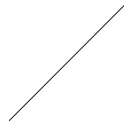


# post.pic

*imageboards, tagging, tool images, visual studies –  
a primer by practitioners*



Research group  
Communication in a Digital Age

Piet Zwart Institute  
Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam University



## introduction

Academic and non-academic discussions of visual culture are often based on the assumption that we live in a time of visual oversaturation, which in turn is typically attributed to new media. The texts in this booklet, most of which were written by media practitioners, analyse the contemporary form and function of images in the context of the most recent digital media – and arrive at often unexpected conclusions.

Our contemporary world of visual media is no longer dominated by video and TV. It is no longer the world – to quote earlier media theories – of the hyperreal, of the visual frenzy, which started with MTV in the 1980<sup>s</sup> and peaked ten years ago with the popular TV show CSI. What we encounter nowadays on the Internet, on web sites such as Flickr, on imageboards and in hacker culture, are images as objects – tagged, data-mined, indexed in databases. In more general terms, this is nothing less than the reinvention of the image: as a carrier of information which is no longer purely, or predominantly, visual. This may also explain why the notion of the “pictorial turn”, as summarized in Mark Halawa’s contribution, has generated such extensive and fundamental discussions of what an image actually is.

This booklet is based on a series of short lectures given for a general audience during the International Beeldfestival/Image Festival Rotterdam 2009. With the exception of the joint presentation by Alex Adriaansens and Julius von Bismarck, the lectures were presented by the research programme Communication in a Digital Age at the Piet Zwart Institute, Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam University, which is also the publisher of this little volume.

— Florian Cramer



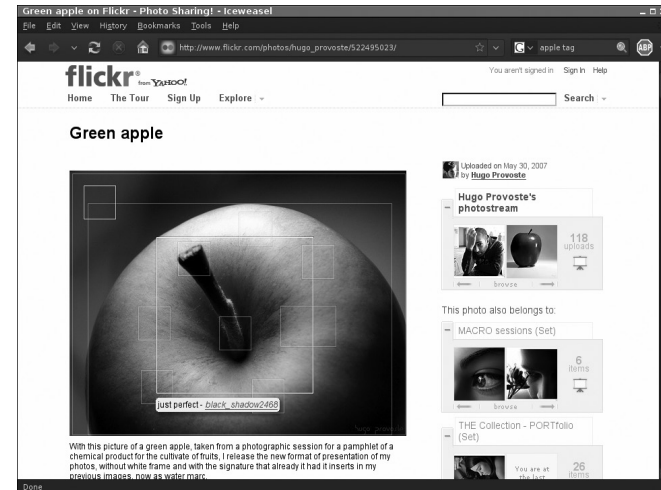
img 01 - - - - -

Clockwise from top left:  
Florian Cramer, Mark Halawa,  
Kim de Groot, Tim Klok,  
Julius von Bismarck.  
photos by Hannah Anthonysz

Florian Cramer (DE), Aymeric Mansoux (F)  
Tagging

The most familiar form of tagging is probably still the graffiti tag: a hybrid of writing, calligraphy and images, typically used as a kind of signature by graffiti artists, mainly on buildings and trains. Graffiti signatures have existed since the late 1960s, when graffiti writers such as Cornbread and TAKI 183 first received media attention. The phenomenon was already widespread by the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the term “graffiti tag” first appeared in American subculture. In computing, meta-information and tagging are standard features of file systems and databases; on the most general level, tagging is simply the labelling of an information object (typically a file) using a name or other keywords. Meta-tagging entered the popular consciousness when it became a central feature of the so-called “Web 2.0”. On websites such as YouTube and Flickr, meta-tagging transformed digital image culture: visual elements could now be identified through the sets of tags attributed to them, such as “apple”, “green” and “photograph” in the case of a photo of a green apple. Meta tagging is also a key feature of web sites such as del.icio.us, a social bookmarking site where people assign keyword tags to web links (in the context of computers and the Internet, the terms keywords and meta tags are, for all intents and purposes, interchangeable).

But is there any actual resemblance between an urban graffiti wall, and our green apple in Flickr? Or is it merely some linguistic coincidence that makes us use the same word for both image cultures? Basic semiotics might help to shed some light on this question. Semiotics (literally the study of signs) originated in the late nineteenth century through the pioneering work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce; its main concern is the analysis of signs and signification processes. Peirce divided signs into three basic categories: icon, index and symbol. If we consider a photograph of the smoke caused by a forest fire, we identify the image as smoke because of its iconic resemblance to actual smoke. But if we are standing outside, looking at actual smoke, we interpret this as an “indexical sign” (a trace and an indicator) of fire. Finally, there is the symbolic sign, the simplest example of which would be the five-letter word “smoke” (which bears no iconic resemblance to smoke, nor is it an indexical trace of smoke).



img 02

If we apply this classification to tagging, then the most intuitive association would be to define tags as symbolic signs: whether they be calligraphic graffiti, or meta tags on digital files, they do not iconically depict anything, but rather resemble writing, as signatures and markings. Or perhaps graffiti aims to be iconic, since it emphasizes visual form and visual associations with other elements of the signature. Yet such explanations are not entirely satisfactory. A historical analysis of graffiti tags, and of their evolution within electronic media, may perhaps give us more insight.

In the opening scene of “Wild Style”, an early 1980s cult film about the old-school hip hop and graffiti scenes, we see a graffiti artist spraying a tag based on his own name (“Ray”) on a subway train in a tunnel. The tag is not merely a symbolic inscription of the name – nor is the juxtaposition of the symbolic sign “Ray” with the iconic footage in the film of Ray’s heads and hands. What the scene (and indeed most of the film) is about, is the marking of a site, using the subway train as a mobile territory which expands the inscription throughout the urban

space. Another 1980s film, Dennis Hopper's "Colors", tells the story of two cops in gangland Los Angeles. In one key scene, they catch a gang member spraying his tag on another gang's wall. They immediately move him out of "enemy" territory and back into his own gang's, even showing him a place where he can spray without getting himself killed. And indeed, his tag functions as a declaration of gang war, which further escalates as the film progresses. Tagging becomes an elaborate form of insult, "dissing" or verbal abuse, which is of course risky in any situation, besides gangland tagging conventions. Here the graffiti tag is not a symbolic or iconic representation, but an indexical territorial marking. Likewise, early graffiti signatures often consisted of the tagger's nickname and street number.

Dennis Hopper's "Colors" can help us understand one major cultural difference between Europe and America, at least regarding the way graffiti tags are perceived. In a city like Rotterdam, graffiti is seen as a mostly harmless expression of rebellious youth culture; whereas in contemporary America, graffiti tags are habitually associated with criminal gangs: the territorial marking of no-go areas. This is an actual claim (and not merely a symbolic one) that a group operating outside of state authority is in control of a territory; not unlike the way dogs will mark their territory with their urine. And so, beyond the symbolic and iconic elements of graffiti tagging, its most powerful aspect is clearly an indexical one.

In the underground computer scene of the 1980s and 1990s, graffiti culture was more or less seamlessly expanded into an electronic graffiti culture among hackers and crackers. This manifested itself most prominently in the "cracktros" for illegally copied computer games: besides removing the copy protection of games on floppy disks, cracker groups (identifying themselves using pseudonyms) would add their own intro screen to the game. Not only did the intro symbolically tag the game with the name of the cracker group; the visual aesthetics of these screens quickly evolved from using plain text and display hacks, to visually emulating actual graffiti writing. Here the territory is shifted, from the city to the computer game and the distribution of media. The practice later branched out into several other activities, such as the "demo" scene, where cracktros grew into complex, computer-generative audiovisual animations.



img 03

Another similar subculture was FTP tagging. For a brief period in the early 2000s, the Internet had become a vast jungle of poorly maintained servers. These machines were leftovers from the late dotcom boom, when many of the new companies providing web hosting and server administration had little or no understanding of network security. For approximately two years this provided an extraordinary new territory for amateur pirates, who made public FTP servers their playground. FTP taggers, once they had located the "pub" folder of these servers, used them for sharing their own files, including illegal material, cracked software, music, and videos. Once a "pub" folder had been found, it was tagged to mark it as the sole property of the individual or the group who had discovered it. This tag was simply a file directory path stating the name of the "pub" owner. For example:

```
/tmp/.test/=-/=-/=-Tagged by GT!!!!=-/=-/=-Filled.by.S/c/a/c/f/a/c/e/fac/{^.^}YDFXP{^.^}/
```

Such tags were not plainly visible, but could be read by looking at all the subfolders contained in the "pub" folder. In the example above, the tag indicates that the folder was discovered by "GT" and that the files in the last folder were uploaded by "Scarface", both of whom are members of

the group “YoFXP”. To prevent “pubstealing” and in-group vandalism, and to make it harder for anyone to get rid of the original “squatters”, a technique known as “dirlocking” was developed to make the tag impossible to remove (analogous to using a permanent marker for signing on a graffiti wall). To make things even trickier, it became common practice to upload thousands of variations of the same tag all at once, thus creating a complete file-system maze on top of the lock.

Eventually, pubstealing evolved from stealing storage space to simply deleting any uploaded content – just for the sake of it, or for the thrill and satisfaction of solving a tag maze or breaking a locked tag, in order to re-appropriate the territory and mark it with one’s own tag. In this subculture, tagging was not merely a matter of marking or symbolically describing a territory, but of actually creating it for a group of peers. The tag thus became a means of granting or preventing access and information retrieval – not unlike the function of tags in systems such as Flickr today.

Tagging has become one of the core features of the so-called Web 2.0. Vodafone even advertises a mobile phone service with the slogan “Tagging, posting, chatting, surfing. And making phone calls” – thus recounting a history of media in reverse, in which tagging has become the most contemporary (and most important) form of telecommunication media usage.

Tagging the image of the apple with attributes such as “green” and “Granny Smith” could of course be considered redundant, given that we can already see the apple in the image. However, we need such words in order to be able to find the image at all. Without the tags, the image cannot be retrieved from any database, search engine or web site. Consequently, the so-called “Semantic Web” is nothing more (or less) than a standardized, comprehensive meta-tagging system for the World Wide Web, allowing for better and easier retrieval of information. The way in which we use computers to access images is predominantly linguistic. Even before the Web, before Google, YouTube and Flickr, we were already well acquainted with linguistic tagging – giving images filenames such as “apple.jpg”, which are, of course, nothing but tags: in fact, the oldest system of meta tagging used in computers. We cannot use a picture of one apple in order to “google” other images of other kinds of apples – at least not without some prior human and computer tagging:



img 04

a set of numerical pixel patterns common to several digital photographs of apples, and a human programmer who has identified this set as corresponding to the English word “apple”.

This should put into perspective any overblown claims of a “pictorial turn” in our culture, at least as far as the Internet is concerned. At the very least, we must reconsider the notion of images being in opposition to text, or being an entirely different medium than text. In our contemporary visual culture, we can no longer separate one from the other. The three semiotic properties of images – symbolic, iconic and indexical – converge in these systems; much in the same way that indexical marking of territory, symbolic writing, and iconic pictorial representation converged in the older visual medium of the graffiti. And so the leap from the graffiti wall to Flickr may not be so much of a leap at all.

img 02 - - - - -

(page 5) Green apple on Flickr.

img 00 - - - - -

(page 11) illustration for conference  
blog: Sandra de Haan.

img 05 - - - - -

(this page) Tagged van. New York City  
LES, 2007.

## Image Fulgurator – introduction

*Alex Adriaansens (NL)*

V2\_

Before I introduce Julius von Bismarck, I would like to say a few words on the subject of images. This festival focuses on the production of images, which as we know are highly valued in contemporary society – I might even say over-valued, because, if we look at an image and try to understand what it is, how it was produced and how it functions, we must first realise that any image can only be understood in the context of a bigger picture (pun intended).

What I mean by this, is that we produce images, not only in order to represent the world outside of the camera (in other words, reality) – we can actually, through the use of media, create new realities. Furthermore, we understand the image as being an agent – a social, political or cultural agent – that is, a form of instrumental action: creating something in order to influence the thoughts and actions of others. This means the image is not merely a representation of reality, but also the embodiment of an (often complex) intention. The image is therefore all about perception, art, culture, the control of knowledge, and the interpretation of meaning.

It is within this context that V2\_ (the interdisciplinary media institute in Rotterdam where I work) looks at images. We investigate how media is used in order to create the realities we live in, and how we can act and interact in these realities. This means that we relate to the image by understanding how it is interconnected and interwoven with acting and interacting. The implication of this is that for V2\_ the image is definitely not a end in itself.

Today we are very pleased to introduce the Berlin-based artist Julius von Bismarck, who will be presenting some of his work, particularly the Image Fulgurator, a strategic device for manipulating pictures taken with personal photo cameras. This artwork has received several awards and generated a great deal of debate, and with good reason – because it's a brilliant concept.



*Julius von Bismarck (DE)*  
**Image Fulgurator**

I invented the Image Fulgurator three years ago, based on my research on how we sense the world around us, particularly through the medium of the still image. We have long grown accustomed to looking at still images (paintings and newspapers for instance). We look at images in order to perceive the world around us, and to project it inside our heads. Even though you may have never been to Africa, you have an idea of how things look over there. Africa is a “visual” inside our heads.

For my first project, I worked inside an old factory building where there was no light at all. I equipped two people with cameras and instructed them to move through the building, orienting themselves using only the information obtained in the split-second of the camera’s flash. I also did the experiment myself. Since we quickly forget what we have seen, we soon find ourselves relying on the after-image in our eye. But when we move our head (and thus our eye) the image moves as well, and no longer corresponds with the actual room. We believe we’re walking towards the door, but since our eyes have moved, we’re really not. Clearly, the brain doesn’t work so well with still images. I later exhibited this work at V2\_, flashing the captured images onto a wall and playing the sounds recorded during the experiment in the darkened factory – and since the audience was unable to “move” inside this projected visual space (consisting of just a few sounds and a minimum of visual information) the whole situation turned out to be quite uncomfortable, even scary.

Technically, the Image Fulgurator is very much based on the camera flash projection which I have just described, only the goal here is entirely different: to reverse the process of the camera. Normally, a camera takes a still picture of the moving world. The world itself is not still – it’s in a state of constant flow. What a regular camera does it to visually freeze one moment, preserving it forever. The Fulgurator, on the other hand, takes a frozen moment and puts it back out into the world, for one moment. For this purpose, I simply use normal photographic equipment such as an old camera, a lens and a flash (it turns out optical components can just as well be used the other way round) except that I have attached the flash to the back of the camera, in order to project for one millisecond an image (from inside the camera, on exposed film) into the



img 06

real world. The result is something our eyes can’t see: the human eye is unable to register an image projected for only one millisecond. Photography, on the other hand, can capture such a moment, and can thus show us more of the world around us than our naked eye ever could.

img 05 - - - - -  
 (page 5) Christian cross ‘flashed’  
 during Obama’s speech Berlin’s Sieg-  
 essäule, July 24th 2008.  
 img 06 - - - - -  
 (this page) illustration for confer-  
 ence blog: Sandra de Haan.

img 07 - - - - -  
 (page 14 - 15) Germany national eagle  
 emblem ‘flashed’ on riot police unit.  
 Berlin Kreuzberg May 1st, 2009.





### 3 4chan and Imageboards

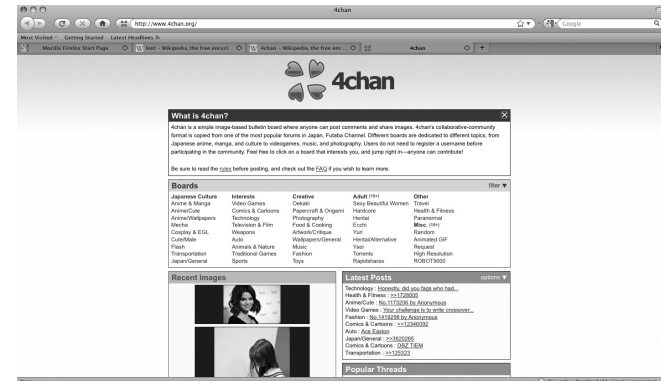
#### Timo Klok (NL) 4chan and Imageboards

Anyone working in the field of contemporary visual culture should have at least a basic understanding of imageboards. But I must also advise against spending too much time on them because – to recall an often-quoted warning – “it will melt your brain”. An imageboard is basically a web forum focusing on posted images (and responses to these images) rather than on texts. The earliest imageboard was Japanese, which is why a substantial amount of the content on these boards is related to Japanese popular culture.

The web design of imageboards is usually extremely simple, featuring two basic visual styles: blue and pink. The blue version is “safe” for viewing in the workplace, the pink clearly not. Typically, a post begins with an image (of a game character, for instance) which then triggers various responses, either in text or image form. The only rule is that no illegal material may be uploaded, which means in practice that anything goes, with the notable exception of child pornography. The “user population” of imageboards is demographically quite specific: mostly young males with little or no education, for whom the imageboard is the centre of their social life.

Of the hundreds of imageboards, 4chan < <http://www.4chan.org> > deserves particular attention since it is currently the largest, most important and most influential. 4chan was founded in 2003, quite a while ago by Internet standards. In 2009, 4chan registered an average of 40,000 posts per day. Just to get an idea of the magnitude of this subculture, let us consider an average post: an arbitrary image with no text message attached. Within about ten minutes, it has generated more than 150 image replies and some 200 text responses.

Most imageboards make use of the same basic forum categories, such as “Japanese Culture”, “Interests”, “Creative”, “Adult”, “Other”, “Miscellaneous”, which are often further divided into subcategories. By far the most important forum is the “random” board, which could best be described as the place where the Internet goes to vomit after a late night out – an endless flow of mostly pornographic and grotesque images. 4chan and other imageboards require no login, posting is done anonymously;



img 08

anyone can pick any user name, but it is customary to use no name at all, so the name “anonymous” has become a collective pseudonym (and synonym) for all imageboard users.

Imageboard culture has a few defining characteristics, starting with the visual style of the forums. It is rather remarkable, in the age of “Web 2.0”, to see such a large group of users obviously uninterested in having their blog or forum updated with new features or a “cool” design – there is no search function, no tag clouds, no flashy animations. Suggestions to modify the 4chan boards were rejected by 99 percent of users, who preferred to keep things simple – quite unlike Dutch blogs and forums (such as the well-known Geenstijl) dealing with similar “low culture” content.

Another important influence of imageboards on visual culture is the “image macro”: plain text superimposed onto a photo. The image macro has by now become a visual format in its own right. One particular sub-format, the “demotivational poster”, combines a photo with a caption cynically commenting on the person or situation depicted; this in itself has become an “internet meme” (an image, phrase, sound file or animation, which becomes the subject of a hype and pervades the Internet for months or even years). The extent of 4chan’s cultural influence is demonstrated by the fact 90 percent of all Internet memes have originated

on its forums – the two most famous being “lolcats” (grotesque photos of cats, featuring image macros in mangled English) and “rickrolling” (web links that redirect an unsuspecting user to a YouTube video of Rick Astley’s 1980’s pop song “Never Gonna Give You Up”).

4chan and other imageboards also influence online language. Language on imageboards, and particularly on 4chan, follows a particular set of unwritten rules (in much the same way as SMS text messaging on mobile phones). With all the jargon and deliberate misspellings, a newcomer will probably understand no more than half of what is being said on 4chan’s posts. Misspellings can originate in two different ways. They may have first occurred as common typos or other mistakes, repeated by others for fun, before eventually becoming standardized: a good example of this is the spelling of the word “like” as “liek”. Any user using the standard spelling “like” would be immediately identified as a newcomer, and thus a target for ridicule. Other misspellings are motivated by the need to bypass text-based censorship filters, for example the word “porn” which is commonly replaced with “pron”.

The power and influence of imageboards extends far beyond their own subculture. In 2007, 4chan users collectively hacked an online election, thus ensuring that 4chan’s founder (known as “Moot”) was “voted” Time Magazine’s most influential person of the year. Imageboard users have also been known to attack websites, making them crash by deliberately overloading them. And beyond the boundaries of the online world, a fake news flash posted by 4chan users, stating that Steve Jobs had suffered a major heart attack, sent Apple stocks plummeting within half an hour. An amusing detail is that it was immediately obvious (at least to insiders) that this was a hoax, since the fake news story quoted its source as being “anonymous” – which is the group identifier of 4chan.

In fact, anyone can join or start an activist movement or event under the name of “Anonymous” – such as the anti-Scientology “Project Chanology” movement by members of “Anonymous” which organises street demonstrations attended by thousands of people wearing “Anonymous” masks. Another target was the U.S. telephone and Internet provider AT&T, which had briefly blocked 4chan boards (apparently by mistake); within a few hours, a massive online campaign was launched to set up websites and recruit an army of “Anonymous” users to collectively attack



img 09

AT&T’s online facilities. As soon as AT&T found out about the imminent attack, it removed the filter.

4chan.org is, of course, the best resource for learning more about imageboards. Knowyourmeme.com provides a helpful historical overview of Internet “memes”. 31chan is the only significant Dutch imageboard. Overviews of existing imageboards can be found on Encyclopedia Dramatica < <http://encycopediadramatica.com> > and Overchan < <http://www.1chan.net/overchan> >. But remember: you have been warned...

img 08 - - - - -  
(page 0) The 4chan website.img 09 - - - - -  
(this page) Samples from imageboards.

*Kim de Groot (NL)*  
**The Image as a Tool**

New media has transformed the nature of the image, from being a strictly visual object, to being a digital data object. What are the consequences of this transformation?

Images are no longer merely a representation of our reality: we now manage our reality through images, by indexing our lives on the web and on our computers. The image has become a networked device for managing information objects (such as maintaining a list of contacts, or keeping one's online status up-to-date). On social networking sites such as Facebook or Hyves, family or holiday pictures serve as a means of initiating "friendship" between people. Not only sharing images, but also ranking, commenting and tagging them – all of this has become a form of social activity in its own right. The best illustration of this paradigm is surely Flickr, with its integrated environment for sharing, tagging, annotating, commenting upon, and socially networking images.

The image thus becomes a focus of interest and activity. One image may exist in a number of collections and in various online locations, connecting networks of people, comments, tags and cameras. This is partly because the image is a data object containing information (metadata) about its production date, its creator, the camera used to take it, technical details, and so on.

Another important development is the access to fast, digital and networked technology (such as the camera phone) which encourages the continuous visual recording of reality. The Internet is no longer a secondary channel, if we consider how digital cameras now feature built-in YouTube capturing and uploading functions. The underlying message is that the industry expects the user to create a YouTube video, a (moving) image that will be duplicated and ranked, tagged and commented – in other words, a public document to be presented to the world.

The well-known "dog poop girl" photographed while refusing to clean up after her dog in a subway car, dramatically shows how the camera phone can be used as a tool for social monitoring and peer control: the resulting public hate campaign eventually led to the girl dropping out



img 10

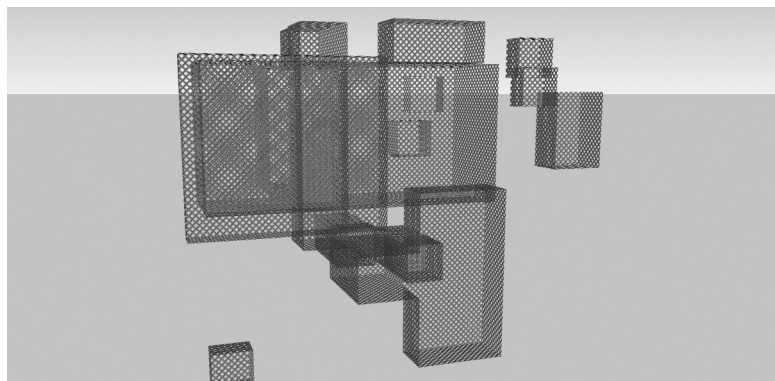
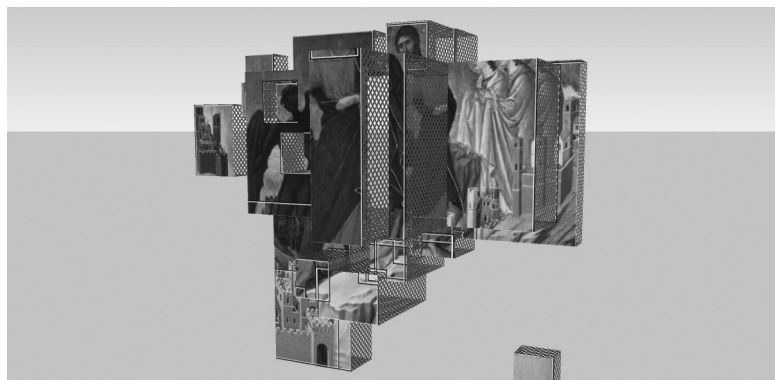
of university. And when images of violent "Happy Slapping" attacks are created and distributed using these new media, the video image is no longer a mere "trophy" but a networked weapon, constructing a visual event based on the "Happy Slapping" protocol of recording and repetition. Finally, services such as Google Earth, Google Ocean and Google Maps illustrate our obsession with imaging every bit of reality. Is Google Earth an atlas, or is it a political act of claiming territory by imaging it?

Another issue is the aesthetics of such images-as-tools. How does the indexical role of the image affect its visual characteristics? Does this somehow generate a new kind of aesthetic? Flickr's "add note" function (causing an image to be superimposed with layers of annotation frames which become visible when the viewer rolls the mouse over the image) demonstrates how the Flickr image presents itself as a data container.

For museums, adopting the concept of metadata and other features of the digital image opens up interesting possibilities. What are the implications of creating a “digital twin” of a painting, and how can such an object be exhibited together with the original artwork? How, for example, can metadata change the museum’s exhibition conventions? Can the copy in a sense be considered an equal counterpart to the original? These, and other, networked image parameters make it possible, visually as well as conceptually, to rethink traditional image categories and concepts – such as “paintings”, “originals” and “museums”.

img 10 - - - - -  
 (page 0) ‘Happy Slapping’ still

img 11 - - - - -  
 (right page) Deconstruction of the  
 image into hierarchical modules,  
 arranged in order of attention and  
 popularity. *Kim de Groot (inspired by  
 the Flickr Add Note functionality)*



*Mark Halawa (DE)*

**Image and Visual Studies, and the concept of “pictorial turn”**

What is the notion of the “pictorial turn” all about? Modern life increasingly takes place on display screens, and less and less through traditional modes of media consumption. A great number of individuals could not do their jobs properly without making extensive use of images and displays. Scientific progress, for example, is essentially linked to visual technologies. Scientists, as well as doctors, are dependent on such technologies and devices. These enable them to visualize objects which would otherwise remain unseen and, therefore, unnoticed.

The omnipresence and indispensability of images can also be witnessed within modern mass media. The photograph of Lynndie England, an American soldier holding an Iraqi prisoner of war on a leash, is probably known to almost everyone. But what many people do not know, is that Amnesty International had already documented torture at the Abu Ghraib prison almost a full year before such photographs appeared on TV and in various newspapers. The media and the general public obviously only started caring when they saw the images. The scandal of Abu Ghraib, therefore, shows how important it is to be seen in order to exist, in and for the public sphere.

This is but one example of how indispensable images have become throughout our modern, media-driven society. One academic consequence of this development, is an increasing interest in the study of images within contemporary humanities. A growing number of scholars is trying to understand what it is that makes images so powerful. In Political Science, for instance, it has become quite common to investigate the extent to which images serve as a means of propaganda. Other scholars, such as philosophers, try to define the meaning of the term “image” or “picture”. They want to find out what all images or pictures have in common, independently of their various meanings, contents, material characteristics, shapes, etc.

Systematic reflection on the nature of images is of course nothing new: such considerations can already be found, for example, in the writings of Plato and other classical philosophers. There is also a vast amount of literature to be found on this subject in contemporary American and

French humanities. However, the notion of Image and Visual Studies as an academic field and discipline in its own right is very recent, dating from the late 1980<sup>s</sup> to early 1990<sup>s</sup>.

Conversely, Image and Visual Studies involves many different disciplines: psychology researches how people psychologically and physiologically respond to images; anthropology investigates what images can teach us about the nature of man as a tool-making and image-making animal; visual culture studies, which is quite common in Anglo-Saxon academia, analyzes, for example, how cultural, racial or sexual differences or stereotypes are visually presented within different media; and as mentioned before, philosophers primarily ask what an image is, how exactly images are (and need to be) perceived in order to be seen as images – and what perception in general, as well as the ability to perceive images in particular, means in the first place.

The notion of Image and Visual Studies also implies a paradigm shift within art history. Traditionally, art historians primarily dealt with the so-called “high arts”. In this context, it was customary to mainly concentrate on a picture’s technical or stylistic execution. Furthermore, the main task of Art History was associated with the attempt to decode the meaning of a specific work of art.

Nowadays, more and more art historians focus instead on images in general, rather than artistic images in particular. Therefore, they also pay attention to the so-called “low arts”. Instead of only investigating the aesthetic value of a picture, or reconstructing the artistic skills of a specific painter, art historians (at least those who promote the idea of Image and Visual Studies) try to understand how viewers perceive and respond to particular images in certain contexts. They are not merely interested in the “beauty” of a specific image, nor in the artistic skills of a painter. Instead, they ask us to reflect about our attitudes towards specific images. To summarize, the focus here is primarily on the image itself, as well as on the perceptual, historical, or ideological relationship between image and spectator.

One good example of a type of image which can be analyzed without focusing mainly on technical skills or an elaborate concept of art, is the medieval Byzantine icon. These religious paintings were worshipped



and kissed by pious Christians who believed icons could enable direct contact with the Gods and saints they depicted. The icon was not admired for its aesthetic value but for its supposed sacred aura, which enabled the image to serve as a mediator between God and his faithful in the context of specific religious rituals. It is worth noting that Christian reformers such as Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli, raged against such beliefs, asking people to worship the word of God rather than the image.

Another interesting case is philosophy, which habitually questions phenomena which are seemingly or supposedly self-evident. Perception is one such phenomenon. When it comes to the philosophical investigation of images, many philosophers highlight the ontological specificity and essence of images. Images may look exactly like the “real” world. Still, what is present in an image can only exist visually; it can only be seen: a depicted apple, for instance, cannot be touched or smelled because the state of its existence is only given in a visual form. Trompe-l’oeil paintings illustrate this (only seemingly trivial) aspect very well: these are paintings which are designed to literally “trick the eye”, making spectators believe that they can actually touch what in truth can never be touched but only seen. Plato strongly disapproved of such artworks, specifically on grounds of such deception and falsehood.

These few examples have given us a glimpse of the current theoretical (and historical) debate and reflection on the concept of the image within the humanities – and also of how and why the image in general, and visual culture in particular, have become the focus of intensive scientific investigation and theoretical reflection.

img 12 - - - - -

A photo obtained by The Washington Post and released May 6, 2004, shows U.S. Army Spc. Lynndie England, of the 372nd Military Police Company with a naked detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.  
*AP Photo/The Washington Post*

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