

# God, Vision, Art, Thought, Society



## There is no “surer way to kill a piece of research,”

Roland Barthes once wrote, “and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method.” This seminar will adopt Barthes’s skepticism as its governing method of methods and use it to raise the question of the value of art history and critical inquiry more broadly in our changing world. The class, thus, is not designed to provide a menu of methods to choose from as if they were academic brand names or club identities, nor is it meant to be a primer in one or several of such choices. Instead, we will consider the question of method more simply as a means for problem-solving. Your task for this seminar, thus, will not be to learn new methods or bone up on old ones but instead to evaluate what the problem is, who it besets and what solution is being proposed; that is, you will need to raise the questions of method and aim together, as if they were inseparable. Since aim does not reduce well to methodological categories (what, after all, would one want, need, or demand as an art historian qua art historian or cultural critic qua cultural critic much less as, say, a formalist qua formalist or semiotician qua semiotician?) we will thus be forced to consider method according to larger criteria: What is the value of our undertaking for our public? Or, to state the same question differently: What is the service that we provide? These questions will be raised with a range of disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches in mind, of course, but our primary goal will be to address them to the humanities and social science generally, to critical inquiry more broadly, and to human self-understanding more widely still.

To that end our seminar’s project will be twofold: for half the term, we will review the philosophical foundations of Art History and its cognate disciplines by taking up core texts by Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; for the other half we will address the freighted question of method directly through a series of case studies that speak to the pressing and vexing historical relations between the terms in our working title: God, Vision, Art, Thought, Society.