



Books

A Philosophical and Practical Handbook on the Development of Artistic Ideas

Allan DeSouza's book is both a reflective investigation exploring how artistic meaning takes shape and a functional handbook that clarifies terms often used in the art world without much lucidity.

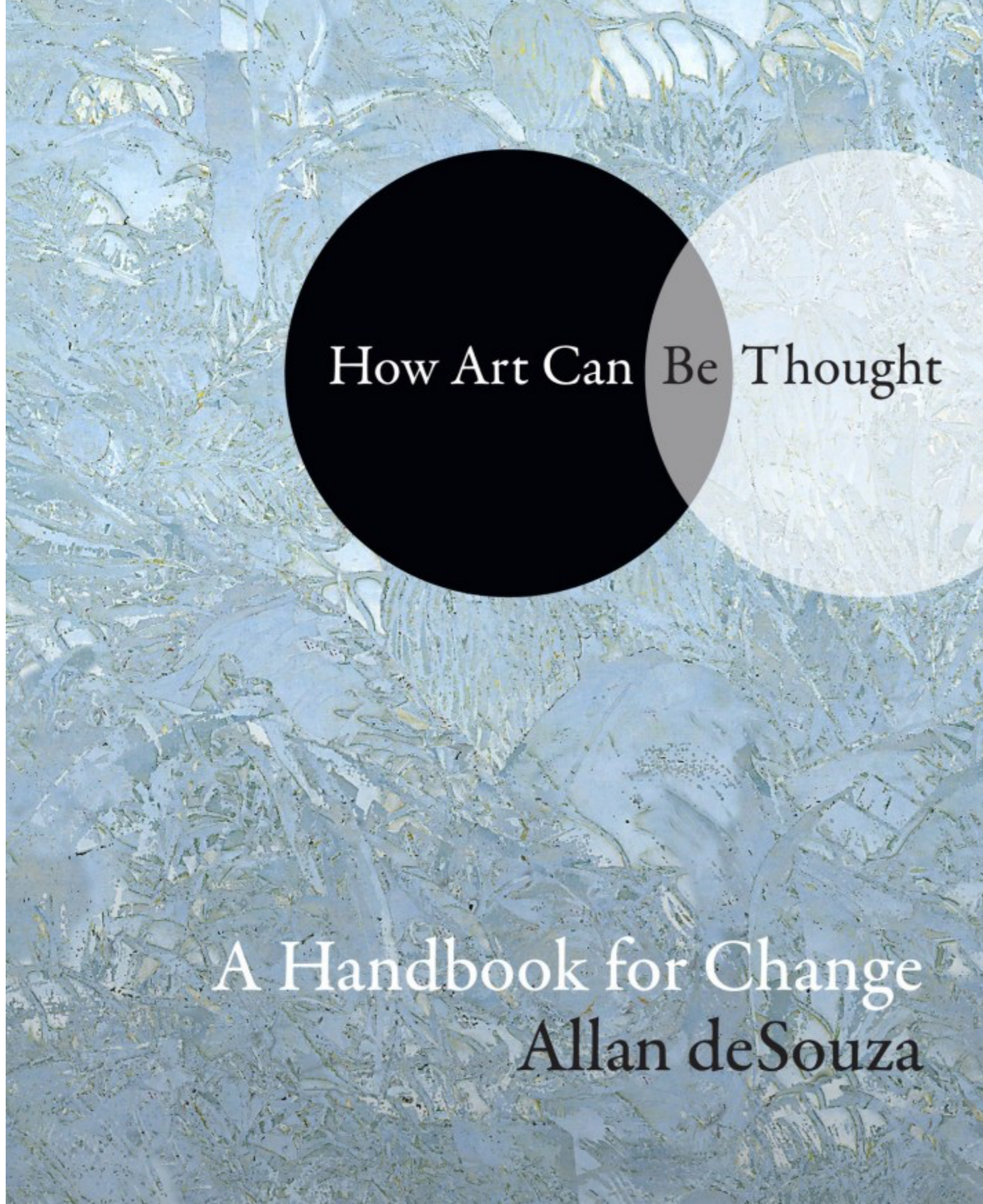
by Alpesh Kantilal Patel
May 14, 2019



Support Hyperallergic's independent arts journalism. [Become a member today](#) »

POPULAR

- When Class Conflict Met Queer Romance
- The Crude, Exhilarating, Watery Worlds of Alfred Wallis
- The Best Books of 2020, According to the New York Public Library
- Required Reading
- Hillbilly Elegy Tries, and Fails, to Understand the Working Class



Front cover *How Art Can Be Thought*

As a contemporary art historian and theorist who has led an MFA program in visual arts (at Florida International University) for half a decade Allan deSouza's book *How Art Can be Thought: A Handbook for Change* is particularly appealing to me. On the one hand, it is a philosophical investigation broadly exploring how artistic meaning takes shape. On the other hand, it is a practical handbook that suggests productive ways of running critiques in art programs (chapter 4) and provides an extensive list of terms often used in the art world without much clarity, with pithy commentary that can be useful to undergraduate and graduate fine arts studio students (chapter 5). Juggling these two aspects of the book — the conceptual and practical, if you will — is no easy task and deSouza does a good job. At the same time, the book is most successful when it functions as “a handbook for change,” the book's subtitle.

In the introduction, he delineates his own genealogy, and along the way his stakes in the arguments of the book:

My diasporic experience, and the very labeling of being “East African Asian” means that I had grown up with ... the necessity of performing multiple positions. I inhabited many worlds: queer, trans and straight; black, South Asian and white; and all kinds of assimilating, oppositional, alternative and “marginalized” groups.

To this list, we can add artist, professor, and administrator — he is currently the chair of the Department of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley. These specific subject positions conjoined with the many worlds (queer, South Asian, etc.) he writes and he inhabits provide him a unique vantage point from which to explore pedagogy, historiography, and the development of artistic ideas.

Implicit in his description above of his experience as “diasporic” is a key intervention of the book: an engagement with related terms such as “colonialism,” “decolonizing,” and “decolonial” that he insists are not meant to address a minority but “all subjected peoples, that is, everyone.” While deSouza does identify two aspects of colonization that he returns to throughout the book in different ways — “control over history (time and memory) and its exertions upon the body (affect and mobility)” — he does not return explicitly to the term “decolonial” as many times as I would have liked to fully explain the sweeping range of his definition of it.

One of the strengths of the book is deSouza's reflection on language — its importance to the project of decolonization and to artistic meaning/expression. For instance, in his first chapter titled “How Art Can be Thought,” (emphasis in original) he provides a definition of “art” from the dictionary and then discusses each and every word in the definition to illustrate the complexity and impossibility of defining art. Instead, he does not so much describe “what art can be but to work toward language to describe what it *does* and *does not do*, how it does that, and what it *can do*” (emphasis in original). At the same time, the following statement gets close to a kind of definition:

How we experience the artwork, what it (potentially) means to us, and how it comes into meaning occur through negotiations of ...complex *intersections* that call for equally complex articulations rather than self-comforting variations of “transcendence” (emphasis in original).

Following on this point, through intersections between the works and the corporeal body of the viewer, the viewer's prior experiences/knowledge, the viewer's assumptions of the artist making the work, and the larger site of viewing (museum, gallery, or art school) the meaning of the artwork can come into being.

He makes a compelling case for working within the institution to effect change — what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would describe as “affirmative sabotage.” For instance, there has been a rise in “alternative” art schools in the West, all of which are valuable in different ways but are often seen in contradistinction to or replacements for traditional MFA programs. Bringing in my own experience as a director/administrator of an MFA program, it is worth exploring how I worked within the institution and *with* an alternative school, specifically the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Miami's Art and Research Center, directed by artist and scholar Gean Moreno. FIU is the state school in Miami and has no budget to bring in the kinds of scholars, theorists and artists ICA does. At the same time, the Art & Research Center was not designed to offer an MFA degree, which is often a bare minimum to qualify to teach at a university level. So, to allow students to get the best of both worlds, those who took an independent research course which involved attending ICA's research center, could effectively garner university credit. My point here is that, as deSouza writes, jettisoning the institution wholesale might be impolitic or misguided. I would add that new alliances and affiliations are necessary rather than the creation of counterpublics.



Allan DeSouza, frontispiece image for *How Art Can Be Thought*

The bulk of the book is a series of alphabetically organized terms, words, and phrases that are often thrown around in the art world: “Form/Formal/Formalism,” “identity politics,” and “affect.” He succinctly and clearly discusses them, often by illustrating how they are not straight forward or simple. For instance, he both describes how paying attention to and logging the colors, lines, shapes, and materials of an artwork is foundational to experiencing and understanding how meaning comes into being. At the same time, he notes that the genealogy of the term “form” in the West is a vexed one — often deployed as disembodied. The book is also not without humor — under “gut feeling” he has simply written “indigestion.” In the footnote he explains how such feelings are hardly every correct and cites recent scientific investigation on the matter. To be clear, this does not mean we should ignore our gut feelings but that from time to time we might want to question the ground upon which they are based.

I personally would like to see a phone app that allows students (and professors) to pull these terms and their “definitions” up during critiques and discussions. Often terms like “identity” come up as self-evident and without complex histories and an app might allow a moment for professors and students alike to reflect in a focused manner. Moreover, students could easily access the terms on their own. This, of course, is not to replace the reading of complex essays that would happen in a critical theory course.

The author's final chapter explores his experience viewing a Rothko painting. At one point, deSouza cogently writes how Rothko's “trailing brushstrokes” become “plumes of smoke” and Rothko's orange become the orange he saw in nighttime explosions of TV. He easily shifts from the metaphysical and the past to the physical world of the recent present and then back again to a different past when he makes formal connections to an 1840 work “The Slave Ship [Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon Coming on]” by J.M. Turner. In the final sentence of the book, he writes:

While still optimistic of art's role in “what it means to be human,” my account is a negotiated refusal: negotiated, since it claims the right to knowledge, pleasure, and experience (in this instance, of Rothko, of late Euro American modernism), and a refusal of assimilation's active forgetting.

This way of thinking overlaps with my own. For instance, my inclusion of Cy Twombly into a transnational South Asian art history is a negotiated refusal, as well: I refuse to forget or disavow my pleasure of modernist art in favor of an essentialized understanding of “South Asian.”

My sense is that students as they begin to explore his lexicon of terms will over time begin to practice his theory before they fully understand it. Of course, practicing what one has learned before fully grasping the nuances of the knowledge imparted is not so different than how information in general is transferred between student and teacher in the classroom. There are two key differences, though, built into deSouza's approach to pedagogy: a rigorous, active questioning of accepted norms rather than a blind acceptance of them, as well as a refusal to jettison the past wholesale.

How Art Can Be Thought: A Handbook for Change by Allan deSouza was published in November 2018 by Duke University Press.

Related

- Art's Corrosive Success: An Interview with Martha Buskirk**
July 27, 2012
- The Designs of Allan Wexler, a “Radical Deconstructor of Habitation”**
May 1, 2017
- The ABC of Art Criticism: Some Recent How To's**
August 29, 2015

Sign up for our email newsletters!

Support Hyperallergic

As arts communities around the world experience a time of challenge and change, accessible, independent reporting on these developments is more important than ever.

Please consider supporting our journalism, and help keep our independent reporting free and accessible to all.

[Become a Member](#)

Tagged: [Allan deSouza](#)

Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is an art historian, critic, and curator. His book *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* was published in 2017 by Manchester University... [More by Alpesh Kantilal Patel](#)

One reply on “A Philosophical and Practical Handbook on the Development of Artistic Ideas”

sittingbytheriver
May 15, 2019 at 3:17 pm

A phone app for definitions is a very good idea.

Comments are closed.

