FAKE FRIENDS
A Symposium on Art History and Comparison
Princeton University & ICA Philadelphia (29/30 November 2018)

Aby Warburg spoke of working, with his assistants, in a “veritable arena” of tables “on which to lay out the documents... so that we can compare them, and these books and images must be easily and instantly within reach.” But what is within reach in comparison? A major principle in art history’s disciplinary vision at least since Wölfflin, comparison—especially as generator of similitude—has come in for relatively sparse scrutiny.

The modes of similarity under which paired comparanda are assembled should, however, be brought to account. In scrutinizing the many guises of similarity within comparison, this symposium hopes to shuffle likes and unlikes, to generate tickled parallels and troubled parallaxes. We invite incursions into the core of the analogical drive and provocative eruptions thereof: comparisons paranoid, antiformal, metaleptic, speculative, amnesiac, even repa(i)rative.

In hoping to move art history’s epistemic stereoscope beyond contextual explication or (pseudo-)morphology, we aim to recalibrate our twin machine of comparison. This task is especially urgent in the long shadow of the discipline’s so-called global turn. Bitter contests over commensurability anticipate the strange promise of a “decolonized” institutional art history to come—from rhetoric of emancipation to boardroom mirage, a puddled optimism of the intellect.

Various recent bids for the “global modern” in the West and its proxies have presented one case for retuning comparison, or at least retooling its terms. Newly capacious histories make fast friends, yet they may also abet what Jalal Toufic, canalizing The Merchant of Venice, termed the “revengeful logic of similarity.” This tension arises in many disciplinary contexts and times.

Neither revanchist nor revisionist, we draw up this old problem to raise it to the methodological challenges of our fraught disciplinary, institutional, and political occasion(s). In making this appeal we echo Nanette Solomon’s still-resonant call to not only challenge but change the “rules” of art history’s “game.” More modestly, we hope to offer an arena in which diverse and divergent practitioners might share notes and exchange positions on (and in) comparison.

We welcome abstracts or other pitches of no longer than 300 words by 15 September 2018. Presentations should not exceed 15 minutes; substantial time will be reserved for discussion at the end of each panel. The symposium is open to scholars and graduate students in any discipline as well as artists, critics, or curators. Funding is available to fully support the travel and lodging of invitees. Please address proposals and correspondence to co-organizers Mostafa Heddaya and Christopher Barrett-Lennard at fakesymposium@gmail.com.