Divided Attention:
Remarks on »Iconic Difference«
Gottfried Boehm

Introduction: Arguments and Experiences

Over the past twenty years, the new critical *paradigm of the image* has developed as much in breadth as in depth. Thus, in Basel's project »Iconic Criticism« we have cultivated an emphatically interdisciplinary and empirical approach, while also securely anchoring it in a guiding theoretical question, which seeks the common foundations in each and every kind of iconic representation. In my view, the figure of iconic difference lends itself to *integrating* tightly the aspect of *breadth* with that of *depth*, the empirical or interpretative research interests with the theoretical ones: we find in the innumerable faces of images the reasons why we legitimately call them in each case an image.

A lateral or comparative use of difference as a criterion that distinguishes objects from objects is in no way trivial, since it creates awareness for the range of the iconic, its historical and cultural genesis and its *quantity*. What is »still« an image and what is an image »no longer«? When did the first images come into being? How can the limits of the iconic be specified? Are these limits impermeable or must we reckon with latencies? In what situations have images fulfilled specific social, political, scientific, or aesthetic functions? What role do medium and materiality play? And so on. It quickly becomes apparent that the answers to such questions essentially already entail a provisional concept of the image. Yet instead of a concept, we often have nothing more than ossified conventions. Accordingly, for the common media consumer images are flat and determined by their referent: they are images »of something«; images or »Bilder,« as one says in German, are »Ab-Bilder,« »re-presentations.« However, a brief survey of the history of the image or of modern art makes evident that the iconic can on no account be reduced to such criteria.

All the more important is the other, *vertical version* of iconic difference, which *descends into a depth*, and which profits from the given interpretive framework. This version no longer differentiates one object from another, no longer groups them according to their family resemblances,

23

designs or genres. Instead it understands difference as a *constitutive struc-ture* of each individual image. Each image, in my thesis, functions in its *own way* according to the *model of difference*, a selection of whose aspects I will discuss in this article.

The suspicion of an objective contradiction may seem apparent here. This contradiction is wedged between the incredible variety *of* images (in their plurality) and the determinacy of *the* image as a singulare tantum. The greater the variety, the more unlikely it seems that a common denominator can be found. Is it indeed possible to bring together the vast and vivid *differences* – from cave painting to today – within the perspective of a unity, for example in the unity of a consistent iconic structure?

The question »what is an image?« has consequently been repeatedly criticized as »ideological« or »metaphysical.« It purportedly operates in an ahistorical realm of universals with a concealed ontology, in search of an alleged timeless »essence« of the image. Such doubts have led, among other things, to the replacement of the question »what is an image?« with other questions, for example: »*When*« are images? What do they »*do*«? Or, in Tom Mitchell's formulation, »what do pictures *want*?« Yet, in my under-standing, iconic difference always already tackles *patterns of activity*, pro-cesses or events (leaving aside the concept of the »act,« which Horst Bre-dekamp has placed at the center of his thinking). In sum, iconic difference is about *temporality* as *the motivating force* and center of the iconic. It implies an omnipresent »viewer,« who does not find himself alongside the object as a super additum after the fact; iconic difference is rather conceived from the beginning, *ab ovo*, with regard to its *corporeal realization*. »The sense of the image« and the »sensory organs« (to cite the title of an earlier treat-ment)[1] interact. A theory that endeavors toward consistency will thus strive to bring together careful analysis of the iconic matrix with the image's inherent potential for movements, affects, effects, func-tions and uses.

The concept of iconic difference attempts to lay the foundations for iconic criticism, by procuring the foundational arguments from the phenomena themselves. Nonetheless, it is in dialogue with phi-losophy and disciplines of pure, fundamental research such as linguistics, anthropology, paleontology or psychology. Those who argue with *difference* find themselves compelled to reference one of the oldest lines of theoretical argumentation. Since its Greek inceptions, the entanglement of *unity* and *difference* has constituted the central topic of philosophy, which has been explored again and again in different ways: by Plato mathematically (as one and the undefined two), or dialectically in various manners (for exam-ple, as meant by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel). The difference between saying and showing was decisive for Ludwig Wittgenstein; Martin Heide-gger spoke of an ontological difference, whose basis he repositioned in human *Dasein*. Jacques Derrida's *différance* drew the ensuing consequences of Heidegger's concept, while Gilles Deleuze departed from »difference and repetition.« It would clearly take more than one article to work out the particular points of contact and the no less important discrepancies

1 Gottfried Boehm, »Bildsinn und Sin-nesorgane,« in *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*, ed. Jürgen Stöhr (Cologne: Du-mont, 1996), 148 – 65.

among these views. Yet one point remains clear: no matter how fruitful and unavoidable dialogues with philosophy or the disciplines of fundamental research remain, at issue are neither imported formulas, nor how-to manuals. Iconic difference must be developed out if its own premises. At issue is an intellectual sovereignty that does not blindly borrow its concepts from the tradition of thought, but rather draws from the restlessness of phenomena and from rich sensible experience. The two loose ends, concept and perception, are to be brought together by means of the figure of iconic difference.

Confronting the Image

But how can the conditions inherent to difference actually be determined?

We begin on-site, in situ, or, in the words of Georges Didi-Huberman: *Devant l'image*. And *how* to begin? An observation lends itself to this task, an observation that is verifiable with regard to any number of entirely different pictorial works. It is of a structural nature and fully evident.

He who allows himself in viewing an image to be taken up by it is compelled by what he sees to divide his attention. On the one hand, he notices distinct elements: figures, objects, forms, colors, details of all kinds; while, on the other hand, he regards the interrelation in which all these elements appear together. For that reason, I can specify my title into: »Divided Attention between Taking Apart and Taking Part.« To be ambiguous: attention takes *apart* both insofar as it divides into elements, and insofar as it takes *part* or wholly participates in the matter at hand. It is precisely this that occurs in the viewing of images: the one unfolds under the conditions of the other. Images thus imply a double visibility, which does not, of course, preclude the possibility that one can turn a blind eye to the place of appearance in favor of concentrating on the particularities, that one can treat the image – against the grain – as an object. Such a procedure certainly never does justice to iconic reality, because that reality differs from all other realities in the world. It relies on a specific culture of seeing, which is grounded in physiological and genetic conditions, but that also must be learned. It is a culture that has developed historically and culturally in various ways. The taking apart and taking part of attention is thus the mode by means of which we perform the internal differentiation inherent to the image itself, that is, its iconic difference.

Let me note, in passing, Richard Wollheim's thought-provoking critique of Ernst Gombrich.[2] Wollheim insists that the mere *seeing of an object*, captured in the formula of perceiving something »as« something, insufficiently describes the *seeing of an image*. Such seeing requires consideration of the medium of the elements, the place in which something comes into view, and which Wollheim marks with the negligible word »in.« Something is seen *in* something, whenever we are dealing with *images*. And the artist decides how this »being in« is particularly organized, even though it would, of course, require an extensive discussion to describe the qualities

2 Richard Wollheim, »Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation,« in *Art and Its Objects. With Six Supplementary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 205 – 26. Richard Wollheim, »Reflections on Art and Illusion,« in *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 261 – 89.

of this »in,« for example, the »seeing in,« or the difference between »inside and outside,« or the »being seen.« Normally the border or threshold determined by the frame belongs to these qualities, even though it only plays a role in certain phases of the history of images, and is thus principally dispensable. What remains truly indispensible is a perspicuity that makes it possible to establish a perceptible interrelation between the represented elements and the scene of their occurrence. Cave paintings demonstrate as much, while even an artist such as Ellsworth Kelly reendows this interrelation between the distinction of a colored form and the material surface, for which he employs the wall, with flexibility, thereby retreating from the norms of easel painting. I will return to additional aspects in a moment.

But first, an objection near at hand that reads: is iconic difference not just another apparitional return of the old contrast between figure and ground in a new guise, and thus the establishment of a two-part model that is exactly composed of figure *and* ground? Have I not, for my part, spoken of a *double* visibility?

Consider for a moment the paramount example in this context, the reversible visual figures introduced by Edgar Rubin that have dominated discussions in perceptual psychology for a long time. The duck-rabbit or Rubin's vase-face are decidedly two-parted, since they can be seen exclusively *either* in one way *or* in another way. They are consequently appreciably unsuitable when it comes to uncovering the reality of the image. The image, after all, contains *three* moments: the site of the elements, the elements themselves and the relay between the two. In the contrast between figure and ground, the relay evaporates into a passing effect that itself cannot be seen. In contrast, the explicit objective of the model of iconic difference lies in working out this folding that occurs, the crisscrossing (chiasmus), the temporal processes and transitions; that is, the articulation of iconic meaning.

It furthermore does not suffice to reduce images to surface or flatness, no matter how often they are discussed in these terms. There are, after all, images realized in three dimensions, for example reliefs, or the variety of older and newer representations that operate with objecthood. It is accordingly appropriate to replace the category of the surface with that of the *continuum*, and to replace the category of the figure or other elements with that of *distinction*, and thus to see these iconic magnitudes equipped with a particular kind of materiality.

The particularity of the image's materiality derives from the fact that it always anticipates being viewed by the human body. The body thereby transfers its own order and its structure of perception onto the artifact. Left and right of the image, up and down, front and back or its other coordinates are anything but objective attributes; rather, they are only justifiable out of the act and conditions of corporeal contemplation. Images do not lose their objective qualities, such as their physical or geometric properties; yet their objectivity gains in the act of contemplation a surplus, an emergence. For that reason, it is advisable to speak of *materiality* rather than simply of *material*, since material acquires in perceptual realization, additional *immaterial* qualities. Deleuze once spoke of the »ascending ground« of the

image, with which he meant its inherent potential for energization. »It is,« he remarked in *Difference and Repetition*, »as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground.«[3] Aspects thereby come into view that are concomitant with the asymmetry of the human body, which, for example, weighs the bottom-left of the visual field differently from the above-right. Geometric premises become endowed with inclines or inclinations; they are inhabited by affects and intensities, and this only comes to bear through perception. The continuum is consequently neither a static carrier or pedestal upon which the remainder is constructed, nor a background or foil against which the play of representation takes place. It is, rather, itself an active, interfering magnitude that becomes effective, for example, on the level of distinctions, when it develops interstitial spaces, when it lends the image a visual rhythm that integrates the moments of difference with another. In other words, the continuum already organizes the transition into distinctions; it sets in motion the event of the image and the process of its articulation.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 28.

The Temporality of Difference

We have begun to familiarize ourselves with the structure of iconic difference and its temporal specificity. In a final set of remarks, I will illustrate these aspects with reference to an example. To begin with, however, I would like to make a few suggestions that attempt to elucidate the central role of iconic difference. Why endow it with such a key role?

The answer is simultaneously easy and difficult. Formulated in today's prevailing terms, it concerns taking the »as« that generates meaning (by marking something »as« something), which is linguistically conceived, and thinking it anew in the form of an iconic relation. For while images have neither a mouth nor a voice, even though they cannot speak, no one doubts that they are capable of articulating cognitive insights concerning the world, of producing affects and intensities and of bringing to expression the experience of vitality as well as manifold other effects. What makes them capable of this? Or, put differently: What takes the place of predication in the image? In my view, the success of a future image theory will be measured by whether and how it finds a convincing answer to this question, an answer that withstands the demands that the question encompasses.

Wollheim undertook the first step when he adapted the linguistic »as« to the visual conditions of the image, transforming the »as« into an »in.« Iconic difference goes a few steps further. It undertakes to replace the equally minute but equally powerful word »is,« active in the copula of the sentence, with a visual agent. Beyond speech there are pre-nominal means of articulating meaning, first and foremost that of deixis. Images say nothing, but they show a great deal.

If iconic difference thereby slips into the universal role of language, replacing or extending its possibilities, then it too becomes a site in which the most important aspects of the iconic can be deduced. Since it would be impossible to unfold this entire spectrum in this article, I will limit myself to a few considerations, and then proceed to the example.

Fig. 1   Henri Matisse, *Red Studio*,
1911. Oil on canvas, 181.0 × 219.1 cm.
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Iconic difference can be formulated in multiple ways. The processes occurring in iconic difference are correspondingly able to actualize various semantic valences available to images (affect, cognition, communication, representation, analysis, etc.). A precise and accurate linguistic description of the iconic articulation of meaning is ambitious because it involves grasping its specific visual and material operations. Incidentally, the question as to whether images are capable of negation or whether they must qualify as purely affirmative magnitudes, the currently dominant view, poses a particular problem. If one argues, as I have done, from the perspective of difference, one cannot avoid apprehending a form of negation particular to images, an apprehension that incidentally only succeeds if one does not begin with the thought of the yes or no of a proposition. Once again, the issue at hand entails retreating from our overwhelming orientation along the precepts of linguistically understood thought. But this too requires its own chapter.

You have perhaps noticed that I have avoided describing iconic difference as a form of dialectic. I have also spoken of neither *reflection* nor *self-reflection*, nor of *semiosis*, simply because we are accustomed to connecting them with the movements of concepts or of signs. Instead, what was under discussion here was, among other things, a play of interrelations or the state of being crisscrossed, referred to as the chiasmus, or an articulation, an event or an ascending ground. These categories are better adapted to the conditions of the image; they are better equipped to formulate appropriately its modes of conveying meaning.

In conclusion I will focus on a single aspect of iconic difference and will then finally make it perspicuous with an example. I have intentionally avoided mentioning this particular aspect until now and will begin by making it comprehensible in the context I have discussed. The materiality that I have addressed accompanies the perception of something that Louis Marin first discussed with great sophistication in relation to its iconic significance, namely *opacity*. More particularly, opacity describes how the visual imperviousness of the ground (whose significance, by the way, Marcel Duchamp examined in his paintings on glass in complex and intelligent ways) is the condition for the *transparency* of meaning that comes to bear in representation.

Let me go one step further. The point of departure is once again an observation. The opacity that confronts the viewer of an image not only inhibits his seeing into the depth, it also redirects his gaze. We look into an image and the image answers us with the view it offers. It accommodates us, showing itself in a way that permits us to enter into a dialogue with it. Iconic difference organizes itself, in other words, by means of *inversion*. Images are anything but optical one-way streets. They are, to the contrary, crisscrossing structures, in which a hither and thither takes place. Sight directed inward *returns* out of the image as a view of something.

The example I have chosen is Henri Matisse's noteworthy *Red Studio* (1911) [Fig. 1]. While it stands in the tradition of studio images, it undermines that tradition's usual iconography, which depicts the artist

at work, inspired by his muse, or immersed with great concentration in activity. This studio does not even display an easel, much less the artist himself busy at work. Instead, we encounter an accumulation of things and products of elapsed activities in the form of scattered images. They offer themselves in a mode of electrifying vitality, triggered by a suffusing red.

With what type of difference is Matisse concerned? You'll remember: our attention divides itself in the act of viewing – it takes apart and it takes part in: the dominating red sets into the eye as a continuum, as a whole, that fully subsumes the visible. Nowhere does it seem diminished or interrupted. Such a ground literally shows itself as »ascending«; it mediates the depth with the near, and exposes the force of a strong intensity. That to which inversion refers becomes particularly clear here: sight directed inward is *answered* by the strong force of an opaque red that becomes equally immaterial.

The other portion of our attention becomes divided among the manifold of represented things and their distinctions that are spread across the surface. Matisse amplified the tension that is inherent in the fission of sight to its utmost. The deictic capacity, which here emerges primarily from the organization of color, relies on a closely related *temporal* tension. The red ground points to the things, the things point back. But how? The continuum presents itself with great effect as a simultaneous magnitude and thereby brings the duration, a temporal experience, into play. The individual things, in contrast, mark a successive here and there, a visual sequence that never comes to rest. And these contrasting temporal modalities (simultaneity versus succession) never resolve into one another. Duration and sequence remain eternally unreconciled and conflict with one another. And yet the image shows them as a visual unity, as an interplay, such that the concept of *chiasmus* (which Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasized) should be taken quite literally. We encounter a veritable entanglement: more specifically, a penetration of realities. The continuum of red is so energetic that it completely penetrates the individual things, for example, table, chair, closet and clock. It exhausts their objective substance, transforming them completely into the color red. The imaginary room, removed from the perspectival order, marks an oscillation that encompasses all iconic dimensions, not just near and far, but also right and left, as well as up and down. In this case, the red, ascending out of the ground, acts as the agent of iconic difference. It initiates movement and creates room for the viewer's gaze, in which sight and view enter into exchange. The representational inventory of the image, its quantity of verifiable objects, could be quickly *stated* and listed. That which defines *Red Studio* clearly lies in a completely different, non-linguistic register: it opens us up to nuances and to a spectrum of experience that leave behind the expressible, appending to it that which only lets itself be shown. An alternative logic unfolds: the logic of iconic difference.