

# Performative uses of images

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In a small article entitled “Research: The Young” (*Jeunes chercheurs*) [1], Roland Barthes expresses his contempt for ‘academic prose’, as commonly understood in past practice. His text, intended for post-graduate students in arts and humanities, is a true declaration against what the author called the separation of discourses: that of scientificity and the discourse of desire, that is to say, writing: “the task (of research) must be perceived in desire (...) to cast the subject across the blank page, not to ‘express’ it (nothing to do with ‘subjectivity’) but to disperse it: to overflow the regular discourse of research”(Barthes, 1987, p 69, 71). His *Text*, in italics, is a new object that belongs to nobody and that is created by means of interdisciplinarity (very incipient at the time). Could we – many years later – think of it, as he proposes, as a *Tissue*? Perhaps we could think from the work to the *Text* and from the *Text* to the device; a device in which images and words are entangled: images of art, but also of writing itself. Images – to go beyond Barthes – of which we emphasize their role as acts (Bredenkamp) or events (Belting); images that neither represent nor illustrate, but intervene in the reconfiguration of the sensible (Rancière). A device-text where all of this inevitably interweaves with the logics of distribution.

Mieke Bal has argued in his *travelling* concepts that it is not convenient to treat performance (in the sense of acting) and performativity (that a word does what it says) separately, and that beyond the unique character of ‘acting’, here and now, it is very important that both terms relate to a complex temporality. Of these concepts (or, rather, words in use), here we retain especially their transformative power, and we insist that the subject is not prior to the discourse, that art is not confirmative, but ‘provocative’, that is to say, performative, ‘provocative’, that is to say, performative (2002, p. 94). Claiming the performative uses of images requires invoking their strength above their meaning; finding precisely that provocative character. In this issue we will not deal with the fortunes of the concept, nor with the discussions that have generated from Austin, Derrida, Butler or Lazzarato. We take for granted that, from the artistic practices and all the theoretical network generated by them, we have been living smoothly with this concept for a while. We have adopted it without having to be accused of the lack of ‘rigour’ that is produced when concepts are used as ‘labels’. We already live in a play that has become performative in its turn: when it is stated, the concept elicits epistemic and political changes that coincide, in addition, with what has been happening in the *plazas*. Therefore, I believe I can declare that, at least, we use it ‘with a sense’.

After the iconic turn made, almost sequentially, by W. J. T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm – a turn required to be theoretically levelled with a world invaded by images – followed – not necessarily in consecutive order – this sui generis performative turn that we propose. We could think that the body of research that is being carried out half way between visual studies and artistic practices would then be a *performative turn* [2], if we count on the agency of the images,

our interlocutors. The result of the *performative activity* (Ramírez, 2005), in lectures and academic lessons, is shared by theoreticians and artists alike. In the iconic-verbal discourse that guides us, Juan Antonio Ramírez has always compared us to primitive cinema: a gesticulating professor before a screen, a figure close to that of the commentators who ‘explained’ the images, as in silent movies. What many of us, in our current lessons and lectures, share with certain artists is an estrangement from a previous wording that images ‘illustrate’ *a posteriori* to regain their heuristic ability. We do not explain images: they help us think. The processual event that we carry out highlights both what the images produce (in us) or provoke in a certain network of relations, and what we can do with them when we share them, move them, or generate with/side by side to/by means of them a rewriting of narratives –as is our case. We have freed the images from the indignity of becoming ‘illustrations’, so they can go on to prove the power of display, not only inherent to editing (*montage*) as an epistemological tool (Didi-Huberman), but also –to follow Bohem–, to the quality of ‘showing’ that is typical of images: the power they have, in addition, to point to something that is not there.

It is likely that Barthes’ words still resonate in the present, and to his ‘freedom for the signifier’ we can add, from the methodology practiced in our project, the unstoppable plays between word and image that, ‘from’ art, generate the aforementioned small narratives. The elective affinities that many professors have established with the performative documentary, as is the case of Hito Steyerl [3], Anri Sala or the ‘lecture performances’ by Rabih Mroué, come as no surprise. The text presented here closely follows his work methodology, that he significantly called *The inhabitants of images* in one of his lecture-performances.

We also find a dialogic ‘body to body’ with the images in Yayo Aznar’s text when she proves that many of the problems treated do not exist outside of the performative agency of the photographic devices that represent them, and how the mechanisms necessary to dismantle the identity theatrical logic are regained in the artistic practices.

All of this shows that we are still interested in images, beyond their being caught in the metaphor of the ‘world as text’, a sign that we must necessarily decipher to see it point to external circumstances, issues that relate visibility and representation. As indicated in the title of our project, the ‘images’ are of ‘art’, and carry therefore an aesthetic potential, or they are ‘manufactured’ – why not – ‘within art’, because it is within the framework of art where the image tout court also makes sense. It is there where the aforementioned device is generated. We have therefore deemed pertinent what Horst Bredekamp, one of the major representatives of the *Kulturwissenschaften*, has considered the power of action of images, describing it with the term ‘Bildakt’: how the ‘picture act’ generates facts [4]. In any case, it is a pragmatics in its most political sense, as stated by Paloma Checa in her analysis of the photo romance novels by the group of artists ASCO, where she insists on the importance of repetition in any performative act.

The reflection on the performative uses of images does not only pertain to academic research and methodology; there is also a whole specific area of what we could call biopolitics of the image, where these issues can be elucidated. The problems that so obsessed us from 9/11 seem very far: the image as ‘representation’, its ambivalence, its capacity to give ‘visibility’ to the world events, and not only this, its capacity, also, to put in relation the visible and the invisible, its capacity to communicate experience. The art worlds have not ceased to speak of the image as document, or to value its practices of document generation, up to the point of provoking a certain ‘archive mania’ (Rolnik, 2010). The greatest problem XXth century art sought to reveal has been proven *ad nauseam*: the different variants of the ‘crisis of representation’. I say that those problems seem remote and I want to stress the ‘seem’, because, as we know, by no means are things overcome hegelianly – one never knows when and under what appearance a new crisis will come back –, but the truth is that now

we have the impression that there are more urgent matters. The crisis of representation is not precisely the crisis of art; it directly involves the heart of democracy.

In the previous issue we reflected the impact of the outcry “¡Que no nos representan, que no!” (We aren’t represented, we aren’t!). This announcement-image of 15-M – an image of all the posters-body-technique and of an event-moment, ‘a plaza’ – tips the scale toward the performative character that had set the key topic of the seminar “Cuerpo, imagen y saber” (Body, image and knowing) (2011) [5]. Now we want to insist specifically on the power of images in their ‘acting’. Representation and performativity have occupied different fields; the latter, given that process and body are present, always appears stirring up the typical and fixed representations of the identitary regime. On the side of performativity seem to lie the strength, the escape, the living that takes action to shake the *figural* in the field *formed* by and from these representations, – in line again with Suely Rolnik.

Hand in hand with Warhol and Nauman, Bárbara Sainza approaches the outbreak of the society of the spectacle and manages to convince us that these authors have been the pioneers of “an imaginary dimension, a life estranged from life, alienated, daydreamed, hallucinated, by which we do not make images; rather, we become images, we are images”. Something very different happened in the events arising from the revolution in the plazas. The relation text-body-image, present in the occupy movements, spoke out and came out. In this coming out- speaking out, they took part in the world. Hence Francesca Martinez Tagliavia raises in her text the issue of the relation between bioimage and *general intellect* and how it all leads to the conviction that images transform bodies. If this was evident, from a negative point of view, from the emerging media system of the 50s, now, with the Occupy movement, the question is to value images that are not external to the event, that ultimately do not account for it, but are produced within it: images that ‘produce’ the event.

We have reflected on the convenience of changing the final title of our project ‘in the global visual culture’ and consider it under the light of ‘the society of control’. Hence the presence, in our third seminar, of Maurizio Lazzarato, with whom Santiago Lucendo establishes a secret dialogue. Consequently, the images of debt round off the article section.

To end, two reviews. Pablo Martínez comments on one of the publications generated around the project *Animism* which, under the direction of Anselm Franke, has taken the form of an exhibition, a seminar and a series of text compilations about the topic. In this issue about the performativity of images, we deemed it appropriate to introduce this ‘making’ of the images that connects them with the spirit of animism.

With the same relevance, Julia Ramírez approaches us to *Beautiful Trouble. A toolbox for Revolution*, a collective book edited by Andrew Boyd and Dave Oswald Mitchell in which various forms of creative activism are presented, in the manner of an instruction manual.

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## Footnotes

[1] It is the foreword to a monographic issue of the journal *Communications*, (nr 9, 1972), *Le texte: de la théorie à la recherche* (The text: from theory to research). Available at [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/issue/comm\\_0588-8018\\_1972\\_num\\_19\\_1](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/issue/comm_0588-8018_1972_num_19_1). (Accessed December 1, 2012.)

[2] Not in the precise sense proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte, but fairly close to her insistence on the transition from meaning to effect, from the semiotic to the performative. <http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/course-citru/%20perfconq04/syllabus.shtml>. (Accessed December 1, 2012.)

[3] It is no accident that when Hito Steyerl (2011) rethinks the documentary form, he goes ‘beyond representation’, in view of how the media are dedicated to the mobilisation of affects, contributing to the ‘empire of the senses’.

[4] On the transition from language acts to picture acts, see M. Lumbreras (2010, p. 261): “Recently, Bredenkamp has focussed on analysing what he calls ‘picture acts’ (Bildakte): ‘Images, considered as living actors [...] possess the ability to mark [History], like any action or procedure: insofar as it is a picture act, it creates the facts by putting images into the world’”.

Horst Bredenkamp, “Bildakte als Zeugnis und Urteil”, in Monika Flacke (Ed.) (2004), *Mythen der Nationen. 1945 - Arena der Erinnerung*, Berlin, 2004, p. 29-66. We have consulted the French version (2008), “Actes d’images comme témoignage et comme jugement”, *Trivium*, 1. (On-line.) <http://trivium.revues.org/index226.html>. (Accessed December 1,

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[5] <http://re-visiones.imaginarrar.net/spip.php?article46>. (Accessed 1 December, 2012.)

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