I am an art historian. The twentieth-century French avant-garde—think early abstraction and Cubism—and its multimedia manifestations are where I cut my scholarly teeth. Thus, I have a taste for innovation that both encourages me to be open to things I haven’t seen before and a tendency to overestimate the excitement of originality. This is undoubtedly what led me to Instagram. With a small child and a teaching position at a large Midwestern public university, I found myself actively desiring new and different visual experiences. On my own in an urban environment, I would satisfy this longing by going to museums and galleries and/or engaging in window-shopping and people-watching. Stuck in the snow with an infant on my lap, I turned to Instagram. It was fascinating, worrying, time-consuming, instantaneous, exciting, comforting, and something akin to but fundamentally different from the kinds of viewing that had been my work and my hobby up until this point.
So, I began to compare and contrast. Using the brilliant but flawed ur-
technique of art history, I began to understand that practices on Insta-
gram ran counter to some of the most widely held assumptions about
art and thus suggested the emergence of alternative conceptions of
images. Distinctions between maker and object, original and appropri-
ated, and viewer and creator are blurred on the platform. While these
are not unprecedented phenomena, their prevalence is new, as is the size
and makeup of their audience. Just as interesting and troubling were the
continuities, including the objectification of female-identifying human
beings, conspicuous consumption, and a connoisseurial devotion to
genius. It is the results of these comparisons that I present here.

So, this is a book about Instagram and art. However, art in this case is
neither a collection of the most beautiful products of human creation
nor a set of techniques for making painting or sculpture. It is an odd cate-
ogy that, despite the fact that it varies based on culture and time
period, leads people to treat certain objects differently than others.
When human beings collectively and often unconsciously devise a series
of rules about what art should be and what should be done with it, they
are not revealing the ontological nature of art. They are unveiling their
concepts, beliefs, social structures, and aesthetics. In short, when we
regard certain images or objects as special, it is our own particular (and
often problematic) set of values that we are actually celebrating. Insta-
gram is quite obviously a way of treating pictures differently. Like muse-
ums and illustrated books, it is a display of images that simultaneously
opens up new vistas and limits what can be seen. It has a set of implicit
aesthetic canons and unspoken tenets about how, when, and what
should be presented. As in all forms of art, there are more and less
esteemed examples as well as different ways of appreciating them.

Like Cubism and abstraction, Instagram is revising our expectations
of images. It does not completely eschew pictorial traditions, but it does
rearrange them enough to prompt a number of questions about what
we want from images today. Thus, this is a book about how Instagram
is affecting viewing and making. It is not a sociological or demographic report. Nor is it a complaint about what social media are doing to us or an ode to the possibilities of technology. This is something closer to a phenomenological account, but one that seeks to situate the experience of Instagram into cultural and historical frameworks. It describes what and how we see on Instagram and relates those experiences to earlier modes. All of which is to say, Appreciation Post is an art history of Instagram in which I will turn some of the theoretical tools of our trade onto a new visual experience in order to call attention to a few of the ways it is changing how we create, view, and understand images. Taking its place in the long tradition of art historical studies that reveal cultural values, it will show how Instagram gives visual form to our culture’s interest in surface interactions with vast amounts of information, its belief in the power of attractiveness, and the continuation of cults of genius and collecting.

ART HISTORY, REALLY?

Art history, it needs to be said, has a history of being bound to problematic ideas and thus complicit in their real-world consequences. From its origins in the work of Giorgio Vasari and even its precursors in the Classical tradition, historicizing art involved defining who could and couldn’t be called an artist, endowing these people with outsized power including the right to break with cultural norms, and making claims for the superiority of certain geographical terrains over others. These themes continued as the field became an established academic discipline in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tied explicitly to Hegelian notions of history and thus implicitly to the cultural hierarchies used to justify colonialism and fascism, art history also consecrated misogyny and abetted class bias. For much of the twentieth century knowledge of the history of art was seen as a sign of being “cultured,” that is, privileged enough to have an elite education.
It was, therefore, a tool of hegemony, bolstering racism, sexism, and classism. Furthermore, this purportedly disinterested aesthetic endeavor had (and continues to have) real ties to the market. The monetary value of works of art is often determined by art historical studies (provenance, authentication) and increased by scholarly endeavors like monographs and exhibitions.2 Indeed, art history is entangled with not only the ordinary evils of capitalism, but also various illicit trades that use works of art as collateral.3

Yet art history has also repeatedly reckoned with itself, using its techniques to question cultural hierarchies and revising its methods to become more inclusive. There have been so many “new” art histories that the discipline’s historiography remains a vibrant subfield. Key expansions and revisions include: shifts from individual masters to cultural production, the incorporation of new styles and their aesthetic values, widening the geographic purview of the discipline and narrating the influences and exchanges between cultures, investigating the roles of class and economics in the production and reception of art, feminist interrogation of the discipline’s methods and objects of study, methodological exchanges with other disciplines like literary studies and anthropology, broadening the types of works art historians look at via notions of visual culture, attempts to counter the Whiteness of the discourse, and interrogations of the relationship between the environment and art. While these shifts can be linked to specific moments, they are also ongoing themes that are revisited regularly. This is not to say that the important political and intellectual work associated with these questions is by any means done. Indeed, we are now experiencing yet another call for a new art history, one that can be experienced as both a continuation and a break.

To paraphrase Michel Foucault, disciplines discipline.4 Academic fields establish rules that govern how knowledge will be created and judged, including who can do that work and what they can work on. This renders the academy rather conservative and turns many educa-
tional milestones into gatekeeping activities. However, the clarity of these conventions also provides a roadmap for how they can be broken. Since approximately the 1970s this questioning of disciplines has led to the creation of interdisciplinary fields that more often than not go by [category name] studies. Sometimes based in geography (American studies, Asian studies), at others focused on identities (Black studies; women’s studies; cultural, i.e. class, studies), and even directed towards specific media (film studies, digital studies), they concentrate on specific, though often contentiously defined, subject matter and incorporate a wide variety of methodological approaches. While the academic disciplinary imperative to determine canons and regulate information still affects these programs, they are also charged with the obligation to elude and expand the constraints of more established fields. That in turn has led some scholars to reformulate traditional academic disciplines using the studies model, which has led to fields like literary studies and religious studies.

Alongside this reorganization of the academy, scholars trained in many different disciplines have begun discussing images in what has been called “the visual turn.” Art historians have found themselves with dual and even primary appointments in other fields. There have also been attempts to establish Visual Studies as an interdisciplinary assembly of examinations of what we can see and thus an alternative to art history. Yet the sheer number of departments that are now named with various combinations of “art history” and “visual studies” or “visual culture” belies the notion of a clear split. Furthermore, the traditional organization of art history into subfields based in geography and time (Renaissance Italy, medieval Japan) has been undermined by both the external pressures of the studies model and internal methodological questions. In this complex terrain, it seems more appropriate to speak of histories of art; yet that also raises the question of the discipline’s viability as an independent department. Such situations are often referred to as crises in part because while to the lay public they
are quibbles over names, these distinctions have a practical impact on the lives of professional academics in that they determine the availability of jobs and research funding.

So, what is to be done with art history? While I often encounter art historians interested in maintaining traditions, those who ask questions like “but is that (good) art” or “where did this person go to school,” there are also many art historians for whom this kind of education has been a liberatory process. My continuing training has involved a series of encounters with difference in a setting that has encouraged not just deep research into other cultures but also a willingness to teach myself to see things differently. Art history was always already interdisciplinary through its links to biography, text, and various histories as well as its baseline imperative to verbalize the visual. I have also been at this for long enough to know that what is happening in contemporary culture will filter into the kinds of histories that can be written. In short, art history has taught me to look and see more by getting me to question my own cultural assumptions.

*Appreciation Post* is a contribution to that ever-expanding art history. In particular, it situates itself within the tradition of visual culture studies while recognizing that the various culturally informed methods for defining and critiquing art help to construct identities and meanings. Asking readers to treat Instagram as a serious cultural product and to engage in the process of interpreting it, like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century arguments for including Roman and Gothic art in the canon, will likely to be seen as contentious to some. More importantly, it will prompt reflections on art historical methods and other types of art. To put it another way, there has always been a vanguard of art historians interested in studies that provide new answers to the question “what is art?” The polemic you are about to read proposes that Instagram might be an answer to that inquiry and traces the implications of that classification for both contemporary culture and the “new” art history.
ART HISTORY AND . . .

One of the things that art history today must do is continue to expand its transdisciplinarity by interrogating not only what it can learn from other disciplines but also what it can contribute to them. While there are long-established connections between art history and geographical area studies, cultural studies, media studies, communications, and Black and queer studies have yet to establish clear relationships. This is not to say that no work is being done at the intersections of art history and these other fields, but simply that they are still spaces where there is terrain to be mapped. The longstanding women’s studies–art history discourse offers a model for thinking about how exchanges with these fields might yield insights that develop into ongoing and generous conversations. Scholarship in this area has been driven by a clear political project and thus has focused on including new objects of study (new artists and new media), critiquing implicit methodological biases, and developing or recognizing new theoretical perspectives. It has directly engaged with contemporary experience even when looking to the past and it has interacted, sometimes critically, with the social sciences. While also subject to conservative academic and social lures, women’s studies, including its art historical branch, has also learned from criticism of its racial, class, and heteronormative biases in a way that renders internalizing such critiques fundamental to full awareness of the subject. It is a mental space where it is possible to learn about difference if one is willing to listen, and it’s one in which art historians have repeatedly highlighted the ways identity and the interpretation of the visual are mutually constituted. It has been foundational to my thinking about this topic and many others.

Coalition, gratitude, service, self-reflection, and sometimes critique form the signposts of Appreciation Post’s relations with other disciplines. I will sketch a few of those dynamics here in order to help readers find them in the body of this text.
Meeting these interlocking but disparate fields at the point where they engage with not only the study of culture but how people interact with it, *Appreciation Post* is deeply influenced by the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, Michel de Certeau, Dick Hebdige, John Fiske, and Stuart Hall, each of whom described not only the power dynamics of cultural production but also how the audience recrafts that material in response. The idea of an active, meaning-producing audience is central to any understanding of social media. Instagram makes this form of participation visual and as such it demands methods for understanding the construction of images, ones that art history has at the ready. These include an awareness of how the formal elements of pictures convey meaning as well as a set of techniques for discussing references to other works. However, the most important methodological contribution the history of art has to offer these kinds of studies is the discipline’s nuanced approach to the scale of artistic production. Even in its most traditional forms, art history addresses the complexities of how to group objects of study, including the reality that categories must interact and overlap. It moves from individual work to artistic oeuvre, which is sometimes subdivided by time, to geographical and/or temporal division, which might be a neighborhood and year or a continent and century, or anywhere in between. Then it addresses examples of influence, continuity, and departure. In the process any one thing we are looking at becomes both highly specific and embedded in a network of historical relations. Even as some pieces are presented as paradigmatic examples of a given style, others are brought forth as outliers and alternatives capable of sparking new developments. In short, art history problematizes cultural generalizations even as it makes arguments for these kinds of categorizations, and thus it offers cultural studies methods for addressing the relation between the individual and the grouping that desolidify its ideas of (sub)culture.
At the same time, these fields nudge art history away from its reliance on institutional accreditation when deciding who qualifies as an artist and is therefore deemed worthy of study. Turning attention away from the museum and gallery with their hegemonic projects and towards other kinds of production is an essential part of unwinding the biases of the discipline and the concept of art. To do so with cultural studies in mind is to also avoid the traps of the “folk” or “outsider” artist by insisting that everyone is engaged with cultural meanings and embedded in power dynamics. Angela McRobbie’s *Be Creative* and Brooke Erin Duffy’s *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love* are essential to this study’s conception of the artistic work done by Instagrammers. Both describe the coincidence of labor, artistic expression, and classed and gendered oppression in today’s new economy. Emphasizing the paradoxical centering and denial of the underpaid feminine or feminized “creator,” they highlight how the fictions of artistic work help construct contemporary hierarchies. This study will add to that understanding by paying close attention to what is being made by these creators in order to describe both the pleasures of making and messages they construct. As the many references to those texts and related studies within *Appreciation Post* should demonstrate, treating Instagrammers as artists is not a denial of economic realities—indeed, despite the mythologies, traditional artists are just as bound to the market—but a way of holding up a magnifying glass to the microphysics of various forms of power and recompense.

... Psychology and Economics

It is the notion of audience artistic agency and complex motivations that separates *Appreciation Post* from the large psychological and economic literature on Instagram. While it is undoubtedly true that mental health effects and economic incentives are produced by Instagram, their discussion is typically based on a unilateral idea of transmission
from platform to user without discussion of the ways the experience is subjectivized or the forms of pleasure that might encourage use even in the face of negative effects. Taking a broader cultural approach, one that addresses the meaning produced by users, *Appreciation Post* will help visualize and thus conceptualize the structure of forces at work on Instagram. In turn, that will allow for a more nuanced evaluation of its healthiness and value.

. . . Technology and Digital Studies

Science and technology studies (STS) and digital studies offer alternatives to the idea that science is purely objective and technology is deterministic by addressing the sociology of work in those fields and providing histories of particular innovations that deemphasize notions of inevitability and progress. The concept that science and technology are social, established by these fields, is foundational to this study. In that regard, Donna Haraway, Peter Gallison, and Lorraine Daston inspired its attention to ideological issues that arise in the coming together of humans and technology.9 Furthermore, *Appreciation Post* is a contribution to an emerging subfield that takes humanistic approaches to technology by treating it as a cultural product and source of cultural meaning.10 As with the other social sciences discussed above, this shift involves actively discussing the interpretation of individual or groups of objects in ways that show how each is constructed within the work as well as by the context. That critical reading or looking in turn helps foster an awareness of the messages present in a given historical situation and a skepticism about accepting them at face value.

. . . Black and Queer Studies

On a parallel track Black studies and queer studies, like women’s or gender studies, have shown that identity deeply influences both pro-
duction and interpretation. By bringing to the fore voices that have been unheard or underappreciated as well as demonstrating the biases embedded in nearly every established form of scholarly narrative, these fields reveal the multiplicity of cultural values and the necessity of addressing how the interpretation of the visual is culturally constructed in tandem with race, sexual orientation, gender, and class. In these areas Appreciation Post is particularly indebted to Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Whitney Davis, and Christopher Reed. By dealing with Instagram, which often produces new configurations of social groups, this book also addresses the ways the codes of one group can be misread, misapplied and even repurposed by others.

One of the contentions of this study is that methodological shifts and changes in the objects of study not only go hand in hand, they push and pull each other. That is why Appreciation Post simultaneously turns art history towards Instagram and views art history through Instagram. In doing so, it will ask a set of seemingly straightforward but ultimately thorny questions about both, including . . .

WHAT IS INSTAGRAM?

In October of 2010, Instagram was first presented to the world as an iPhone app. “App” is a small word for what are often highly limited bits of software that allow smartphones to perform some activity or another. In many ways, apps have replaced reference books. They are dictionaries, travel guides, journals, maps, lists of calories, events, tasks. Alternately, they are games and minor diversions. Of course, there are also more practical applications; however, they tend to take the form of mobile versions of the software we use on our computers. These allow access to email, documents, and the internet in order to continue the work we do in other places. Instagram seems categorically different from these modes. Certainly, it provides amusement; sometimes it even delivers information; and it is a way of managing
products and relationships. Yet what is striking about Instagram, along-
side other forms of social media, is the way it erases the lines between
professional and personal, public and private, commerce and recrea-
tion. Furthermore, that refusal of boundaries in turn creates new forms
of work that do not get applied to our lives so much as they radically
overhaul them.14

What sets Instagram apart from other social media is that it is
largely, though not exclusively, a photographic phenomenon.15 Yet
unlike the film-based version of photography around which the
medium was theorized, Instagram’s photos exist entirely in a digital
landscape. This shift undermines whatever was left of the notion that
photography is indexical, which is to say that it has a direct physical
connection to the real. Given the fact that now almost every photogra-
pher has the capacity to manipulate digital images, what is left of the
automatic nature of photography is simply a set of formal, cultural
signs that convey a sense of “realness.”16

Yet Instagram has become something more than simply a collection
of images. The technical jargon for this more expansive presence in
people’s everyday lives is “platform,” understood to be a program or
app that functions as a gateway and means of organizing other pro-
grams and apps. While not a theoretical framework, the idea that Insta-
gram is a platform is important for understanding the ways it
incorporates other social networks (Twitter, Facebook) as well as web-
sites. The notion of a platform calls attention to the fact that Instagram
is not self-contained. It also highlights the disciplinary qualities of its
functionality in that certain combinations are easy (shopping) while
others (getting a full news story) require multiple clicks and an exter-
nal program. Elisa Serafinelli identifies the moment when Instagram
transformed from app to platform as April 9, 2012, the day it was bought
by Facebook.17 This highlights the larger framework of controls and
shows that Instagram has been integrated into some of Facebook’s
techniques and practices. It also reminds us that Instagram is in com-