

Editorial

Learning by doing with images and words

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The articles in this issue of *Artifact* are written on the basis of papers presented at the *What Images Do* conference in Copenhagen in 2014.¹ During two days, we discussed how the dialogue with images can help create awareness of and insight into what we do not yet know about what images do.

In his keynote lecture at the conference, Jacques Rancière claimed that images, resembling reality to a degree that we forget that they are created and different from what they represent, are not only overwhelming, but also pacifying. Rancière argued that

what constitutes the image and makes its power is nothing but the inability of the subjects to enjoy a real possession of the product of their action. Just as in Plato's cave, the reality of the image is the reality of impotence. Image in Plato designated the fact of being unable to turn one's head or move from one's bench to see the Real outside. (Rancière, in print)

Rancière distinguished between a strong, pacifying power of images, related to their ability to resemble and replace reality and thus conceal that they are the product of our own action *and* what he called a weak force of images which shows not yet known possibilities in "the Real outside." It is this weak force of images we seek to raise awareness of by using words in this issue of *Artifact*: Investigating what images do.

We do not ask what images are, but what they do, and are aware that we thereby also challenge what words do in their dialogue with images. Images and what only images can do are crucial in the process of generating and developing design and architecture when utilized as tools for exploring, testing, and communicating ideas. This does not necessarily imply that images should look like the finished product. The similarity between image and product

will always be merely apparent and partial and—as Rancière points out—pacifying. With reference to Plato, David Summers has pointed to two ancient, but perpetually relevant questions relating to images:

Socrates had long ago already raised two fundamentally important and finally incompatible questions. The first is this. Why is there a desire to create doubles to the point of reanimation. (...) The second question is this: If Socrates is right, and we do not really want images to be doubles, because then they could not serve their purposes as images, what are the purposes only images can serve? (2009, p. 336)

We are aware that the answer to the second question can't be general and independent of specific images, but has to be particular and experience-based. The answer is not to identify what images are, but what they do. That is why the contributions in this issue of *Artifact* are engaged in learning by doing with specific images and words.

It is worth emphasizing that Plato was not an iconoclast. In fact, he let Socrates produce the "image of the cave." Plato's criticism of images was aimed at those strong, pacifying images that seek to replace reality and have played a major role throughout Western history. With Gottfried Boehm, one can discuss the extent to which the obviously image-enthusiastic Renaissance was characterized by iconoclasm. The invention of the perspective was born by the ambition of making images identical to reality. As Boehm states: "Image should not be, reality must be—which means: The image must be reality. But if one thinks this thought to the end one experiences surprisingly that the perfect image coincides with a complete iconoclasm" (1994, p. 336). The Renaissance's understanding of what images are is still prevalent and it is therefore relevant to

recall not only Plato’s criticism of strong images, but also that he sought to promote our active reflection with weak images by allowing Socrates—by means of words—to produce the “image of the cave.”² As Rancière argues, “In Plato’s description the Greek term that we translate as ‘image,’ namely *eikon*, appears only once. And it does not designate what is seen on the wall of the cave. It designates the description of the cave, the ‘picture’ made by Socrates” (Rancière, in print).

Recent image theory has found a great source of inspiration in the work of Plato. With reference to the *Sophist* where Plato lets The Stranger ask, “Then what we call a likeness [*eikóna*], though not really existing, really does exist?” (Plato and Fowler, 1921, 240b), Horst Bredekamp has stated that “truth in this paradox is the logic of the image” (2007, p. 52), while Gottfried Boehm has argued that The Stranger’s question articulates the central concern in contemporary image theory (2011, p. 170). It is this concern—what images do as they come into existence—that is at work in this issue of *Artifact*, leading us to consider what images do as a matter of iconic difference, an increase in Being. The articles comprised in this issue of *Artifact* more or less explicitly address the questions mentioned in this editorial. Yet by the means of words, they all investigate what images do—and by setting up this dialogue between words and images the articles draw attention to that of which we cannot yet speak but merely show.

NOTES

1. *What Images Do* was an international research network funded by the Danish Research Council. The network’s twelve permanent participants—from *eikones*/The National Center of Competence in Research Iconic Criticism in Basel, TU Delft, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation, and The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Visual Arts with academic expertise in the fields of design, architecture, and art—participated in four research meetings in order to discuss what images do. The network organized a final public conference at the Charlottenborg Palace in Copenhagen with keynote lectures delivered by Jacques Rancière, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Jonathan Hay, and about fifty academic paper presentations from amongst which the articles presented in this issue of *Artifact* have been selected.
2. In his keynote lecture, Jonathan Hay pointed out that the scopic model created during the Renaissance has been crucial for the

understanding of past art and of art from other cultures. This model has prevailed in our cultural circles throughout the twentieth century: “During the twentieth century, this scopic model had enormous influence over the pre-Renaissance and non-Western art as well. The art history of recent decades, however, has in part involved the slow rediscovery of the prevalence of topological thinking and bodily perception in history. Even our picture of European art since the fifteenth century has gradually been transformed” (Hay, in print).

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