

BARBARA BAERT

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

In 2004, at the beginning of my academic career, I became involved in an interdisciplinary research program on one verse: John 20, 17. The research team consisted of an exegete, an anthropologist, and myself as an art historian. For me, the *Noli me tangere* project was not only *pars pro toto* for a turn into the senses, but also led to the concept of *Interspace*. *Interspace* concerns the “magnetic field” between word and image, or the methodical translation of a literary corpus into the iconographic tradition. The insights from this interdisciplinary collaboration, have given me the methodological resilience for the follow-up projects on the iconography of the bleeding woman from Mark, and on the context of the so-called *Johannesschüssel*.

These latter projects not only challenged the relationship between high & low material culture, but also fundamentally questioned the original concept of *Interspace* once again. Where iconography appeared to have no safety net in primary sources, and knowledge of functions of textless phenomena remained “blind,” other approaches forced themselves upon us.

Infra: §3 en §4.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

– As early-career scholar onwards. Gerhard Wolf & Herbert Kessler about the mandylion and *il volto di Cristo*. These authors had a considerable impact on me regarding the ontology of the image (later also Georges Didi-Huberman and his *L’image ouverte*).

– *Compagnon de route*. The Belgian non-conformist art historian/anthropologist Paul Vandebroek on nun’s art, material culture and Berber textiles. Vandebroek did not need the Turn for his transcultural & transhistorical research in archetypes and migration of motifs.

– Today. Anthropologist Timothy Ingold on the impact of environmental senses and his work on the meaning of the visual medium as making processes.

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

I will explore this question with three case-studies that challenged me to reconsider the dichotomy between style & iconography, between form & content.

1. Hybrid Objects: Enclosed Gardens. *Revisions*

The phenomenon of the Enclosed Gardens (*Besloten Hofes*) in the Low Countries is one that has only received some attention in the last decade. As a product of so-called cottage industry within the nunneries, it was not considered part of the canon for a long time, until the Gardens regained interest from the gender and anthropological turn. The Enclosed Gardens escape the actual definitions of religious devotional material and escape the more conventional methodic perspectives. By distancing themselves from mainstream questions, the Enclosed Gardens became *pars pro toto* for an art history that dissolves the boundaries between high and low, between text and image, and between making and completing. The study of the Gardens has demanded a revision concerning these ingrained contradictions.

Infra: §10 Tim Ingold.

2. Objects and instruments of daily life: art-form-process. *Replacements*

The essay *About Sieves and Sieving* takes as its subject an object that utterly coincides with its own function. The essay explores the *longue durée* of the sieve as a symbolic-technical object of use, looking at examples from Jewish folklore, Berber culture, and ancient Egypt that indicate the cosmological importance of the action of sifting, and the exclusivity of women in the related actions. The roundness of the sieve and the ‘shaking’, rocking, circular movements support this symbolic spectrum. Female responsibility for nutrition and hygiene are cultically and symbolically transferred to the sieve. *About Sieves and Sieving* also involves paradigmatic challenges. The first challenge concerns its tectonics. The sieve’s filtration process is made possible by a woven structure. Its capacity both to retain (saving the good) and to remove (discarding the unwanted) in a single action makes the sieve a fundamental symbol of ‘separation’ and ‘filtration’.

The sieve connects the principles of matter, structure, form and function in a radical manner, and inspires us to consider objects, things, material culture etc. organisms. The binary asks a *replacement* by the non-binary, by consubstantiality and immanence.

3. Art Historiography and ‘burned’ scholars. *Integrations*

As a student during the eighties, I was taught what is known as Panofsky-bashing. We were taught to regard Panofsky as the “Atlas bearer” of guilt, in terms of an overly rigorous definition of Worldview, an overly dogmatic interpretation of disguised symbolism, and a malignant irreparable dichotomy between form and content within his famous three-step system. The result is that our generations have not read Panofsky and know only the negative valuation history as a teaching tool. This has prompted me personally to revisit so-called stakeholders in art historiography in *prima lectura*. The return to primary sources, among ‘overheated’ scholars brings peace and hygiene to the lore and inte-

grates exegetical nuance and ‘the period’s eye’ into historiography. This project led to the publication *Signed PAN* at Princeton (Peeters Publishers).

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such new scholarly debates?*

1. My generation has experienced the various “turns” both consciously and unconsciously. My doctoral research during the 1990s concerned the literary, material, and iconographic development of the Legend of the Cross from the early Middle Ages to the 15th century. The dissertation project worried some senior scholars at the time. The method was fluid, the finality unbounded, and the genre indeterminate: no catalogue raisonné, no stylistic research, no single iconographic course, and an open lock on all sorts of “vernacular” traditions. Someone at the Hebrew University at the time called my interdisciplinary ambition “a glorious mistake”. Through the material & anthropological turn, however, *A Heritage of Holy Wood* would still gain a frame of reference to this day. These “multiple dynamics” led me, backed by scholars such as Carolyn Walker Bynum, Cynthia Hahn, Jeffrey Hamburger, Bianca Kühnel, John Lowden & Miri Rubin, to the study of liturgical and domestic objects in material (gendered) space, and their anthropological anchoring in the senses (cfr. §7 mise-en-scene and project OrnaSacra).

2. *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte* was never taught as such at KU Leuven. But as a searching postdoc scholar, I myself came into contact with German *Kunstwissenschaft* around the year 2000 through the Berlin milieu of Gerhard Wolf, Hans Belting and Christoph Wulf. Around the same time, I also began to read the work of James Elkins and Tom Mitchell on my own initiative. The German *Bildwissenschaften* on the one hand and the “Iconic Turn” from the U.S. on the other emancipated me. The French Turn with *l’anthropologie visuelle* (Louis Marin, Georges Didi-Huberman), also broke open my work theoretically.

As benefits I mention:

- Ontology and iconogenesis of the image (e.g. vera icon). Myths of emergence of the image; paradigms of image as non-figurative (*dissemblance*) versus figurative (*resemblance*) (Georges Didi-Huberman); Textile and “textility” as matrix of the dynamics of the image (Tristan Weddigen);

- Nachleben studies. Research on Aby Warburg: *Pathosformeln*, *Ninfa fiorentina* and the launch of the Studies in Iconology series (Peeters Publishers: 2014-*).

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

In the foregoing, I have outlined the impact on turns. My impressions can be extrapolated to present-day understanding of images:

- Transcultural rooting and archetypes: so-called migration of images (Warburg Studies);
- Making & Meaning: images in their materiality and made by human hands;
- The image in the sensory space: images entangled in the sensorium.

I add two elements that have not yet been addressed:

The renewed fascination with the detail, the *Beiwerk*, the *parergon*, the ornament. Since Ernst Gombrich's *The sense of Order*, there has not yet been an "Ornamental Turn". How can we provide meaning to these motifs that have been mistakenly considered "empty"? What role does the *parergon* play in artistic interpretation today. From the perspective of art historiography, Spyros Papapetros performs inspiring work on Gottfried Semper to this end.

Developments in Digital Humanities. The possibilities of deep learning, computational art history in which form groups, iconographic families (genealogies of images) can be articulated.

6. *What is your specific understanding of "meaning" in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

See my answers in §5.

"How to summarise Barbara Baert's reconfiguration of iconology? As a resistance to the reduction of iconology to hermeneutics, i.e. to the interaction with images as flat entities to be read, as visual representations that can be coded and decoded, understood as "illustrations" of texts. Barbara Baert proves that images confront the viewer more like a sensing organism than as text. While a text depends on a code, the contact between organisms is never perfectly coded. It presupposes continuities and transitions, movements and tensions. The image is not just a visual text but an organism that appeals to the broader aesthetic and intellectual disposition of the viewer. An image that evokes odours and touch, movement and breath demands infinite attention as it claims to include more than a readable message. It cannot just be seen, archived, explained and left behind because it solicits the experience of time as duration. Subsequently, the experience of time as duration is a sign of life and it is in this sense that we may speak of a "life" of images (Vlad Ionescu, in *Predella*, 39, 2016)."

7. *To what extent is "meaning" determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

– *Mise-en scene*. With our project team Ornasaca and its casus of the liturgical space of the Cathedral of Antwerp during the 16th century, we developed the idea of the liturgical space and its objects (*retabula*, altar bells, etc) as a choreography of moveable patterns, dependent of the momentaneous liturgical and devotional needs.

– *Conditions of visibility*. For my dissertation in the nineties on *The Legend of the True Cross*, I traveled the world hoping that churches would be opened as to set my eyes on fresco cycles, liturgical objects, etc. Deep Pixel Viewing as for example is shared with the public after the famous Van Eyck conservation project lead to important new iconographical interpretations, as for example deep details of the pupil of the new discovered authentic lamb's face (published in *Iconographica*). Of course, the emotional impact to see the images "in vivo" remains incomparable.

– *Experiential viewer*. The sensory and emotional experience of the viewer has long remained taboo as a methodological starting point. In the training, an objective gaze is

claimed from the students. That gaze should then lead to a language purged of emotion. That is a fiction. Where the viewer's gaze attaches itself to the image, a dynamic of meaning-giving arises. One cannot escape the projection of the subject and the self. This position is taken most radically by Mieke Bal (after Roland Barthes): the image needs the gaze, it comes to life in the meaning that the viewer himself administers. The viewer fertilizes the image.

This position has also influenced my academic language. I have evolved into an *écriture* that allows for scenography, drama, and prose, thus integrating relevant passages from (functional) literature. My academic position is evolving toward "authorship".

As a writer and an essayist Siri Hustvedt (*A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*).

"One can argue that there is a synesthetic quality to all art experiences, that art revives a multimodal-sensory self. While looking at a painting, for example, don't we feel the brush? Studies have shown that mirror systems are active when people look at visual art and are also activated by written accounts of actions or emotional situations. If we do not feel our way into works of art, we will not understand them. I do not sense the touch of persons depicted in paintings, but I do have strong felt responses to the marks left by the painter's brush, but then arguably this is a common experience, one hardly limited to people with mirror touch."

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

The "now" might be:

– The ability to relate the classic iconological approach to a phenomenology of the image. Reading images – that is to say, explaining them in terms of visual symptoms that are detectable in texts – appears as a first step, an introductory episode meant to account for other sensorial dimensions of the image. (After Vlad Ionescu about *Pneuma*, in *Predella*, 39, 2016).

– Or say that the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end. /And all is always now (T.S. Eliot [1888-1965], *Four Quartets*)

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers' understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

A valuable classical-Panofskian viewpoint is that the image is embedded in its cultural environment. That environment can be micro (e.g., a snapshot) or macro (the oft-discussed concept of *Weltbild*). The image can be loosely or very tightly sewn into a temporal and spatial joint. Occasionally the image even escapes that wiring. The image floats or is "suddenly" there. Be that as it may, I agree that one image evokes another, and a dialogue with the broader cultural context ensues. Here I hold to a strong iconological reflex. The relevance of this reflex lies in the resilience of the Art Sciences to unfold itself and allow access to the erudite.

“Yet, the potential of the discipline to spread out and the freedom to keep the subject matter close some of the time and to expand it over its complete breadth on other occasions is one of the most delightful choreographies that the Human and Art Sciences can create. The dynamics of open and closed, of landscape and focus, of archetype and details – and everything in between: the thinking, seeking, trying, hesitating, failing, the creative solutions, and so forth – are more than just a spontaneous reflex: they form the *ampleur* of an actual describable hermeneutics in the *Zwischenraum* or ‘the third area’ (from: Baert, *Interruptions & Transitions*).”

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

Here I am very much inspired by Tim Ingold. Throughout his work, Ingold has fought against dualisms in the human sciences, such as the dichotomy between object and subject, between form and content. Instead, he sees objects as living beings and artists as makers from whose hands objects flow. Ingold therefore rejects Aristotle’s exhausted Western hylemorphic model, whereby art is just a passive meeting of form and matter. Ingold replaces this template with an ontology that prioritises the actual formative processes and transformations of materials over, respectively, the finished product and a static definition of form. Form came to be seen as imposed, by an agent with a particular end or goal in mind, while matter – thus rendered passive and inert – was that which was imposed upon. To the transformations and blends of materials rather than to the different stages of matter.

“My ultimate aim is to overthrow the model itself, and to replace it with an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter [...]. My aim is to restore things to life and, in so doing, to celebrate the creativity of what Klee (1973, p. 269) called ‘form-giving’. This means putting the hylomorphic model into reverse. More specifically, it means reversing a tendency, evident in much of the literature on art and material culture, to read creativity ‘backwards’ (Ingold, *The Textility of Making*).”

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

Cfr. reflections in §7 & §9.

Again, I will let Siri Hustvedt speak her mind about these interrelations. “I believe art is born in the world of the Between, that is bound up with the rhythms and music of early life, as well as in a form of transference that moves from inner life out onto the page, from me to an imaginary other. My story tells emotional, not literal, truths.”

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

See also §8.

This question was exactly the purpose of the book *Pneuma* (2016), and *Interruptions & Transitions* (Brill, 2017) where I launched the concept of thresholds. Being a core-subject in my work it was already touched upon above.

I will give one passus from the book:

“In her book *Die Schwelle im Mittelalter: Bildmotiv und Bildort*, Tina Bawden assigns five coordinates to this intertwined energy of stillness and movement, of past and future, of the in-between: ambivalence, concealment, invitation, transformation, and mediation, to which I would like to add a sixth parameter – *synesthesia*. (...) “Research into the impact and meaning of odour as part of a model of knowledge has long been underestimated. In ancient, oral cultures – as well as in late antique and medieval epistemology – rites and models were developed in which scent (incense, oils, flowers) occupied a prominent place. Odour is an ephemeral element that reaches us through the air. Winds carry odours with them. An odour is phantasmic. In the sacral context, odour plays a crucial role as an evocation of, and a way of recognizing, the divine. The unseen God manifests himself through his voice and through scent, and is worshipped with the scents of sacrifice, incense, herbs, perfumed oils. Perfume is a medium that allows people to move between the now and the transcendent. Odour may be only the fifth sense in the Platonic model, it is nevertheless an exceptional sense of knowledge. Odour evokes insights in a flash: as an *anamnesis*, as an intuition. Odour is also the pre-eminent binding agent of synesthetic apprehension.”

I think this approach is also the opening to what we did not touch yet so far: the trans-global, transcultural view on visual culture. What bounds us is wind, smell, nature. What brings us in intercultural dialogue is indeed the fundamental bias of the body in the sensory world of the planet.

“We should not be guided merely by the sense of sight in meandering through the labyrinth of *Fragments*, and also, and perhaps more importantly, in pursuing our own research interests: if we follow the thread that Barbara Baert has lent us with her generous example, then we may find our way out of any labyrinth and be less afraid to pursue scents wherever they may lead us” (Davide Stimilli on *Fragments*: a celebration book with 110 lemmata from Barbara Baert’s oeuvre since the year 2000 (2018).

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

– The non-figurative. In the most recent analyses by visual anthropologists, the conspicuous presence of rock and flamed marble in iconographic traditions thematising the pneumatic emergence of images is interpreted as a visual undertaking whereby the hidden and mysterious “breath” is evoked pictorially. Independently from each other, Georges Didi-Huberman, Paul Vandenbroeck, and Victor Stoichita suggest that the *faux marbre* in representations of the Annunciation is an expression of a phase in the visualisation process that precedes the stage of figuration. In other words, artists insert representations of marble and mineral-amorphous drawings in iconographies that benefit from the symbolism of “what precedes” and the “taking root in the matter in order to take shape”, as the Annunciation. Paul Vandenbroeck goes one step further. He writes: “In addition to the phallic sphere, we must introduce non-phallic symbolic domains. Such a domain can be called the *matrix*. The *matrix* conceptualises non-oneness, the prenatal experiences of the

I and the non-I, which exist together without absorbing or repelling each other. [...] The basis of meaning lies in the ‘transcendence’ of bodies. As yet non-symbolic processes of interconnectedness are charged with meaning; not by a ‘higher’ (symbolic) intervention, but from the base, from within (*Matrix Marmorea*).”

– Landscape. My first experiment with this approach was the book on wind: *Pneuma and the Visual Arts in the Middle Ages and Early Modernity*. At this very moment is “imprimatur”: *Looking into the Rain. Magic, Moisture, Medium* (De Gruyter). Back cover text:

“The sensory experience of water falling from the heavens evokes feelings ranging from fear to gratitude and has inspired many works of art. Using unique and expertly developed art-historical case studies – from prehistoric cave paintings up to photography and cinema – this book casts new light on a theme that is both ecological and iconological, both natural and cultural-historical. The follow-up of *Pneuma and Rain*, will be *Morass. Mystery, Matrix, Medium* (inspired by the work of Rod Giblett)”.

14. *Many studies have focussed on the dynamics by which images, originally meant for a specific viewing context, came to be transferred, appropriated, transformed, and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

I think of two points of interest here.

Moshe Barasch describes the creation of *Noli me tangere* as a particular example of *energetic inversion*. Energetic inversion is the power of a gesture to become a formal-artistic recipient for various emotions and their shifting interpretations across the history of art. In the history of gesture, the *Noli me tangere* constitutes such a powerful force field.

I still consider what Aby Warburg developed in his oeuvre, and realized together with Gertrud Bing in his *Bilderatlas*, to be the fundamental hermeneutic for image transfer. It is a tool that is both infinite in its ambitions, and the only access to understanding migrations, genealogies and time travel of image cores. No other explorer has tried with such passion, delicacy and stubbornness to fathom what still continuously washes up on the shores of the Middle Sea from the Far East: from Mithras to Cherub, from astrology to mathematics. Panel A says all about the methodological basis for understanding the human will to expression: 1) *Orientierung*; 2) *Austausch*; 3) *Soziale Einordnung*. This is why the publication project of Horst Bredekamp et al. is so important.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

We will not be able to reverse this process. I myself am in favor of the use of loanwords. Some terms are hermeneutically intertwined with the author’s native language and cannot be translated without losing the psyché of the word.... For example: *Scheine* (Hegel), *Kunstwollen* (Riegl), *Pathosformel* (Warburg), *Aura* (Benjamin), *Punctum* (Barthes), etc.

Belgium’s position in this regard is interesting. As a trilingual country, Belgium remains art historically connected to the French tradition (*anthropologie visuelle*), to the English-speaking tradition (*Pictorial Turn*, *Visual Studies*) and to its German-speaking

neighbors (*Bildwissenschaften*). With this in mind, we have recently set up a network – *réseaux iconologies* – which will further explore and disseminate this added value with methodological workshops.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

There is nothing “lacking” and there is no “should” because there will always be *Kunst-wollen*. Today and in the near future, we will embrace the various efforts that have already been initiated regarding the decolonization of our heritage, museums and the language surrounding them, and the further opening up of the planetary borders for a transglobal historiography of art. Unmasking gender-unfriendly reflections also remains an important responsibility. Finally, the art historian, in his capacity to unite images and narratives, can also play a social, ecological, and climatic role.

“Yes, everything becomes attenuated, but it’s also true to say that nothing entirely disappears, there remain faint echoes and elusive memories that can surface at any moment like the fragments of gravestones in the room in a museum that no one visits (...). We never eliminate all vestiges, though, we never manage, truly, once and for all, to silence that past matter, and sometimes we hear an almost imperceptible breathing” (Javier Marías, *The Infatuation*).

Barbara Baert
KU Leuven
barbara.baert@kuleuven.be