansiveness of graduate students. It is nowhere more clearly evident than in this special issue.