What Images Do

In the *Sophist*, Plato has The Stranger ask the following question about images: "Then what we call a likeness [*eikóna*], though not really existing, really does exist?"[1] In this, what may be the oldest known text about images and representation, we encounter an understanding that the interaction between the visual (the image) and the linguistic (how we denominate this image) is decisive. By language, we can require that the image somehow correspond with reality, but, we can also affirm the image has having a reality with its own creative potential that opens other possibilities, as has been the case with pictures in art throughout history.

Traditionally, the dialogue between language and images has emphasised the first requirement of evaluating pictures from their identity with reality. There is, however, a contemporary focus in image theory upon the second possibility, which seems pregnant with potential – not only for art, but also innovation, widely speaking.

In reference to the quote from the *Sophist*, Horst Bredekamp notes that "truth in this paradox is the logic of the image",[2] while Gottfried Boehm points out that The Stranger's question articulates the central concern in contemporary image theory.[3]

Our aim with the research network is to contribute to the development and understanding of what the image does (its *pragma*). The unreasonable entanglement of being and non-being,[4] calls for an examination of the image as an act or event (Bredekamp, '*Bildakt*'). Through its event, the image-act instigates image-related reflection upon the issue of being and non-being, physis and semiosis, actuality and potentiality. We are here interested in what Boehm has termed 'the iconic difference', which has an internal effect in the formation of images as an entanglement of being and non-being, matter/perception, imagination/representation, but also externally in the picture's relation to language and concepts.

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[1]   Plato, *Sophist: 240b.*
[2]   Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010, p. 52.
[3]   Cf. Gottfried Boehm, "Ikonische Differenz", *in Rheinsprung 11 – Zeitschrift für Bildkritik*, Basel 2011, p. 170. It is noteworthy that David Summers with roots in the Anglo-Saxon tradition points to a similar problem related images. Summers writes: "To my mind 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 match appearances 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 that only images can serve?" David Summers "The Archaeology of Appearance as Paradox" *in Paradoxes of Appearing* (ed. Michael Asgaard Andersen and Henrik Oxvig), Baden, Switzerland 2009, p. 36.
[4]   Plato, op.cit., *240c.*

The dialogue between the visual arts and architecture has always been one of mutual inspiration. Art historical research has demonstrated, how cultural history is characterised by epochs where similar stylistic features can be traced both in pictures and buildings. The invention of perspective in fifteenth century Florence changed the arts, among others because the architects used the new technique to develop buildings and environments they wanted to realise. As a new method to represent reality, the perspective thus nurtured a new naturalism in the visual arts. In the conception of architecture, representation is developed before the realisation of the very building, one is set to create. With the perspectival *representation* – and later with the more elaborate projective geometry – architecture was thus created to perfectly fit into the world as depicted by the visual art. It is thus relevant for both the visual arts and architecture, when Gottfried Boehm, on the visual culture following the invention of perspective, writes: "The image ought not to be, reality ought to be, or, to be more precise: the image should be reality. If you follow this thought, one comes to the surprising conclusion that perfect representability, that is *illusionism*, converges with the perfect *iconoclasm*. In the midst of the good picture is a force nurtured that dissolves the very image."[5]

With the invention of perspective, and supported with a firm trust in that "the image ought to be real", architecture became – with Nelson Goodman's terminology – an *allographic* art, perfected on the drawing board,[6] whereas it before was *autographic* in as much as drawings and representations were developed at the site and in continuous dialogue with the actual building process. For the neo-platonist Alberti, who had written a tract on this "new art" before he 1452 wrote his tract on architecture, everything relevant with a building can be decided by and with drawings, at a secure distance to the site because of this ideal identity between image/drawing and reality. For Alberti the dialogue between language and image was based on this claim of identity between image and reality. There was no room for difference and thus for affirmation of the image's own mode of existence and what this mode of existence might require from language.[7]

In a sense, modernism (Bell, Greenberg, Loos, Wittgenstein …) instigated a complete reversal of the Albertian claim, a reversal which nevertheless seemed necessary for to insist on the reality of the fine arts. For to "be real", the works had to reject representational devices such as perspective, verisimilitude or mimesis and consequently of any notion whatsoever of "image" (likeness). The

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[5] "Bild soll nicht sein, Realität soll sein, genauer: das Bild soll Realität werden. Denkt man diesen Gedanken zu Ende, stellt man überrascht fest, dass die vollendete Abbildlichkeit, d.h. der *Illusionismus*, mit der perfekten *ikonoklastik* kovergiert. Mitten im gelungene Abbild nistet eine bildaufhebende Kraft." Gottfried Boehm, "Die Bilderfrage" *in Was is ein Bild* (ed. Gottfried Boehm), München 1994, p. 336.

[6] On the allographic and autographic arts, cf. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, New York, 1976, pp.99-174.

[7] On Alberti's claim of the identity between representation and (built) reality, cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art and Building in Ten Books*, New York, 1988, p. 23.

works were instead (*aesthetically significant*) bodies among other bodies in the world, identical only to themselves and thus unaffected and indifferent to language or discourse. Even though promising in its quest for aesthetic signification, formal qualification and especially fruitful for recent phenomenological approaches (e.g. Deleuze), this claim, in its extreme form, seems impossible to maintain. Recent artistic, design and architectural practices from the last half a century blatantly demonstrates the impossibility to expel the question of the image in the arts. An insight which has stimulated the recent researches in the image before art (e.g. Hans Belting) and the veritable explosion of Warburg receptions – this new twist of iconology – from the 1990s onwards.

Today image theory has made us aware of possibilities, which show up, if we try another dialogue with images than the one that rests on the claim – or negation – of identity. With this awareness, image theory seems to be in dialogue with the challenges of innovation in general and design, visual art, and architecture in particular. These challenges are obfuscated rather than clarified with the still widespread notion of identity between image and reality, and demands that we with language and theory undertakes to reflect images as certain *acting possibilities* (deliberately formulated as a logical aporia) to create and change reality. Architecture seems today again an autographic art insofar as computing power and new flexible drawing software makes it possible to develop the drawings in a continuing dialogue with the reality one intends to create and, which is not identical with any number of representations whatsoever.[8] On the contrary. The new situation is not only a chance, but a challenge, as it calls for new, creative and continuing exchange between the visual and the conceptual throughout the creative process.

It is our view that this new situation again poses an opportunity of discourse between visual art, architecture and design, and that this discourse is conveyed by insights from image theories by among others, Gottfried Boehm, Horst Bredekamp, George Didi-Huberman, Hal Forster, James Elkins, David Summers, Adrian Forty and which are still evolving.

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[8]   Concerning architecture as an autographic art in a digital context, cf. Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm*, Cambridge Mass., USA, 2011.