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Introduction "The Thought of Images"

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Article

In recent years, the notion of thinking images has enjoyed increasing attention. Obviously, the idea that image-making occurs at the intersection between philosophy and art has had a long history. In the sixteenth century, Giordano Bruno observed the strong ties among philosophy, painting, and poetry when he wrote that painting is a way both of poeticizing and thinking. He asserted that without thinking, no one can be a true poet or painter. Later Diderot, in his *Salons,* famously considered painting as a philosophical enterprise-once poetry had been drained from its surface. Comparing philosophers to genre and still-life painters, he observed how domestic scenes contain scarcely any poetry but are derived exclusively from philosophy's signal qualities study, patience, and truth. A somewhat different view had been put forth in Poussin's celebrated letters to Chantelou of 1640. In distinguishing a picture's conception and composition from what he calls its *thought,* Poussin precisely articulated the relation of philosophy to painting. Ultimately his composition/conception/thought distinction led Hubert Damisch to conclude in *The Origin of Perspective* (1987) that painting is a form of thinking. Damisch stated that linear perspective has allowed artists to make a "statement" in painting, an argument that is exclusively based on (and applicable to) early modern oil painting. Recently, in *Art and Mind* (2005), Ernst van Alphen widened such media-specific boundaries by suggesting that all art, in fact, thinks. A similar claim has been made for cinema and photography as well. Most notably, Walter Benjamin called photography the enlightenment of painting, assuming, in what I suppose to be a Kantian gesture, that the photographic image has thrown off the yoke of pictorial tradition, and of Academic tutelage, to start "thinking" for itself. Gilles Deleuze claimed that cinema produces particular, filmic ways of thinking, regarding thinking as a continuous renewal of "the image of thought" that precedes all thinking and that, in turn, has been transformed by cinema as such.

Though most of these reflections on what we may generally call "philosophizing images" have been widely disseminated, what has not yet been realized are substantive explorations of these images as a series or type; moreover, we lack new designs for particular interpretative approaches that such images may solicit. This collection of essays makes a first step toward an understanding or theorization of images as fundamentally philosophical. The contributions (both verbal and visual) are varied in their selection of materials as well as their theoretical perspectives, ranging from contemporary still-life painting to early cinema, from modernist portraiture to postmodern theater, from Piranesi's architecture to Giacometti's sculpture, from Bataille's obsession to Iser's wandering viewpoint, from Jeff Wall's photographs to Benjamin's

dialectical image, from the space in painting to the space in literature, and from phenomenology to iconography. A genuinely interdisciplinary selection indeed, this volume presents a preliminary exploration of the possibilities (and limitations) of this promising new mode of dealing with images in the wide and overlapping fields of philosophy and visual studies. As the authors and artists demonstrate, the notion of a thinking picture immediately raises questions as to how such a picture corresponds to self-reflexive or so-called self-aware images, or theories of the imaginary, and how a new, essentially inter-medial series of "philosophizing images" relates to interpretative approaches that encompass close reading, semiotics, visual rhetoric, notions of affect, and the aspect of speculation in meaning-making in general. Another issue is the problem of where the thought of the image resides-or rather, how we, as viewers, can "see" it. What is it exactly that pictures want from us (to use W.J.T. Mitchell's phrase)? In addition, various contributors ponder the ways in which images look back at us: how pictures acquire a "face" that confronts us in a moment of shock, provoking us to think.

In addressing these and other topics, this collection presents a rich, multi-layered blueprint of an alternative approach to images that may further complement or refine accepted methods of (historical) interpretation, (cultural) analysis, or (close) reading. The authors, in fact, have taken up the challenge to re-think the notion of the image and its capacities, in order to articulate a mode of thought that is as much a philosophy of the image as imaginative philosophy. The volume opens with two contributions of artists Charlotte Mott and Nikolaus Gansterer, that need no further introduction, as their photos and drawings speak for themselves.

With a paper entitled "Can pictures think?," James Elkins opened a March 2006 symposium held at the Jan van Eyck Academy (Maastricht, the Netherlands) that launched a long-term research project on the notion of the Pensive Image. Initially inspired by Roland Barthes' observation in *Camera Lucida* that photography is subversive when it is pensive, when it *thinks,* this research project is devoted to "philosophizing images." The idea for this issue of *Image&Narrative* grew out of discussions in the Pensive Image seminars. Half of the contributors are either currently researchers at the Jan van Eyck Academy or have been affiliated with the institute in the past. I would like to thank all participants of the seminar for sharing their thoughts on this theme, and for the lively and inspiring debates we have had so far.

Hanneke Grootenboer is senior researcher at the University of Amsterdam and advising researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht (NE), where she runs a project on The Pensive Image. The author of *The Rhetoric of Perspective* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), she is currently writing a book on intimacy and extremity of vision entitled *Treasuring the Gaze.*

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