Images and pictures are the subjects of an enormous literature, little of which articulates what might make visual objects different from written objects. Few critics, historians, or philosophers develop theories of the visual, or of visual objects; most work empirically, relying on received accounts for foundational conceptualizations of what visual objects are and how they create meaning. As a result, academia and the art world tend to operate pragmatically, assuming that the nature of the visual is well understood. Foundational issues remain unexplored: What are the optimal accounts of what visual objects are, and how they create meaning? What is the effect of deferring work on the nature of images, even as the literature on them builds exponentially? This lecture is a survey of the principal theories and problems and the current state of visual studies.

James Elkins is currently E.C. Chadbourne Chair in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His writing focuses on the history and theory of images in art, science, and nature. Some of his books are exclusively on fine art, What Painting Is (Routledge, 2000), and Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? (Routledge, 1999). Others include scientific and non-art images, writing systems, and archaeology, The Domain of Images (Cornell University Press, 2001), On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them (Cambridge University Press, 1998), and some are about natural history, How to Use Your Eyes (Routledge, 2000).

Current projects include a series called the Stone Summer Theory Institutes, a book called The Project of Painting: 1900-2000, and a series called Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Art.

James Elkins

What is an Image? – Unsolved Problems

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Graduiertenkolleg Schriftbildlichkeit (FU Berlin)
www.schriftbildlichkeit.de
contact: Mark Halawa.
halawa@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Graduiertenkolleg Sichtbarkeit und Sichtbarmachung (Universität Potsdam)
www.uni-potsdam.de/visibility
contact: Lenore Hipper.
lenore.hipper@uni-potsdam.de