continuing historical conflict within modernity between the forces of its own self-criticism and those that would wish it to remain the undisturbed terrain of unnamed Oedipal fantasies, rivalries, and archaic pleasures of narcissism. These Freud identified with the death drive. Such resistance may, therefore, be read as art history's death wish. Others—like feminists—permit themselves different desires, by admitting to the role of desire in the production of cultural forms and in their viewers, readers, and users. In the words of Adrienne Rich quoted above, at issue is not simply a chapter in new cultural history. It is a matter of life and death, for re-viewing the histories of the histories of culture is not a polite debate about "Art History and Its Theories," but a political act of survival.

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Theories of Reference

Christopher S. Wood

What we have mostly come to mean by "theory" is an attitude of ironic doubt toward any truth claims made by a language or a representational system. This skepticism has been learned, in part, from aesthetic texts. Aesthetic texts are unusually dense clusters of signification where staged contradictions among messages dramatize the treachery of all representation. In our intellectual culture, "theory" seems to thrive in proportion to proximity to such texts. "Theory" has also acted as a powerful lever, shunting entire disciplines away from the study of reference, that is, the capacity of a language to point at a real object or event; and instead toward the study of signification, that is, the property simply of making sense. Here it may help to introduce the distinction drawn by analytic philosophy between an "extensional" and an "intensional" semantics. An example of an expression that has intension but no extension is "the very first landscape Dürer ever drew"—the phrase makes sense but we are not certain what object it refers to. Another such phrase is "the meaning of Cézanne's *Card Players*." Other expressions, supposedly, make precise reference to things in the world. In the humanistic disciplines, however, "theoretical" skepticism has nurtured the extreme belief, derived from idealist epistemology, that signification is the only reality available to us: the belief, in other words, that no expression can ever be *more* than intensional.

In this sense, art history has always been strongly "theoretical." Images are insecurely hooked to reality. Unlike language, images do not formulate expressions by means of a system of oppositions within a stable structure. Indeed, some art historians believe that images fail altogether to signify and so will not even yield to an intensional semantics, let alone to a historicist hermeneutics with extensional ambitions. Because it refuses to deliver precise meanings, the image (even the nonaesthetic image) has become the emblem of the aesthetic text in general. The use of eidetic metaphors in poetics attests to this (figure of speech, imagery); so too does the use of the generic word "art" as a shorthand for the plastic arts.

Art historians hesitate to submit visual texts to the reading strategies developed by ordinary historians for their own less charismatic documents. Art historians mistrust causal or circumstantial explanations of the genesis of their texts, and disdain any coarse assumptions about what an image might represent. Because they are so protective of the intensionality of the work of art, art historians tend to clear room within their writing for subjective, normative, and critical responses. From the point of view of, say, an economic historian, even the most buttoned-down art history will echo annoyingly the elliptical cinquecento "conversation," the knowing prattle of Salon journalism, or the turgid Victorian appreciative essay.

Traditionally, "theoretical" skepticism about the extension of works of art has been coupled with a taste for exceedingly precise description and taxonomy of those works. Art-historical scholarship often seems little more than an amplification of the philological and archaeological disciplines of epigraphy, numismatics, *Quellenkunde,* and folk-

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lore. Iconography itself retains some of the flavor of an auxiliary discipline. Thus it is no wonder that the peculiar maneuver of the discipline, and its most distinctive accomplishment, is connoisseurship. Connoisseurship marries a philological appetite for precision to an extreme epistemological fastidiousness. Connoisseurship worships the incongruity between the signifying structures of the image and the world of objects and events outside the frame. It avoids making any uncouth statements about what the image means. Instead, connoisseurship is content to point out the family resemblances among images. The connoisseur will at most offer aphoristic or lyrical phrases as the only possible rejoinders to the image. Connoisseurship is sometimes too squeamish to follow the graphic trace back to a living, thinking, intending mind; it suffices to attach the trace to a name. Connoisseurship thus carries semiotic idealism to an extreme of nominalism.

So art history is most "theoretical" at its extremes, the extremes of aestheticism and empiricism. There is nothing more theoretically respectable than treating the image as a nonsignifying entity (for example, an altarpiece considered as the end product of a collaborative process of fund raising, consultation, carpentering, and painting), or as an entity with an agreed-upon meaning that gets attached to a new signified, thus becoming a signifier in its own right, within a larger system of meaning (the altarpiece considered as the public emblem of the munificence, piety, or good taste of whoever paid for it). In this way no unwarranted statements are made about what is signified by the representational apparatus at work *within* the image. Patronage studies and reception history all commonly perform such a bracketing, as does connoisseurship. It is the very tactic—unexceptional and unexceptionable—employed by a religious historian who studies the fortunes of a particular eschatological doctrine without ever interrogating the truth value of that doctrine. Despite the soundness of the tactic, many art historians believe empirical method to have been refuted or superannuated by "theory." Empirical method, which is based on accumulation of evidence, inductive reasoning, and probability, is actually noncompetitive with theoretical skepticism. Empirical method was devised precisely to minimize credulous and slipshod assumptions about representation and meaning.

Early on it was recognized that the conventionality of visual representation—the same conventionality that seemed to lock the image into an intensional semantics—could also serve as the foundation for a social history of images. This apparent paradox was the mainspring of the historically ambitious formalisms of the early twentieth century. Neo-Kantian art criticism of the late nineteenth century—the writings of Konrad Fiedler, for instance—had convinced many scholars that the image gave no trustworthy access to real objects and events. But clearly the image *was* linked to other representations, and not only visual and linguistic representations, but also representations in the widest sense, throughout the society and the culture. All these representations were governed by a common repertoire of conventions.

The insight into the sociality of vision bloomed into the grandiose contextualisms of the 1910s and 1920s, some highly theorized, some less so: the "Expressionist" art history of Fritz Burger or Max Dvořák; the imaginative Marxism of the Hungarians Arnold Hauser and Frederick Antal; Erwin Panofsky in his essay "Perspective as Symbolic Form"; the so-called *Strukturanalyse* developed by Otto Pächt, Hans Sedlmayr, and Guido Kaschnitz-Weinberg, the most zealous disciples of Aloïs Riegl. These art histories tried to coordinate the content of the aesthetic text with real phenomena and conditions, not by some limpid, analogic correspondence between text and world, but according to complex representational models provided by the aesthetic text itself. The key was to treat the objects and events of the world as if they, too, were texts to be interpreted. The work of art was then revealed to stand in certain allegorical or generally figural relationships to those other texts. Works of art emerged, finally, not as mere registrations of reality, but as a reality in their own right, capable of working feedback effects upon politics, ideology, and even sensory perception.

It is easy to see that these "figural" contextualisms are not so different from our own late twentieth-century contextualisms, no less heady and precarious. The allegorizing or poeticizing mode of doing history is common to a broad range of contemporary practices, including some Foucauldian and "New Historicist" art histories, Cultural Studies, and much British and German Marxist art history. Figural contextualisms solve art history's "theoretical" problem by deriving their epistemologies from the image itself, or ultimately from language. What distinguishes our own versions of this practice is a familiarity with ever more nuanced and flexible models of representation. Terms such as intertextuality, *mise en abyme*, appropriation, and colonization, adapted from semiotically based poetics or discourse-analysis, are now routinely used in historical writing.

Figural contextualism works best in the field of modern Western art, where the perspectival distortion of temporal and cultural proximity favors allegorical modes of writing. But a method really gets its mettle tested in the study of non-Western and pre-Romantic art. For many who work in these fields, the results of the figural contextualisms are unsatisfying, for the disarmingly simple reason (which any semiotician would concede) that extension to reality is not achieved. In other words, it is hard to tell which figurations are true and which are false. It is a discouraging fact that figural contextualism, because it is rooted in idealist epistemology, today no less than in 1910, does not command much respect from scholarly disciplines beyond the hard-core humanities.

Empiricist-aestheticist art history, then, produces good but limited results because it delicately ignores the representational mechanisms at work within the image. And the semiotic approach either is satisfied to interpret the image ahistorically, or attempts a historicization that semiotics can never deliver.

It is therefore not surprising that some art historians have lost patience with the fastidiousness of "theory," whether in its more traditional aestheticist guise, or in its current incarnation as semiotic idealism. They are ready to argue

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that the image, so far from merely signifying, or even not signifying at all, can actually be used to *refer* to the world. Some claim that the image refers more effectively and more dramatically than words ever can. Others believe that the image, as a representation with material substance, inflicts uncoded effects on its material beholders, effects that semiotics cannot account for. In sum, many art historians are unwilling to quarantine the image within an intensional semantics.

To refer is to point at the world, perhaps with an index finger or with the slide lecturer's thin red beam, but more commonly with statements, terms, names, descriptions, or images. Portraits, effigies, maps, botanical illustrations, and religious icons (provided that one believes in the existence of the sacred personage portrayed) are all examples of extensional uses of images. When images are used in this way, they do not merely signify; they also mention real objects in the world. A society may agree on a standard formula for making such referential images. This opens the *practice* of referring to semiotic analysis. But the precision of the particular reference, or its success in singling out the correct object in the world, is not arbitrary.

The precision of an image's reference is in part a technological matter. An assemblage of surrogate stimuli can make beholders believe in a reality "behind" a representation almost as firmly as they believe in their own perceptions, although it is true that not all referential usages require such an assemblage. To the extent that the image is a product of technology, its form is governed by matter and nature, and not only by conventional agreement.

Finally, images are material samples. They do not merely stand for an absent world, as linguistic signs do. They are actual physical fragments, visitants, from that world. Images thus partially re-create their own original, historical performance. They do not stand in the same pressing need of contextualization that a linguistic utterance does.

Images—including works of art—provoke desire, awe, confusion. Images provide information. Such functions are not so easily demystified by critical analysis. These functions are to blame for art history's permanently "unfulfilled" relationship to theory. But they have also been the most pointed instigation to the project of a cultural history built on images. It was these more-than-semiotic functions of the image that gave the discipline of art history the great prestige it enjoyed from about 1915 to 1930. In those years art history seemed to mark the crossroads between anthropology, the history of religion, social history, psychology, and the history of ideas.

Early attempts to resist the total semioticization of the image were clumsy. Nineteenth-century "empathy" theory, for example, tried to account for the capacity of images to stimulate certain psycho-physical responses in beholders. Obviously images do such things, and there is little that is semiotic about it. The "content" of the visual stimulus is only partially governed by a conventional code. But knowledge about such somatic processes was completely inadequate, and still is. There is no physiology of aesthetics.

Empathy theory did contribute to one very extraordinary art-historical model: Aby Warburg's "iconology." Influenced by the theories of Friedrich Vischer and Robert Vischer and by Darwin's writings on the expression of emotions, Warburg developed a concept of the symbol that would bridge the phenomenal world and the mind, a kind of scientifically refurbished avatar of the Romantic symbol. Warburg's symbol is never quite reduced to a coded vehicle for content because it retains a "live" connection to passion and fear. The symbol infiltrates art not only in the obvious way—in the cult image—but also in secular portraits, emblems of political power, cosmological imagery, and crisis zones such as the early Renaissance rapprochements with antique form. In our own time, the Romantic symbol has been more or less banished by the idea of allegory. Perhaps its last epiphany was in Jean-François Lyotard's *Discours, figure* (1971), which offered "figurality" as a mode of permanent resistance to discourse's regime, resistance waged precisely by the mute operations of designation and tropological deformation.

Phenomenological thought, meanwhile, envisions what might be called a "presemiotic" art history. Phenomenology seeks to make contact with an irreducible ground of objecthood behind the sign. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, rebelled against the neo-Kantian acceptance of mediation between subject and object, whether by signs or by the visual metaphors employed by art historians ("form," or "symbolic form"). Henri Maldiney, another French phenomenologist who writes on Cézanne, accuses semioticians of using the code as an "alibi," as if he cannot believe that they really care so little about the making of aesthetic texts and the mysteries of figuration.

Another line of interpretation that tries to burst the boundaries of semiotics, and so appeals to many who still believe in the "truth" of the work of art, is the psychoanalytic. An example of such an interpretation is Julia Kristeva's essay "Giotto's Joy" (published in *Calligram,* edited by Norman Bryson, Cambridge, 1988), which contends that painted color, because it is linked by contiguity to perceived objects in the world, can serve within a system of representation as a trace of various excessive and physiologically supported drives that perpetually escape representation. Kristeva goes on to argue that color in Western painting, at the moment when painting was extricating itself from the medieval system, became the locus of the self's reconstitution against the coded, nomothetic Christian narrative of transcendence.

In our own time, the most characteristic symptom of uneasiness with the semiotic model is perhaps the concept of indexicality. Indices in language, which are also called shifters or deictic markers, are words whose content is determined by the proximity of actual people and things, or of points in space-time, in other words by the particular circumstances of a linguistic utterance. Personal or demonstrative pronouns, for example, are shifters. This concept has been adapted with considerable success to pictures, even though a picture can only metaphorically be called an utterance. The index in the picture is the point where signification breaks down and the picture is connected to the moment that produced it. Recent work that avails itself of this concept has dealt with self-portraits (here laying claim to territory that might otherwise be conceded to phenomeno-

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logical art history); the technology and rhetoric of linear perspective; the gaze; and subject-enunciation.

Shifters are often discussed alongside true indices, which are objects that point to the existence of other objects or prior events because they were physically caused by those objects or events. The connection between an index and its cause is established by inferential reasoning. The index then becomes a piece of *evidence*. Indexical elements in an image—for instance, deposits of ink or pigment or the scars left by a chisel—can be used as evidence for all sorts of things, including the circumstances of the image's fabrication. An image dominated by indexical elements, like a photograph, can even be used in its entirety as an index of reality.

The semiotician Charles Peirce argued that an index is also a species of sign. But it is not clear that he was right. A sign, properly, is a manipulation of an agreed-upon code. Neither the content of the sign nor its status as a sign can be contingent upon the factual existence of a referent in the world. Of course, any indexical image or indexical component of an image can be made to function as a sign. But that function is supererogatory to its identity as something caused by something else. Nevertheless, Peirce's effort to recuperate the index for semiotics is often adduced by art historians as if it were uncontested. Many supposed analyses of indexicality in art are really no more than semiotic analyses of signs of indexicality, that is, signs that signify pointing or contiguity—for example, the rhetorical tropes of apostrophe or metonymy. Contrariwise, some empiricists are beginning to call their bits of evidence "indices," as if the semiotic-sounding terminology could make empirical method respectable again.

The index is thus an amphibious term that is used, not quite honorably, to cover both signs and evidence at once. If you wish to backtrack from the index to the existence of an actual object (reversing the causality, as it were), then you are dealing with evidence. If you are uninterested in the existence of the object that the index indicates, then you are dealing with a sign—and from the point of view of the semiotician, a sign no less conventional (although much less arbitrary) than a linguistic sign.

The currency of the parasemiotic concept of indexicality is evidently an effect of the turbulence generated by recent attempts to "denature" all the old discourses of power, gender, and representation. Difference used to be seen as the product of both nature and convention. The shock of the recent abolition of nature has produced a recoil in the general direction of materiality, facture, the body, desire, and perhaps as well toward some reconciliation between intension and extension in art-historical interpretation. The index may prove a mediator in this affair.

Many scholars are disappointed by the results of social art history and cultural history. But it is not the case that these projects have faltered because they are "politically" driven, as we so often hear. Cultural Studies and Foucauldian discourse-analysis are brought down neither by their partisanship nor by their moralism. When the contextualisms fall, it is because they have so little extension, or truth-value. Right now, art history operates with maximum theoretical integrity when it verges toward the extremes of empiricism and aestheticism: the truth of the fact, the truth of the work of art. Clearly, truth is a little more elusive once you venture into the wide district between these extremes, which is where most people want to be. But if art history is to regain some of the interdisciplinary prestige it had earlier in the century, it has to keep working this territory, and without abandoning theory. The way to do this is to worry again about all the things images do other than signify.

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