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THE STONE ART THEORY INSTITUTES

Edited by James Elkins

VOL. 1

*ART AND GLOBALIZATION*

VOL. 2

*WHAT IS AN IMAGE?*

The Stone Art Theory Institutes is a series of books on five of the principal unresolved problems in contemporary art theory. The series attempts to be as international, inclusive, and conversational as possible, in order to give a comprehensive sense of the state of thinking on each issue. All together, the series involves over three hundred scholars from over sixty countries.

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*THE STONE ART THEORY INSTITUTES VOLUME 2*

# WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

EDITED BY JAMES ELKINS AND MAJA NAEF

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## INTRODUCTION

*James Elkins*

*A version of this introduction was given on the opening day of the event, July 13, 2008.*

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 This assumption often takes the form of the common, and now scientifically outdated, claim that the right brain and left brain are configured in such a way that they can explain what artists do.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.<sup>1</sup> 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 be understood as well as possible.

1. This theme is developed in vol. 3 of this series, *What Do Artists Know?* (University Park: Penn State Press, forthcoming).

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, or expect them to carry much of the argument.<sup>2</sup> Relatively few art historians or critics have developed accounts of images. (Among the dozen or so exceptions are Panofsky, Hans Belting, Gottfried Boehm, Tom Mitchell, and Aud Sissel Hoel.) 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 this book, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 speak 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.<sup>5</sup>

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. 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's 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

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).

3. This is explored in Section 8 of the Seminars.

4. 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: Penn State Press, forthcoming).

5. An interesting meditation on this subject is Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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 this book might be counterproductive 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.<sup>6</sup>

It would not be difficult to multiply examples of often fruitful theories that have begun by declining to interrogate the image. I leave this thought for readers of this book to ponder; it comes up in Section 1 of the Seminars, but it was not developed during the week of conversations recorded here.

Because most of this book is occupied with concerted theorization, 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" (*alantois*, and in German *Glückshaube*) 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.<sup>7</sup> As a metaphor this is very suggestive, very embodied, but as a theory it would restrict seeing to literal embodiment.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup> 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

6. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), 1.1.1, "Of the Origin of Our Ideas." For the printing metaphor see William MacGregor, "The Authority of Prints: An Early Modern Perspective," *Art History* 22, no. 3 (1999): 389–420.

7. *De rerum natura* 4.2.1.60.

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

Gabriele Paleotti's expression "the defect of distance" to elaborate a theory of art in terms of the pathos of human presence and absence.<sup>10</sup>

3. *Images as reminders.* This is, for instance, Susan Sontag's position: images don't tell us anything, they remind us what is important.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13</sup>

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 this book.<sup>14</sup> 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*.<sup>15</sup>

6. *Images as the touch of flowers.* This is one of Jean-Luc Nancy's formulas: "every image is à fleur, 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*]."<sup>16</sup> 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.

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  $\mu$ . The Swedish scholar Göran Sonesson, author of a number of books on systematic visual semiotics, is excluded from these Seminars.<sup>17</sup> Partly that is because both North American and some German scholarship (especially including Gottfried Boehm's) reject systematic semiotics, and partly because performative, open, and contextual readings have become central in art history.

9. Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 123.

10. See the references in my review of David Summers, *Real Spaces*, in *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (2004): 373–80, reprinted in *Is Art History Global?*, Art Seminar 3 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41–72.

11. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

12. *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images* 3.16, available at [fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images.html](http://fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamascus-images.html).

13. This is discussed in my *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 208–9.

14. Boehm, "Iconic Knowledge: The Image as Model," unpublished manuscript, 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.

15. For example, *Visuelle Modelle*, edited by Ingeborg Reichle, Steffen Siegel, and Achim Spelten (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008).

16. Nancy, "The Image—The Distinct," in *The Ground of the Image*, translated by Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 4.

17. See especially 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 (New York: Mouton de Gruyter), 67.



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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

9. *Images as a genus, composed of individual species.* Goodman’s theories divide images into different kinds, and so do many others. The question of dividing and classifying is taken up in Section 9 of the Seminars. 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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).<sup>23</sup>

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.

18. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 42–43

19. *Languages of Art*, 234.

20. My own contribution to this problem is in “Pictures as Ruined Notations,” in *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 68–81.

21. John Bender and Michael Marrinan, *Culture of Diagram* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 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: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 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.

22. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, second edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), section on “Features of Iconicity.”

23. Nancy, “Distinct Oscillation,” in *Ground of the Image*, 63–79.

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. I will propose six reasons as a kind of heuristic introduction to the concerns that are explored in this book.

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 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."

(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*. His interest in that book is in theorizing pictures, but also in "pictures themselves as forms of theorizing."<sup>24</sup> 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* or *What Do Pictures Want?*, 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.<sup>25</sup> The subject is not explored in this book: 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.)

2. A number of fields work with images, and they do not often share bibliographies.

A wide range of disciplines and areas are involved in images: at the least there are philosophy, art history, visual studies, cognitive psychology, experimental psychology, neurobiology, neurology, machine vision, robotics, computer-

24. Mitchell, "Vital Signs / Cloning Terror," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

25. The production of images is a current interest of Sunil Manghani's; see the end of his Assessment in this book. 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: Routledge, forthcoming; and see [visualreader.pbworks.com](http://visualreader.pbworks.com)).

aided vision, evolution, animal vision studies, and art practice. Depending on how these disciplines are classified, they might reduce to just four faculties (art, humanities, sciences, social sciences) or expand into dozens of individual subjects. A survey I made at the University College Cork in Ireland of the departments that were invested in images yielded an astonishing list: virtual-reality reconstructions in legal cases, linguistic inquiries into historical uses of color terms, emblems of free choice used in economics, problems of documenting performance art, visualizations of viruses, programs that graphically monitor intranets, image-based exercises in occupational therapy, multispectral imaging in aerial surveying, radio astronomy images of stars, visual solutions to mathematical problems, automated recognition of cetaceans, studies of the deformation of grains in sandstone, comparative analyses of kidney pathologies, images of the sea floor using side-scanning sonar, and visual tropes in Arabic and Russian. The contributors to that project used a bewildering range of technologies, including digital video editing, computerized surveying, optical microscopy (fluorescence, confocal, interference contrast, and a half dozen others), electron microscopy (transmission electron microscopy, atomic force microscopy, a half dozen others), spectroscopy, sound spectrograms, and image manipulation (using programs such as NIH Image, ImageJ, Exbem, and PhotoShop). The thirty contributors to the resulting book included just two art historians, and even they did not share a common bibliography.<sup>26</sup> There are ways to address the problem of nonintersecting bibliographies; it is possible, for example, to find groups of allied technologies. But at least in the Irish project, it was not possible to begin from any common theoretical sources.

The challenge for humanities-based research on the image, as in this book, is to take other fields as seriously as possible. There is increasing mention of non-art fields in visual studies and art history, but relatively few projects begin from science, or stay with it, or study its languages as carefully as they deploy the languages of the humanities.<sup>27</sup> A sign of the limited engagement of humanist scholarship with other fields is the complete absence of work that takes its interpretive methodologies from outside the humanities. What would happen, for example, if photography criticism were to stop using terms like *realism*, the *punctum*, or the *index*, and use instead terms from the criticism of electron microscopy (*contrast transfer function*, *optimal foci*, *Scherzer focus*)? The fact that this sounds outlandish is a sign of the distance that still has to be crossed before image studies in different fields can begin to share bibliographies.

26. This is documented in *Visual Practices Across the University* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007). See also *Bild und Erkenntnis: Formen und Funktionen des Bildes in Wissenschaft und Technik*, edited by Andrea Beyer and Markus Lohoff (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2005).

27. Two notable exceptions are the initiative "Das Technische Bild," led (until 2010) by Horst Bredekamp in the Helmholtz-Universität in Berlin, and Lena Johannesson's work in Göteborg.

In this book non-art interests are represented by Alexis Smets, Klaus Sachs-Hombach, and Christoph Lüthy, among others. See further, Sachs-Hombach and Klaus Rehkämper, "Thesen zu einer Theorie bildhafter Darstellung," in *Bild-Bildwahrnehmung- Bildverarbeitung: Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Bildwissenschaft*, edited by Sachs-Hombach and Rehkämper (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 2000), 119–24.

3. Some accounts are primarily concerned with the politics of images or images as politics, while other accounts do not feel the necessity of approaching political concepts at all. This is made more difficult by positions according to which images and politics are inextricable, so that every image is a political act. At the beginning I mentioned that from the point of view of production, visual art is sometimes seen as a potentially privileged vehicle for social action. (In *What do Pictures Want?* Tom Mitchell asks, rhetorically, “Are images the terrain on which political struggle should be waged . . . ? There is a strong temptation to answer . . . with a resounding yes.”<sup>28</sup>) The converse, which produces an especially strong claim, is that the political is optimally realized through the visual.

Recently discussions about politics and visual arts have tended to defer to Jacques Rancière’s account of images, or “imageness,” as fundamentally a matter of relations. “Imageness,” he says, is “a regime of relations between elements and between functions,” an “interplay of operations.”<sup>29</sup> It is distinct from likeness and resemblance. Images “produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance,” and they are therefore political, because in Rancière’s philosophy the effect understood as politics in the proper sense produces dissemblances.<sup>30</sup> Rancière’s ideas are discussed intermittently throughout this book, but his operative terms such as *image* and *politics*, which have special technical meaning in his work, tend to be reassigned to the meanings that are in wider use, making it difficult to assess the pertinence of his ideas.<sup>31</sup>

In this book a number of contributors begin with some form of the assumption that politics and the image need to be conceptualized together. Marie-José Mondzain’s meditations on the image have often turned on the coordinate theorization of economics and imagery.<sup>32</sup> In the short book translated as “Can Images Kill?” she writes, “My aim here is . . . to understand what an image is and to understand its relation to violence.”<sup>33</sup> At the extreme, accounts that focus on politics can make the place of art unclear, as if the choice of art, images, or visuality as subjects is arbitrary. This has played out in different ways in recent art history. For this book, a pertinent moment occurs in an exchange of letters between Gottfried Boehm and Tom Mitchell, which the participants read in an unpublished English version. In that version, Boehm remarks that his sense of

28. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 32–33.

29. “The Distribution of the Sensible,” in *Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 4, 6.

30. “Distribution of the Sensible,” 7. The argument becomes more concrete and contentious when it comes to specific art practices. Developments like abstraction, Rancière argues, are misunderstood by modernists and postmodernists: they weren’t medium-specific, but “implicated in an overall vision of a new human being lodged in new structures.” The flatness of abstraction is “the flatness of pages, posters, and tapestries,” of “interfaces.” Abstract paintings are about the development of new communities, new spaces, new “bodily functions and movements” (16, 19).

31. The participants in vol. 4 of this series,

*Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic* (based on conversations held in summer 2010) also read Rancière extensively, but in that context his sense of terms like “politics” appeared as an obstacle to taking his theories into art discourse. *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by James Elkins and Harper Montgomery (University Park: Penn State Press, forthcoming).

32. Mondzain’s principal work on this is *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, translated by Rico Franes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

33. Mondzain, *L’Image peut-elle tuer?*, translated as “Can Images Kill?,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2009): 22.

the “pictorial term” (a phrase both he and Mitchell coined, independently, in the early 1990s) is that it involves “a criticism of the image rather than one of ideology.”<sup>34</sup> Mitchell replies that his aim “was to show . . . that the very notion of ideology was grounded in a specific image-repertoire.”<sup>35</sup> It is a moment of deep divergence in a correspondence that several contributors to this book describe, rightly, as mainly about points of agreement.

4. A fourth reason why it is not easy to list theories of images is that some accounts are about the agency of images—their “voice,” their “life.” They ask for a different kind of response than accounts that are not centrally concerned with agency. At the extreme, when such accounts draw near to anthropology, religious belief, or animism, they may also involve a suspension of disbelief, as in Mitchell’s question, *What do images want?* or Mondzain’s, *Can images kill?* This is not the place to adjudicate those claims, but it is pertinent that they need to be heard with a different ear than claims about, say, a picture’s semiotics. It is not clear, at least to me, exactly how to change the register of the conversation when talk goes from a picture’s structure, or even its politics, to its agency, its voice, its life. Moving back and forth between those perspectives, as the talk in this book often does, produces a kind of dissonance that is heard, but not analyzed, by a number of the participants.

5. The same sort of observation can be made about the idea that images are a fundamentally religious category. The claim that images are conceptually inseparable from religious or ritual belief is easy to substantiate by considering the historical record: secular modernity is a tiny, Western fraction of the sum total of image making. Even within the Western tradition, the theorization of the image has until recently been an exclusively theological preoccupation. In *Of the Trinity*, St. Augustine writes, “While in all creatures there is some likeness to God, in the rational creature alone we find a likeness of ‘image’. . . whereas in other creatures we find a likeness by way of ‘trace.’”<sup>36</sup> The image is inside the economy of the revelation, and until recently that is where images belonged.

But the force of that argument is not so clear, because it assumes that we can step outside our putatively secular modernity to consider images in that broader context. I am not at all sure if academics interested in images can do that: what, after all, is that larger context that comprehends representations of images as religious and as nonreligious? We represent religious uses of images to ourselves as historical practices, but we do not step *into* those practices.<sup>37</sup> In terms of contemporary theorizing about the image, a version of this difference plays out at

34. Letter to Tom Mitchell, unpublished in English, §3. For the two letters in German see Boehm, “Iconic Turn: Ein Brief” and Mitchell, “Pictorial Turn: Eine Antwort,” in *Bilderfragen: Die Bildwissenschaften in Aufbruch*, edited by Hans Belting (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2007), 27–48. Boehm’s sentence in the original is “‘Mein’ turn ist also eher bild- als ideologiekritisch” (31).

35. Mitchell, unpublished letter, §5.

36. *Of the Trinity* 2.6. The passage continues, “imprints which are left by the movements

of animals are called ‘traces’; likewise ashes are a trace of fire.”

37. This is argued in my *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and in relation to Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, and Joseph Koerner’s exhibition *Iconoclasm!*, in a review in *Art Journal* 62, no. 3 (2003): 104–7.

38. An example of work along these lines is Daniel Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids: Baker

the level of interpretive strategies. For some scholars, talk about images is always also talk about religion.<sup>38</sup> Marie-José Mondzain is a strong example of this sort of discourse, and Tom Mitchell is an equally strong example of the opposite. The tricky thing in preparing the Seminars was to bring out that difference, which immediately disappears when talk of religious meanings is taken historically, or when talk of historical meanings is interpreted as implicitly theological. There were no participants in the 2008 event who would have said, with the art historian T. J. Clark, “I will have nothing to do with the self-satisfied Leftist clap-trap about ‘art as substitute religion,’”<sup>39</sup> and none who would have wanted to counter that with a Marxist review such as the one Karl Werckmeister wrote in response to Clark’s book.<sup>40</sup> The participants moved seamlessly from talk about the image that required a full, historically specific series of theological terms from Byzantium to the present, to talk that had no need of any such terms. The seam, the dissonance, was often invisible, and for me that was the puzzling thing.

Marie-José Mondzain’s intricate and powerful monologues about images and theology would seem to preclude any discourse that presented itself as secular. “The story of the incarnation is the legend of the image itself,” she writes in “Can Images Kill?”; “only the image can incarnate.”<sup>41</sup> Or again, “artistic practice broke with the Church in order to remain faithful to the incarnation of the invisible.” The “failure of the gaze,” she says, means sight will never encounter “what it desires to see: God. That is why men continue to desire and to make images” even though “God is thus nothing other than the name of our desire to see our similarity . . . that constantly escapes from sight.”<sup>42</sup> The difficulty is not in finding ways for these insights to work for a historical understanding, any more than it was difficult during the event for Mondzain to encounter any number of nonreligious issues, from diagrams to semiotics. The problem is deeper, or different: it is to know how the negotiation between those forms of meaning takes place.

6. The same problem of theorizing the move from one form of understanding to another also emerges again in the discussions about the claim that images have an inherent logic or rationality, and the companion claim that they possess a kind of irrationality. Some accounts, especially of modern and contemporary art, involve searches for the irrational, the nonlinguistic, the nonverbal, the unrecognized, or the unrepresentable. In other accounts, those properties are understood as constructions of modernism, historically determined desires in relation to images, or misunderstandings of the nature of pictorial meaning. Texts on the postmodern sublime, on practices of the monochrome, and on artists’ interest in void, negation, or emptiness can be understood as artifacts of modernism’s

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Academic, 2008). In a very different register, the participants also read several texts by Nancy that develop theological issues in relation to art. He argues, for example, “the image is always sacred” if by that word is meant “the distinct,” “the separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off. . . . It is there, perhaps, that art has always begun, not in religion . . . but set apart.” “The Image—The Distinct,” in *Ground of the Image*, 1–3.)

39. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); this is an epigraph in *On the Strange Place of Religion*.

40. Werckmeister, “A Critique of T. J. Clark’s *Farewell to an Idea*,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 no. 4 (2002): 855–67.

41. “Can Images Kill?,” 23, 28.

42. “Can Images Kill?,” 30, 31, 32, respectively.

understanding of the image.<sup>43</sup> One reason why Jean-Luc Nancy figures less in this book than he did in our readings is his own immersion in issues of the non-linguistic and nonverbal, which seemed at times to be less explicitly aware of its historical position than it might have been.<sup>44</sup>

Discussions of the rational and the nonrational may be different from discussions of agency and structure, or religious and secular meaning, because there are discourses that can bridge what can appear as a large gap. There are theories of the alternative logic and sense that inhere in images (Gottfried Boehm's theories, for example), and there are also theories of the nonrational or nonlinguistic nature of images (the Rosalind Krauss of *The Optical Unconscious*, or the Jean-François Lyotard of *Discours, figure*). Not every position is as pure, as extreme, as Georges Didi-Huberman's when he writes, "We must try, before the image, to think the negative force within it. . . . There is a work of the negative in the image, a 'dark' efficacy that, so to speak, eats away at the visible (the order of represented appearances) and murders the legible (the order of signifying configurations)."<sup>45</sup> Boehm's work is a bridge in this respect. On the one hand, he considers the study of the visual as a convenient distillation and official, disciplinary name for "das Ikonische zu denken": to understand how images create meaning apart from language, and therefore also apart from semiotics.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, he thinks pictorial meaning is "nonpredicative," and does not involve truth and falsity. It entails questions of clarity or obscurity—a "logic of intensity or of forces."<sup>47</sup> It may not always be easy to see how "image and concept meet each other in the image itself,"<sup>48</sup> or how "iconic knowledge" is produced by a "nonverbal, iconic *logos*," distinct from and possibly underlying other knowledge,<sup>49</sup> but such formulations make many discussions possible.

The difficulty, as in the third, fourth, and fifth topics in my list, is knowing where we are, as speakers, as scholars, or even as observers, when we move between these registers. If I write in one text about the nonlinguistic elements of the image, and then I write in another text about the historical discourses that have led me to want to claim that images have nonlinguistic properties, then what has happened to me in between those two acts of writing? The answer cannot simply be that the conceptual has been captured by the historical, because the movement will very likely reverse itself.

I hope this is not too abstract for an introduction. The principal reason I wanted to stage a lengthy conversation between Tom Mitchell, Marie-José Mon-

43. "Iconoclasm and the Sublime: Two Implicit Religious Discourses in Art History," in *Idol Anxiety*, edited by Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

44. The "ground of the image," he writes in "The Image—The Distinct," "appears as what it is by disappearing. . . . It is the force of the image, its sky and its shadow." Nancy, "The Image—The Distinct," in *Ground of the Image*, 7.

45. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, translated by John Goodman (University Park: Penn State

Press, 2005), 143.

46. *Wie Bilder Sinn Erzeugen: Die Macht des Zeigens* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2007), 9. I am translating *Bildwissenschaft* as "the study of the visual," just to avoid the difficulties of explicating the nuances of *Bildwissenschaft* that are in play in Boehm's book.

47. Boehm, "Indeterminacy: On the Logic of Images," unpublished manuscript, 6–7.

48. Boehm, "Iconic Knowledge: The Image as Model," unpublished manuscript, 3.

49. Letter to Mitchell, unpublished in English, § 2.

dzain, and Gottfried Boehm is because they are each such eloquent representatives of differing conceptualizations. This is not the kind of encounter that leads to arguments: it is the far more interesting and difficult sort of encounter in which the participants are enthusiastic about a dialogic and even a collaborative conversation. Still, there remains the dissonance between fundamentally political understandings of the image and those that are not; between theological conceptualizations of the image and those that do not require theology; and between ideas of the image that take the visual to be nonrational, irrational, or nonlinguistic, and those that do not.

These dissonances themselves, aside from whatever we may decide about the particular claims that give rise to them, are a fascinating subject. Of the people who contributed to this book, Paul Willemarck and Wolfram Pichler do the most work on this. But then again, these dissonances are my own interest: this book is bursting with many other viewpoints and concerns. I hope this book is a contribution to the current state of thinking, in all its indecisions and messiness and compelling energy, and—in its wonderful Afterword—its promise of foundational rethinking.



THE SEMINARS



**THE PARTICIPANTS:**

The 2008 Stone Summer Theory Institute had seven Faculty, fifteen Fellows, and nine graduate students from the School of the Art Institute. They are shown on the panorama on the following pages.

**THE FACULTY:**

Gottfried Boehm (Eikones—NCCR Iconic Criticism, University of Basel), James Elkins (School of the Art Institute), Jacqueline Lichtenstein (Paris-Sorbonne [Paris IV]), W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago), Marie-José Mondzain (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales).

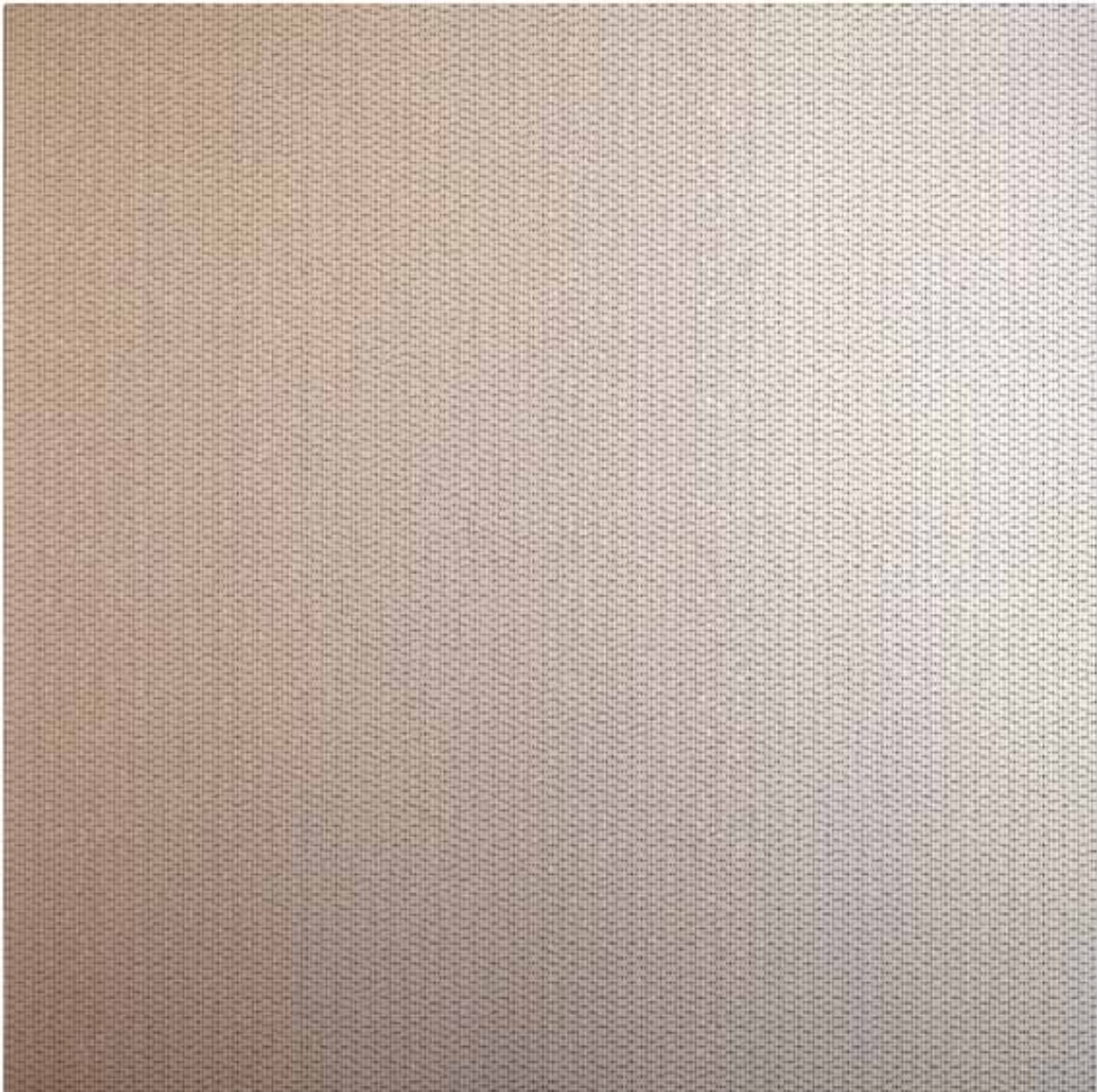
**THE FELLOWS:**

Elisabeth Birk (Aachen University), Catherine Burdick (PhD candidate, University of Illinois at Chicago), Daniel Gleason (Illinois Math and Science Academy), Regan Golden-McNerney (University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee), Ian Heywood (Leeds Metropolitan University), Aud Sissel Hoel (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim), Ladislav Kesner (Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic), Markus Klammer (PhD candidate, Eikones—NCCR Iconic Criticism, University of Basel), Adrian Kohn (PhD candidate, University of Texas at Austin), Rachel Mundy (PhD candidate, New York University), Steffen Siegel (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities), Si Han (PhD, Göteborg University, Sweden), Alexis Smets (PhD candidate, University of Nijmegen), Joel Snyder (U



THE SCHOOL OF THE ART  
INSTITUTE GRADUATE CLASS:  
Ellen Alderman, Dorota Biczal  
Nelson, Andrew Blackley, Karl  
Hakken, Kristi McGuire, Rachel  
Moore, Marcus Owens, Candace  
Wirt, Eduardo Vivanco Antolin.  
Auditors: Barbara Stafford, Mar-  
garet Olin.

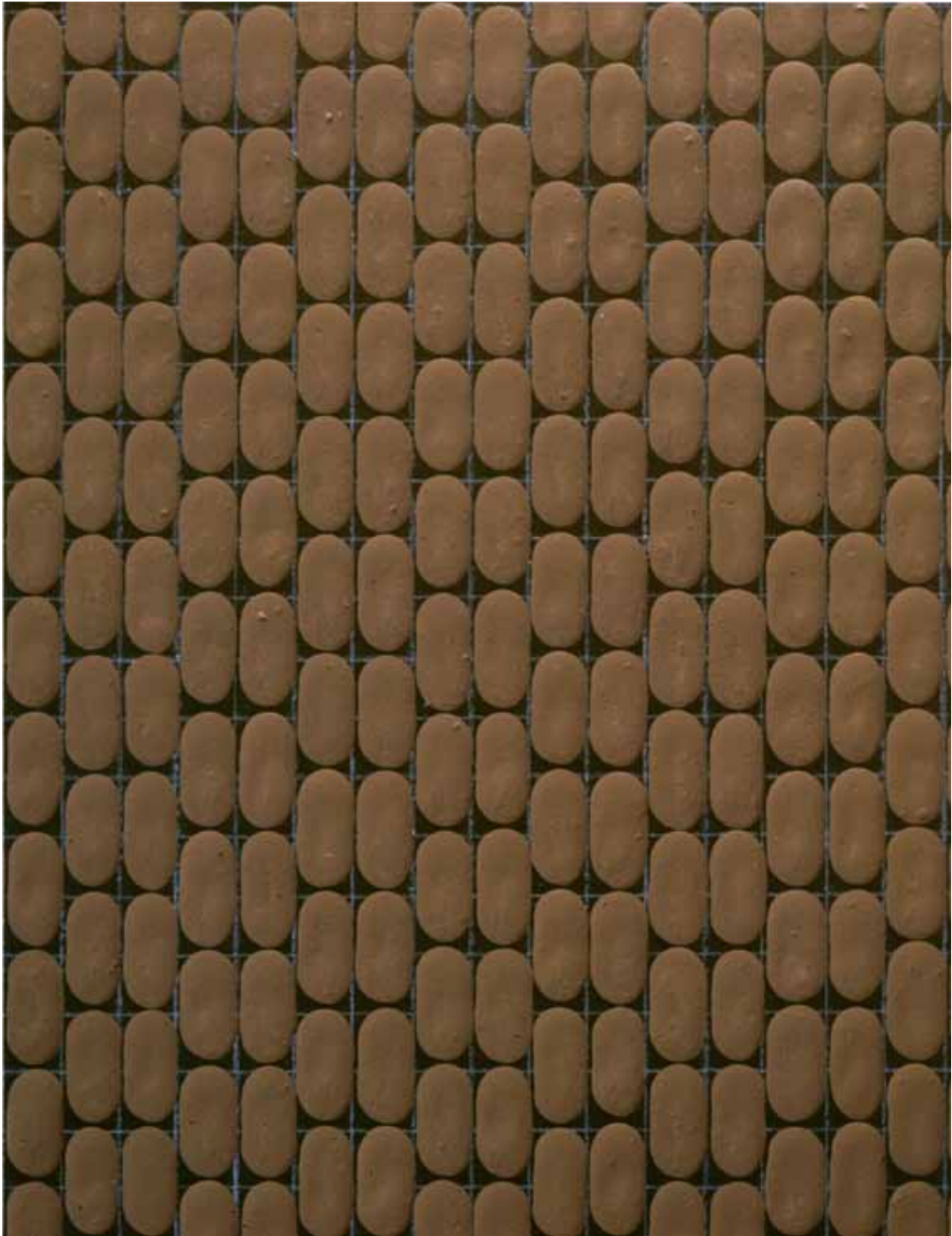
The panorama was taken by  
James Elkins and Aud Sissel  
Hoel, who took turns taking pho-  
tographs on three different days.  
Kristi McGuire appears twice,  
which is appropriate, because  
she was the assistant for the  
event and was often in several  
places at once. On the three  
occasions the photographs were  
taken Joel Snyder was absent.



We had a painting, a diptych, in the room with us during the seminar. The two canvases are called *And* and *Towards Neither*; they are acrylic and pencil on linen on board. The artist, Marie Krane, paints in small, regular oval shapes on a penciled grid. The colors are carefully determined according to naturalistic criteria (for example, they may match the decay of a flower over

time), and they change incrementally according to a geometric grid. The paintings are usually executed by artists who work in Krane's studios. The participants referred to these intermittently throughout the week. See [www.mariekranebergman.com](http://www.mariekranebergman.com) for more information.

Marie Krane Bergman  
Part of One Year (May)  
2003  
acrylic and pencil on canvas  
70" x 70"  
177.8 x 177.8 cm  
The Donna and Howard Stone  
Collection



Detail (cap TK)

The following conversations were recorded during the week of July 13–19, 2008, at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago.