


# IN MEMORY OF MICHAEL F. ZIMMERMANN (1958–2025)

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“Courage!” With this simple yet profound encouragement, Michael Zimmermann would urge us on upon departures from intense and inspiring discussion with his overwhelmingly capturing smile. Have courage: to speak, to keep speaking, especially – and perhaps precisely – within a discipline still often bound by the status quo of methods and conventions as art history is. His exhortation always echoed the Horatian motto Kant famously translated as “*Sapere aude* – Have the courage to use your own understanding”.

Unexpectedly, the scholarly community has lost in Michael Zimmermann an enthusiastic art historian, an original thinker, a tireless initiator of debates, and a singularly warm-hearted colleague. With his passing, also this journal *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual. Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte und visuellen Kultur* loses an indefatigable advocate for methodological renewal and cultural expansion whose intellectual curiosity and critical energy will continue to shape our work.

Michael F. Zimmermann was born in 1958 in Münster, Westphalia. He studied art history, philosophy, and history at the University of Cologne, complementing his studies with extended stays abroad – first in Rome at the Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max Planck Institute for Art History) and at La Sapienza University, then in Paris at the Sorbonne. In 1985, he received his doctorate with a seminal dissertation on *Seurat. Sein Werk und die kunsttheoretische Debatte seiner Zeit*, which has since been translated into several languages and remains widely cited.<sup>1</sup>

Following his doctorate, Michael worked as a research assistant at the Freie Universität Berlin and at the German Art Historical Institute in Florence. His academic reputation soon led to a leadership position: in 1991, he became Second Director of the Central Institute for Art History in Munich, where he not only guided the institute’s development but also advanced his research on the relationship between media, painting, and national identity in modern

<sup>1</sup>

Michael F. Zimmermann, *Seurat. Sein Werk und die kunsttheoretische Debatte seiner Zeit*, Weinheim 1991; also: *Seurat and the Art Theory of His Time*, Antwerp 1991; *Les mondes de Seurat. Son œuvre et le débat artistique de son temps*, Paris 1991; *Seurat en de kunsttheorie van zijn tijd*, Antwerp 1991.

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Michael F. Zimmermann (1958–2025) © [Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt](#)  
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Italy. This work culminated in his Habilitation, *Industrialisierung der Phantasie. Malerei, illustrierte Presse und das Mediensystem der Künste in Italien, 1875–1900* (*The Industrialization of the Imagination. The Formation of Modern Italy and the Media System of the Arts, 1875–1900*), published in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Zimmermann's international visibility continued to thrive. In 2001, through a competitive selection process, he was nominated by the Conseil National des Universités as a qualified candidate for French professorships. That same year, he held visiting appointments at the University of Paris X and served as Robert Sterling Clark Visiting Professor at Williams College in Massachusetts. By 2002, he had accepted a professorship in Modern and Contemporary Art History at the Université de Lausanne. Two years later, he took up the Chair of Art History at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt – a role he held with passion and distinction for more than two decades. Even while based in Eichstätt, he remained deeply engaged with academic communities across Europe, holding visiting professorships and giving guest lectures in Amsterdam, Berlin, Milan, Paris, Pisa, Trento, and other centers of art historical research.

Michael's research interests spanned the visual arts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in France, Italy, and Germany. Artists such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Caspar David Friedrich, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, Vincent Van Gogh, and Claude Monet figure prominently in his writings. Inspired by his exchanges with Robert Herbert, he set out to explore the art of Impressionism through fresh approaches that connected it to the history of science, theories of perception, and, importantly, to the vibrant contemporary debates that shaped painting in late nineteenth-century France. He not only infused the research on Impressionism with insights into the social and political context of the time but also delved into both historical and contemporary theories of the image. Among his major works are *Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts. Realismus – Impressionismus – Symbolismus*, the above-mentioned *Industrialisierung der Phantasie*, and an insightful monograph on Lovis Corinth and countless book chapters, essays and reviews in prestigious anthologies and international journals of art history and art criticism.<sup>3</sup>

In his nuanced study *Artistic Self-Discovery Beyond Influence*, Zimmermann used the example of Manet to demonstrate that artistic originality does not simply emerge from the “influence” of historical precedents. Instead, he understood the deliberate and often contradictory appropriation of past visual languages as a strategy of

<sup>2</sup>

Id., *Industrialisierung der Phantasie. Malerei, illustrierte Presse und das Mediensystem der Künste in Italien, 1875–1900*, Berlin 2006.

<sup>3</sup>

Id., *Die Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts. Naturalismus – Impressionismus – Symbolismus*, Munich <sup>2</sup>2020 [2011]; id., *Lovis Corinth*, Munich 2008.



Georges Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884, oil on canvas, 201 × 300 cm, London, National Gallery (and details). Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#), in the public domain (July 10, 2025).



modern self-positioning.<sup>4</sup> By referencing the painting of Velázquez, for instance, Manet developed an autonomous and historically conscious artistic identity – an approach that shaped Zimmermann's own reflections on the dialectic between tradition and innovation. To place contemporary visual practices in conversation with currents of art history was not only one of his passions; time and again, he succeeded in illuminating how visual cultures – then and now – speak to one another and continue to shape our ways of seeing. In his essay *Selfies as Self-Caricature* (2019), Zimmermann interpreted contemporary selfies not merely as expressions of narcissistic self-display but as playful experiments with masks, roles, and staged identities.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the image culture of social media, he showed how strategies of self-promotion and ironic masquerade echo earlier traditions of artistic self-portraiture – extending back to Gustave Courbet's self-stylizations. In this way, he found deep satisfaction in connecting contemporary analysis with historical depth.

With a keen sensibility for visual phenomena and always guided by close looking, Michael wrote on artists ranging from monographic approaches to Seurat, Courbet or Van Gogh to philosophical trajectories of time, to Hermann von Helmholtz's scientific experiments and their relation to Paul Cézanne's studies of vision, from Jean-Luc-Nancy to Allan Sekula's practice and theory of documentation as dialogue, from contemporary selfie-culture to the political dimensions of Adam Szymczyk's *documenta 14*. Michael Zimmermann's writing unfolded perspectives that spanned precise analyses of single works, reflections on visual theory, film, and socially engaged artistic practices – always reaching into philosophical thought and history of science that passionately pushed the boundaries of conventional scholarship.

His intellectual reach extended far beyond art history alone. With an acute awareness of the questions of our time, and deep familiarity with cultural and philosophical debates, he continually brought concerns about the pressing issues of our present into our shared discourses. His insightful engagement with the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, which he explored alongside his early engagement with Michel Foucault – whose lectures he had himself attended at the Collège de France in 1981/82 – are just a few examples of how masterfully he introduced philosophy and the French school of Deconstructivism to art history while bridging disciplines and generations of thought, with as much profound knowledge as playfully and with a creative impetus towards expanding the repertoire of our discipline's methods.

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Id., 'Künstlerische Selbstfindung jenseits von Einflüssen. Manet und Velásquez, „Maler der Maler“, in: Ulrich Pfisterer and Christine Tauber (eds.), *Einfluss, Strömung, Quelle. Aquatische Metaphern der Kunstgeschichte*, Bielefeld 2018, 97–137 (June 29, 2025).

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Id., 'Courbet als Assyrer. Selbst-Karikatur und Self-Fashioning im Dialog mit Baudelaire, in: *Diaphanes. Kunst-Literatur-Diskurs/Art-Fiction-Discourse* 8/9, 2019, 76–81 (= special issue *Authentizität und Feedback/Authenticity and Feedback*).







Michael Zimmermann was not only a pioneering scholar but also an institutional builder and an inspiring colleague. As co-initiator and founding member of *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* – a journal he helped shape after having significantly revitalized the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* between 2014 and 2019 – he left an indelible mark on the scholarly landscape. Since 2023 he was a member of the editorial leadership team, serving with passion, intellectual generosity, and an unwavering belief in the power of dialogue across disciplines, cultures, and perspectives.

He brought people together: organizing interdisciplinary seminars, workshops, and graduate courses with colleagues past and present, and publishing with them on topics that transcended any single field. As early as the 1990s, in the *Kunstchronik*, he called for a more international and inclusive art history, urging the discipline to integrate East German heritage sites and to engage more fully with Eastern Europe – ideas that prefigured debates that continue to shape the field today. His unwavering commitment to critical discourse was vividly expressed in recent years when he co-authored, among other texts, a debate essay in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*. Taking the remarkable convergence of contemporary art exhibitions in the summer of 2017 – documenta 14 in Kassel, the Skulptur Projekte in Münster, and the Biennale di Venezia – as a point of departure, he reflected on the condition of contemporary art and its capacity to intervene in social and political discourse.<sup>6</sup> For Michael, this was also a call to art historians to acknowledge their own political responsibility and to engage more directly with the ethical challenges posed by today's global realities, rather than retreat into purely retrospective scholarship.

His edited volume *Vision in Motion. Streams of Sensation and Configurations of Time* brought together wide-ranging studies on how vision itself is shaped by time, sensation, and movement – from Berkeley and Goethe to Cézanne, from gesture to cinema, from the physiology of perception to theories by Bergson and Deleuze.<sup>7</sup> Among his many nuanced readings, his essay “Nach-Denk-Bilder. Der Blick auf die Sonne und die Bewegung der Wahrnehmung” stands out as a vivid example of how he made complex ideas about seeing both tangible and deeply engaging, revealing how Robert Delaunay's *formes circulaires* capture perception as a dynamic interplay of presence and memory.<sup>8</sup>

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Ursula Frohne and Michael F. Zimmermann, The Summer of Art 2017, or, The Condition of Art in Times of Political Unrest, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81/2, 2018, 163–169.

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Michael F. Zimmermann, *Vision in Motion. Streams of Sensation and Configurations of Time*, Zurich/Berlin 2016.

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Id., Nach-Denk-Bilder. Der Blick auf die Sonne und die Bewegung der Wahrnehmung, in: Werner Busch and Karolin Meister (eds.), *Nachbilder. Das Gedächtnis des Auges in Kunst und Wissenschaft*, Zurich/Berlin 2011, 173–214, 293–297.











At the KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Michael played a central role in developing the DFG-funded graduate school *Practicing Place – Socio-Cultural Practices and Epistemic Configurations* and served for many years as spokesperson of the master’s program *Aisthesis. Historical Art and Image Discourses* within the *Elitenetzwerk Bayern* – an innovative, interdisciplinary course of study blending cultural and media studies, media sociology, journalism, and hands-on media practice. *Aisthesis* – the ancient Greek word for “perception” – was a perfect emblem for Michael’s commitment to openness, interdisciplinarity, and theoretical boldness. A valued member of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities) since 2008 and the Academia Europaea since 2012, Michael tirelessly championed interdisciplinary research communities, leading working groups on topics from “Fake and Fact in Images” to “Future Values”, always with a keen sense for the ethical, political, and cultural stakes of our time. His programmatic initiation of a series of video conversations on *The Power and Impotence of Images* engaged international colleagues in discussions on the complex interplay between media image production and claims to truth in society.<sup>9</sup> In view of historical and contemporary visual practices that interweave fiction, manipulation, and authenticity – from nineteenth-century photography to today’s digital image cultures and the debates around “fake news”, this still accessible forum of conversations underscores the central role of art history in critically reflecting on the power of images to construct social realities and questioning the notion of objective documentation in times of digital practices of image manipulation.

Above all, Michael was a gifted and generous teacher, beloved by students and doctoral candidates for his intellectual rigor, human warmth, and infectious humor. His lectures and excursions were journeys through cultural and social history, reaching far beyond the traditional boundaries of art history. He gave his students a strong foundation and inspired in them a lasting passion for art.

In his last years, he pursued studies in visual narratology – investigating how images not only show what is but also evoke what unfolds – to explore the sea as a “space of longing, economy, escape, and still life”. Although a non finito project of his rich scholarly repertoire, it stands for his profound belief to be guided by open horizons of thought and for future art histories. Michael Zimmermann’s presence embodied the very spirit of living scholarship: restless, curious, unafraid to challenge complacency, and always brimming with ideas. He never imposed authority but shared it – gently, zugewandt and always eager to make space for others to grow.

The news of his passing has struck us deeply and leaves us with a profound sense of loss. For exactly four decades, I personally had the privilege to enjoy a constant discourse with him and within our editorial team Michael shared his inexhaustible knowledge, profes-

<sup>9</sup>

See the video conversations on the [website](#) of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (June 29, 2025).



sionalism, and kindness since 2019, when he acted as an enthusiastic advocate for the realization of this then unforeseeable adventure. He proved in all his spheres of collaboration and in the widespread network of his activities to be a true colleague, a wholehearted collaborator, and loyal friend. He was a fearless advocate for academic freedom, a brilliant scholar, a charismatic teacher, and, above all, a warm and generous spirit whose presence enriched our academic lives in countless ways. His untimely departure leaves behind unfinished thoughts and projects, and a community that will feel his absence for a long time to come.

We honor his memory by living his courage, his openness, and his unshakeable belief that dialogue is at the very heart of scholarship and humanness. Michael will be missed more than words can say – and in our thoughts, he will always remain close.