

Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach to Visual Rhetorics,

by Laurie E. Gries. Logan: Utah State UP, 2015. 324 pp.

Reviewed by Ben Harley, University of South Carolina

Despite the recent proliferation of new materialist scholarship in rhetoric and composition, little of this work has focused on the field of visual rhetorics. While works such as Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites's *No Caption Needed* and Lester Olson's *Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community* have invigorated discussion about the ways images contribute to public life, such studies have lacked replicable methods and methodologies. Laurie E. Gries's *Still Life with Rhetoric* remedies this problem by providing a theoretically informed and methodically sound engagement with the rhetorical image of *Obama Hope*, an image that gained national prominence during the 2008 presidential election. Written in three sections—a theoretical justification, a comprehensive methodology, and a case study—*Still Life* not only creates a new materialist methodology for visual rhetorics but also demonstrates how new materialism can enable scholars to understand images as important members of the political and social communities in which they exist, thus shifting the focus of visual analysis from questions of what images represent to questions of how images coproduce the world.

Still Life begins with a discussion of the theoretical commitments upon which Gries's book is built. As her subtitle makes clear, the book is founded on new materialist theories espoused in works such as Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple*, Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. However, this book is still firmly rooted in the field of rhetoric and composition. In addition to taking inspiration from the scholarship of new materialist rhetoricians such as Kevin Porter's *Meaning, Language, and Time*, Louise Wetherbee Phelps's *Composition as a Human Science*, and Jenny Edbauer Rice's "Unframing Models of Public Distribution," Gries frames her entire project as an extension of the process movement. She writes, "while we think of composing as a process, we still think of composed matter as static, stable things [. . .] As a consequence of this static model, we often refrain from accounting for the constant yet often-unpredictable change and movement that discourse experiences" (25). Exploration of the change and movement that discourse experiences—the ways discourse both affects and is affected by the material world in which it moves—is at the heart of this book. Gries believes that discourse, and specifically images, are important rhetorical actors. They are entangled in relations with human and nonhuman actors and they act within these entanglements to "induce change in thought, feeling,

and action; organize and maintain collective formation; [and] exert power” (11). Gries argues that an image’s ability to create change goes beyond how it was composed; objects exceed both their creators and the rhetorical situations for which they were created and go on to circulate in different communities, affect other actants, and develop their own identities. Images are agential and help to (re)assemble the worlds in which they live and circulate. However, Gries does not simply argue these beliefs; instead, she articulates both a new methodology and a new method for visual analysis that will validate them.

The second section of *Still Life* begins with Gries’s discussion of a methodology for visual rhetoric that is not concerned with representation but rather is concerned with the “dynamic movement of matter and the vital contributions it makes to collective life” (85). This concern is rooted in six theoretical new materialist principles—becoming, transformation, consequentiality, vitality, agency, and virality—which Gries transforms into three more practical methodological guideposts: following, tracing, and embracing uncertainty. In other words, Gries’s methodology asks a new materialist visual rhetorician to choose an object of study; to follow its nonlinear path through the world, including its various transformations; to trace the effects caused by its various intra-actions with other actants in the world; and all the while to embrace uncertainty by suspending interpretation so as not to miss alternative possibilities. Gries collects these methodological principles into one concrete method that she calls *iconographic tracking*. Iconographic tracking takes place in four stages, though Gries points out that the stages often intersect and overlap. During the first stage, which she occasionally refers to as the *data-hording* stage, the researcher finds as many instances of the image and discussions of the image as she can and saves them onto a hard drive. In order to find the most images possible, Gries encourages researchers to use multiple computers during this phase to avoid filter bubbles. During the second stage, the researcher looks at the instances and discussions she has collected and organizes them into categories. These categories should not be predetermined but rather should emerge organically from the data set. During the third stage, the researcher does more narrow research utilizing the names of her data sets in her search terms. Finally, during the fourth stage, the researcher conducts a close study of specific communities in which the image has intra-acted. In this last phase, the researcher must be careful to attend to the material processes of the image, of which Gries lists seven: composition, production, transformation, circulation, distribution, collectivity, and consequentiality. These processes speak to both what allows the image to effect change and how it does so. Attending to these processes is a rather thorough final step for an already rigorous method, but Gries does not shy away from its demands in her own research, as becomes clear in the third section.

The third and last section of *Still Life* demonstrates Gries's method by providing four distinct histories of the classic red, white, and blue Obama campaign poster created by Shephard Fairey for the 2008 presidential campaign—*Obama Hope*. The first of these histories tells the traditional story of how the poster was created and circulated. She discusses the ways in which it went viral, inspired people, and helped Obama win the presidency. The second history discusses the way *Obama Hope* was actually produced, the debate over what photo was manipulated to make it, and the ensuing battles over copyright and fair use. Gries points out that these events not only created legal battles, but also inspired conversations about copyright law and made the image one of the most prominent teaching tools for copyright and media literacy courses across the United States. The third history focuses on how the image was monetized, parodied, and satirized. Gries demonstrates how the image was used to sell products in Africa, to make fun of the zombie craze in America, and to make arguments about Obama himself. The final history discusses how the image and its style have been repurposed for other social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, and Greenpeace. Gries points out that the politicized nature of the image still has cultural weight around the globe. In keeping with her methodological principles, Gries holds back on interpretation throughout these histories. While each section ends with some analytical interpretation, the histories mostly rely on thick descriptions of the objects through time to explain how the image circulated and the effects it had on the social assemblage.

Gries's choice to foreground description in her histories, as opposed to contextualization and analysis, may strike some readers as peculiar, but this method of scholarly writing has roots in both new materialism and composition and rhetoric. Latour's *Reassembling the Social* and Raúl Sánchez's "Outside the Text" emphasize the importance of description in scholarship. Building on these works, Gries argues that description is the best way to make transparent the complex, multifaceted, and dynamic contributions images make to collective life. She argues that description does not presuppose solutions, belie complexity, or undercut the agency of the image; rather, description allows the image, its associations, and its networks to demonstrate their own complexity and agency. Nonetheless, Gries does acknowledge that there is a tension between the "need to organize an image's collective activities and be faithful to its rhetorical abandon" (102), which is why her four histories end with rhetorical analyses. Analysis is not rejected entirely, but its position in the academic hierarchy is rearranged. This rearrangement will be uncomfortable for some readers because by questioning the hierarchy that exists between analysis and description, Gries also questions the hierarchy that exists between the researcher and the object of study. She asks that visual rhetoricians stop undercutting the complexity of images by jumping to analysis and explanation; she asks us to trust the objects we study.

Because of the methodical relationship Gries cultivates with her object of study, *Still Life* both explains how an iconic image of a senator from Illinois came to have a massive cultural, political, and social impact and demonstrates how rigorous research that follows an image, traces its associations, and embraces the unexpected can be utilized to answer important questions about the agency and effects of images in the twenty-first century. The book is simultaneously an interesting case study and an example of how to mobilize complex theory through rigorous methods. In no small part because of this dual nature, *Still Life* is, and will continue to be, an important book for anyone in the field of rhetoric interested in new materialism, vitalism, circulation, object-oriented ontology, or visual rhetorics. This book explains and contributes to an academic theory, provides a methodology and method for investigating that theory, and then executes that method. In short, it succeeds in all aspects of rhetorical scholarship and will serve as both a touchstone and exemplar of the field for years to come. To put it in Gries's language, this book is an object that has the ability to reassemble the network of which it is a part in meaningful and unexpected ways.

Columbia, South Carolina

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