Reasons Why it Is Not Possible to List Concepts of the Image

JAMES ELKINS

The following text is the first half of the Introduction to a book called What is an Image?

The event that gave rise to the book was a week-long series of seminars, held in Chicago in July, 2008. There were five Faculties: Gottfried Boehm, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Marie-José Mondzain, and myself. In addition there were fifteen Fellows from about eight countries, including China. The book will be published in 2011, as part of the series Stone Art Theory Seminars (Pennsylvania State University Press). More information is available here www.stonesummertheoryinstitute.org and the publisher's page is here www.psupress.org. The event, and the book, show how difficult it is to conceptualize images. My Introduction, excerpted here, does not ‹solve› that problem, but tries to show why images are especially difficult to conceptualize.

There is, luckily, no way to summarize contemporary theories of the image. The very disorganization of the subject is reason enough to worry about the state of writing that depends on the word ‹image› and its deceptive cognates such as ‹picture› and Bild. In this Introduction, I want to say a few things about the kind of disorganization that pertains to concepts of the image, and the reasons why that sort of incoherence makes it impossible even to make a reasonable list of the meanings that are assigned to words such as ‹image.› This Introduction is therefore a sort of anti-Kantian prolegomenon, in the sense that what I have in mind is the conditions of the impossibility of a certain field. But first it may be useful to say a little about why it might be interesting to ask the question, What is an Image? to begin with.

There are at least three answers to this question about a question, depending on whether subject is art instruction, art history, or visual studies.

First, regarding the studio art environment: in art instruction, it is often assumed that the visual exists in a separate cognitive realm from language, logic, or mathematics. This assumption often takes the form of the common, and now scientifically outdated, claim that the right brain and left brain are configured in such a way that they can explain what artists do. More generally, in studio art settings it is often said that some things can only be communicated through the visual and not through other senses or media. Art pedagogy is also broadly committed to the notion that the visual is politically privileged, in the sense that politically oriented practices are optimally situated as visual arts practices.

The justification for this claim is that art schools and academies are marginal in relation to institutions of power including universities, so that visual art practices end up being the vehicles for effectively oppositional political work; but there is also an underlying implicit claim that the visual is itself inherently outside discourses of power and therefore suited to speak against power. [1]

[1]
This theme is developed in vol. 3 of this series, What Do Artists Know?, University Park, PA, forthcoming.

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This particular tangle of often undeveloped claims—the left brain/right brain claim, the idea that the visual is somehow outside of language, the hope that the visual is optimally or inherently suited as a medium for political work—underwrites a substantial amount of the work that is done in art departments, art schools, and art academies, and so it is especially important from their point of view that the concept of the image is understood as well as possible.

Second, regarding art criticism, art theory, and art history: most historians and critics work with received ideas about what images are. Words such as ‹image,› ‹picture,› and Bild work in art historical discourse as placeholders: we do not put much pressure on them, we don't expect them to carry much of the argument. [2] Relatively few art historians or critics have developed accounts of images. This is not a fault of art history, criticism, or art theory, but a characteristic of their discourses, which enables many other things to happen within the ill-defined field (the cloud, as Karin Leonhard, one of the contributors to the book What is an Image?, might want to say) of the image. The pragmatic, everyday use of words such as ‹image› does have some nameable consequences, however, such as art history's relative lack of interest in detailed visual incident.

Third, regarding visual studies: like art history, theory, and criticism, the developing field of visual studies uses the word «image» as a given term, but with different consequences because of the enormous rhetorical weight that visual studies puts on the idea of the visual. [3] We are said to live in an especially visual culture: we may see more images in our lifetimes than any other culture has, and we may be able to assimilate more images per minute than any other culture. Visuality is said to be characteristic of late capitalist first-world culture, and it has even been claimed that we have come to think and experience primarily through the visual. The authors associated with different forms of these claims—Martin Jay, Jean Baudrillard, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Lisa Cartwright—either speaking for, or are claimed by visual studies. For that reason the relative lack of work on the nature of images themselves plays an especially important part in the constitution and conceptual possibilities of visual studies. [4]

In all three of these areas—art production, art history, visual culture—the image is normally taken as a given term. That is how I would frame an answer to the question about the question. (Why ask, What is an image?) My own interest in this is principally conceptual and not normative: that is, I do not want to reconsider or reformulate the fields that use the concept of the image in these ways. The uses of ‹image› and related terms do not call for change as much as explanation.

[2] In Frege's terminology, words like ‹image› are high in sense (Sinn, meaning the manner in which the word…

[3] I am conflating visual culture, image studies, and Bildwissenschaft; see vol. 5 of this series, Farewell to Visual…

[4] An interesting meditation on this subject, which is in press at the time of this writing, is Whitney Davis, A General…

Since art pedagogy, art history, and visual studies are all thriving, a more intriguing question might be what kinds of discourse are enabled by not pressing the question of what an image is. It is a commonplace in studio art instruction that theories tend to be used strategically, to let the student artist get on with whatever she wants to do, so that it might not be helpful or pertinent to interrogate the student's theories. Whatever they are, however strange and idiosyncratic they might seem to the student's instructors, their purpose is to enable other practices. In the same way, the words ‹image,› ‹picture,› and Bild in art history, theory, and criticism, and in visual studies, may work by not being analyzed, and so the work done in the book What is an Image? might be counter-productive or misguided.

Contemporary discourse would not be alone in its lack of interest in its leading terms. There is a long history of texts that take «image» for granted in order to do other things. Here, as an emblem of that issue, is Hume's opening argument in the Treatise of Human Nature: «Impressions,» he writes, are «all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these [impressions] in thinking and reasoning.« Notice how much weight images have to bear: they are the link between impressions, a crucial concept throughout Hume's work, and ideas. As scholars have noted, Hume is thinking of a printing press, and so an image would be the visible result of the printing. But the image's faintness is not the result of a faint print impression, at least not according to this passage. Somehow the image itself carries the property of faintness, which then characterizes all ideas. [5]

It would not be difficult to multiply examples of often fruitful theories that have begun by declining to interrogate the image.

I thought it might be good to begin informally, with a selection of theories about images. I present these in absolutely no order. Afterward, I will propose six reasons why it would be difficult to do this more seriously: that is, to begin a study of images in the way that might be considered both reasonable and necessary in many other fields, merely listing the principal existing theories.

1. Images as very thin skins of things. This is Lucretius's theory: images are «membranes» or «cauls» (allantois, and in German «Häutchen») that float through the air toward our eyes. We see the world by virtue of our eyes' capacity to take in these diaphanous skins of objects. An image, in this theory, actually is a skin: it is not thin like a skin, but is an actual skin. [6] As a metaphor this is very suggestive, very embodied, but as a theory it would restrict seeing to literal embodiment. [7]

[5] David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (1739–1740), Book I, Part 1, Section 1, «Of the Origin of Our Ideas.»…

[6] Lucretius, De rerum natura IV.2.1.60.

[7] I tried using it as a metaphor in Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis, Stanford 1999), 1, but I am not…

2. Images as reminders of love. This was well put, as an allegory, by André Félibien. Here is how Jacqueline Lichtenstein recounts Félibien's idea: «As the substitute for an absence, the pictorial image has all the characteristics of a sign, but it is a lover's sign born of the painful experience of lack, the only form of representation capable of satisfying a desire that seeks a presence.» [8] It would not be difficult to find other examples: Leon Battista Alberti compared painting and friendship; and, in contemporary scholarship, David Summers has made use of Gabriele Paleotti's expression «the defect of distance» to elaborate a theory of art in terms of the pathos of human presence and absence. [9]

3. Images as reminders. This is, for instance, Susan Sontag's position: images don't tell us anything, they remind us what is important. [10] The same intuition that images point to meaning, without specifying that meaning, can be found in a culturally very distant location —Christian doctrine. John of Damascus's theory, for example, takes images as mnemonics of divinity: «We see images in created things,» he writes, «which remind us faintly of divine tokens.» [11]

4. Images as kisses. This lovely idea emerges in a very convoluted etymology proposed by Wolfgang Wackernagel: one can associate Greek philos, that is to say «friend,» and the Indo–European root *bhilo (origin of the German Bild). In that case, Wackernagel says, Bild could be associated with meanings Émile Benveniste proposed for philos: «mark of possession,» «friend,» and, by verbal derivation, «kiss.» [12]

5. Images as models, entailing a capacity for «cognitive revelation (deixis, demonstratio)»: this is one of Gottfried Boehm's senses of the image, and it is discussed in the Seminars in the book What is an Image? [13] There are in addition a number of other research projects on the idea of the image as model, which are not connected to theories of deixis. [14]

6. Images as the touch of flowers. This is one of Jean-Luc Nancy's formulas: «every image is à fleur de peau, or is a flower,» he writes, «it approaches across a distance, but what it brings into proximity is a distance. The fleur is the finest, most subtle part… which one merely brushes against [effleure].» [15] Even though the Seminar participants read a number of Nancy's texts, he did not figure strongly in the discussion or the assessments, and it is not entirely clear why.

[8] Jacqueline Lichtenstein, The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age, Berkeley, CA,…

[9] See the references in my review of David Summers, Real Spaces, in The Art Bulletin 86/2, 2004, pp. 373–80, reprinted…

[10] Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York 2003.

[11] Apologia Against Those who Decry Holy Images, III.16, available on www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images.html….

[12] This is discussed James Elkins, On Pictures, and the Words That Fail Them, Cambridge 1998, pp. 208–9.

[13] Gottfried Boehm, «Iconic Knowledge: Image as Model,» 3. The concept of modeling was also a subject of active…

[14] For example Visuelle Modelle, edited by Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel, and Achim Spelten, Munich 2008.

[15] Jean-Luc Nancy, The Image—The Distinct, in idem., The Ground of the Image, translated by Jeff Fort, New York…

7. Images as sign systems. The many structural semiotic theories are hardly mentioned in this book, despite a fairly extensive literature that includes Fernande Saint-Martin and the Belgian Groupe μ. The Swedish scholar Göran Sonesson, author of a number of books on systematic visual semiotics, is excluded from these Seminars. [16] Partly that is because both North American and some German scholarship rejects systematic semiotics, and partly it is because performative, open, and contextual readings have become central in art history.

8. Images as defective sign systems. This argument is usually assigned to Nelson Goodman, and especially his argument against naturalism. In the effort to capture «the crucial difference between pictorial and verbal properties,» he argues, representation is «disengaged from perverted ideas of it as an idiosyncratic physical process like mirroring, and is recognized as a symbolic relationship.» [17] The notion of a defective or incomplete system is crucial to this sense of what an image is: «In painting and sculpture, exemplification is syntactically and semantically dense. Neither the pictorial characteristics nor the exemplified properties are differentiated; and exemplified predicates come from a discursive and unlimited natural language.» [18] Goodman has an unresolved position in some contemporary discussions of the image, and of the texts on this opening list, he is the one most likely to be almost adopted: «almost» because the authors who most believe him, including Tom Mitchell in these Seminars, are also the ones least likely to use his theories in any detailed way. [19]

9. Images as a genus, composed of individual species. Goodman's theories divide images into different kinds, and so do many others. In general, theories that try to divide images do not get much further than the distinction between naturalistic images and their proposed counterparts, which are normally named diagrams, notations, or graphs. [20] Thomas Sebeok's Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics, for example, begins with Peirce's triad icon, index, and symbol. Sebeok then comments: «the neglect of diagrams is particularly incomprehensible in view of the fact that they loomed large in Peirce's own semiotic research.» [21] I think the Seminars reflect the general tenor of the literature in that they are less interested in the actual divisions than in the idea of dividing. Aside from a small recent literature on diagrams, most discussion on whether images are divisible into types has centered on the word/image dichotomy—and some form of that distinction is assumed even in philosophic texts interested in the image, such as Nancy's essay «Distinct Oscillation» (i.e., between word and image). [22]

[16] See especially Göran Sonesson, On Pictoriality: The Impact of the Perceptual Model in the Development of Pictorial...

[17] Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art, Indianapolis, IN, 1974, pp. 42–3.

[18] Ibid., p. 234.

[19] My own contribution to this problem is in Pictures as Ruined Notations, in: The Domain of Images, On the Historical...

[20] John Bender and Michael Marrinan, Culture of Diagram, Stanford, CA, 2010; and see also Sebastian Bucher, Das Diagramm...

[21] Thomas Sebeok, Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics, Toronto 1994, section on «Features of Iconicity.»

[22] Jean-Luc Nancy, Distinct Oscillation, in idem, The Ground of the Image (note 16), pp. 63–79.

10, 11, 12... This list is disordered and, of course, potentially infinite. Next up could be psychoanalytic theories, or theories developed in hermeneutics, psychology, phenomenology, cognitive science, neurobiology, or rhetoric and media theory. There is no end, but more significantly, there is no order and no way to know what ‹order› would be.

I think it is fair to say that a list like this is hopeless from the very beginning. The question is why that should be so. Here are the first two of a total of six reasons I propose as a kind of heuristic introduction to the concerns that are explored in the book *What is an Image*?

1. There are theories of images, but most of them are other people's theories.

By this I mean that they can be interesting and coherent, but less than ideally suited for the purposes of writing about visual art. Few seem useful for illuminating the ways people use the word «image» when they talk about art. One way to think about this is to make a distinction between theories of images and theories that are about what happens to the concept «image,» or to particular images, in different settings. For some writers, including some participants who came to Chicago to talk about theories of images, what counts more than theories of images is theories that take image as a given term, and ask about about how images work, what relations they create or presuppose, what agency they might have, or how they appear in discourse. That is a live issue throughout this book, and especially in Section 3 of the Seminars, titled «Accounts of images, and accounts that begin from images.»

2. Once the focus shifts to the distinction between theories about images and theories that use images, then another possibility also appears: the difference between these two kinds of accounts and the idea that pictures also produce theories. That has been discussed by several authors including Hubert Damisch and Jean-Louis Schefer, and it is contemplated in Tom Mitchell's *Picture Theory or What Do Pictures Want*? His interest in that book is in theorizing pictures, but also in «pictures themselves as forms of theorizing.» [23] Susan Buck-Morss has also attempted to find ways to let pictures guide and theorize her inquiries. But this theme is not developed in Buck-Morss's books or in Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, where images continue to work as mnemonics and as examples of many things voiced in the text, but not as objections to the text, or revisions of arguments presented in the text. It could be argued that the idea of images that theorize has been identified but not developed in art history, theory, and criticism, or in visual studies. [24]

[23] W.J.T. Mitchell, Vital Signs | Cloning Terror, in: idem, What do Pictures Want?, Chicago, IL, 2005, p. 6.

[24] The production of images is a current interest of Sunil Manghani's; see the end of his Assessment in the book...

The subject is not explored in the book What is an Image?: I mention it here because it seems to me that it is logically implied by talk about theories of images and theories starting from images. It is an open door in both art history and visual studies.

I hope the forthcoming book What is an Image? will be a contribution to the current state of thinking, in all its indecisions and messiness and compelling energy, and its promise of foundational rethinking.

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His writing focuses on the history and theory of images in art, science, and nature. Some of his books are exclusively on fine art (What Painting Is, Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?). Others include scientific and non-art images, writing systems, and archaeology (The Domain of Images, On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them), and some are about natural history (How to Use Your Eyes). Current projects include a series called the Stone Summer Theory Institutes, a book called The Project of Painting: 1900-2000, a series called Theories of Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Art, and a book written against Camera Lucida called What Photography Is.

Fussnoten

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This theme is developed in vol. 3 of this series, What Do Artists Know?, University Park, PA, forthcoming.

Seite 15 / [2]

In Frege's terminology, words like ‹image› are high in sense (Sinn, meaning the manner in which the word has meaning), and low in reference (Bedeutung, meaning the object to which the word refers), cf. Gottlob Frege, Über Sinn und Bedeutung, in: Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, 1892, pp. 25–50.

Seite 15 / [3]

I am conflating visual culture, image studies, and Bildwissenschaft; see vol. 5 of this series, Farewell to Visual Studies, for a detailed discussion of the differences, University Park, PA, forthcoming, 2012.

Seite 15 / [4]

An interesting meditation on this subject, which is in press at the time of this writing, is Whitney Davis, A General Theory of Visual Culture.

Seite 16 / [5]

David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (1739–1740), Book I, Part 1, Section 1, «Of the Origin of Our Ideas.» For the printing metaphor see William MacGregor, The Authority of Prints: An Early Modern Perspective, in Art History 22/3, 1999, pp. 389–420.

Seite 16 / [6]

Lucretius, De rerum natura IV.2.1.60.

Seite 16 / [7]

I tried using it as a metaphor in Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis, Stanford 1999), 1, but I am not aware of any attempts to use Lucretius in image theory.

Seite 17 / [8]

Jacqueline Lichtenstein, The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age, Berkeley, CA, 1993, p. 123.

Seite 17 / [9]

See the references in my review of David Summers, Real Spaces, in The Art Bulletin 86/2, 2004, pp. 373–80, reprinted in Is Art History Global?, vol. 3 of The Art Seminar, New York 2006, pp. 41–72.

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Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, New York 2003.

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Seite 17 / [13]

Gottfried Boehm, «Iconic Knowledge: Image as Model,» 3. The concept of modeling was also a subject of active discussion in the Iconic Criticism (Eikones) initiative in Basel, Switzerland, between 2008 and 2010.

Seite 17 / [14]

For example Visuelle Modelle, edited by Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel, and Achim Spelten, Munich 2008.

Seite 17 / [15]

Jean-Luc Nancy, The Image—The Distinct, in idem., The Ground of the Image, translated by Jeff Fort, New York 2005, p. 4.

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See especially Göran Sonesson, On Pictoriality: The Impact of the Perceptual Model in the Development of Pictorial Semiotics, in Advances in Visual Semiotics: The Semiotic Web 1992-1993, edited by Thomas Sebeok, Berlin 1995, p. 67.

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Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art, Indianapolis, IN, 1974, pp. 42–3.

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Ibid., p. 234.

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My own contribution to this problem is in Pictures as Ruined Notations, in: The Domain of Images, On the Historical Study of Visual Artifacts, Ithaca, NY, 1999, pp. 68–81.

Seite 18 / [20]

John Bender and Michael Marrinan, Culture of Diagram, Stanford, CA, 2010; and see also Sebastian Bucher, Das Diagramm in den Bildwissenschaften, in Verwandte Bilder: Die Fragen der Bildwissenschaft, edited by Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel, and Achim Spelten, Berlin 2007. Bender and Marrinan cite a number of schemata that divide images into more kinds, including Ignace Gelb and my own Domain of Images, which proposes seven kinds of images, but for them «diagram» is the historically appropriate Other to naturalistic images.

Seite 18 / [21]

Thomas Sebeok, Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics, Toronto 1994, section on «Features of Iconicity.»

Seite 18 / [22]

Jean-Luc Nancy, Distinct Oscillation, in idem, The Ground of the Image (note 16), pp. 63–79.

Seite 19 / [23]

W.J.T. Mitchell, Vital Signs | Cloning Terror, in: idem, What do Pictures Want?, Chicago, IL, 2005, p. 6.

Seite 19 / [24]

The production of images is a current interest of Sunil Manghani's; see the end of his Assessment in the book What is an Image? New York, forthcoming, 2011. The possibility that images can do more than just illustrate the theoretical, social, and political concerns of visual studies is the central concern of the Visual Studies Reader project, a book that is being written by graduate students (New York, forthcoming; and see visualreader.pbworks.com).

Abbildungen

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The 2008 Stone Summer Theory Institute, photo courtesy James Elkins.