IVAN FOLETTI

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different view-points, 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?*

Trained at Lausanne University, I was initially mainly interested in traditional iconology. As early as in my MA studies, I shifted my attention toward the interaction between spaces, images, and rituals. This interaction between representation and "performativity" has been further developed, especially in the last ten years, with a growing interest in the role of beholders and their perception of images. In the last few years, I have been more and more fascinated by images in the broadest sense of the term – e.g., architectural layouts, urban structures, processions, pilgrims' bodies – and their impact on human cognition. In certain cases, I have also investigated objects and images with immense pedagogical, olfactive, and aural potential. Visuality, in these cases, was virtually impossible to dissociate from other phenomena.

In a certain sense, I have moved from conception to perception, and to the experience of visual acts. However, I believe it is also essential to add that my perspective has always been challenged by the history of art history.

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

It is practically impossible to say what the most influential books for my understanding of images have been. But I would certainly start with the short story *The Portrait* by Nikolai Gogol. This moralizing and romantic tale about art explores the life and power of images. Reading this novel as a teenager, I was fascinated by its ideal of the artist who should never betray his talent and "sell his soul". More interesting from a scholarly perspective was the full realization of how visuality is an instrument of both taste and artistic research.

Two other books transformed my understanding of images. The first is *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaïm Potok, and the second is *Neither God nor Man* by Herbert Leon Kessler. Both books discuss the role of the invisible God in visual culture. The first is the literary confession of a Jewish artist from the Bronx, discovering his identity as a painter. He transgresses the rules of his Hassidic community to depict a Crucifixion featuring his

mother's face. Kessler's book unites the image of the Crucified Christ with the Judeo-Christian debate on images.

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 would distinguish between methodologies and scholarly traditions. As for the first, iconographic and formal analysis are simply the basis of art history and visual studies. Without them, it is hard to imagine any systematic use of other methodological tools. However, I strongly disagree with the use of any methodology as an end or as a must. Each object and image require a unique approach. Furthermore, I believe that any obsessive or artificial use of one specific methodology by an entire school of art history can destroy the field. I am therefore convinced that all possible methodological tools should be used to access the meaning and relevance of images, in the past and in the present.

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 scholarly debates?*

Without a doubt, I've benefited from several of them, from the amazing challenges posed by the anthropology of images, most notably developed by Hans Belting, the debates initiated by the "material turn" and, lastly, within the framework of the "sensual turn" promoted by Pentcheva and Lidov. Once again, however, these tools should serve the final goal of understanding and explaining objects and images.

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?*

From the "power of images" to "hierotopy", "sensual icon", "Bildakt", "icon of space" and the concept of "agency", the notions used in present-day scholarship are numerous. They are all, to some extent, important to the development of the field. The two most relevant, for me, are very close to one another: the notions of "spiritual eye", developed by Kessler, and "iconic presence", established by Belting. Both are instruments that enable us to better understand the role of images as thresholds between the tangible world and what lies beyond. For a medievalist, I see these as crucial tools to make better sense of past men and women's relationships to images.

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

The "meaning" of any image should be divided into two main categories: pre-cultural and cultural. The first layer of understanding occurs in the first moments the beholder is faced with an image. This understanding is "intuitive" and mainly determined by colors

and lines. The second level arises from the beholder's cultural knowledge and is understood through iconography and/or inscriptions accompanying the image. The meaning of images and objects can be reinforced or weakened by the materials used in its making: a golden image has a very different meaning from a wooden one (if the wood, of course, does not imitate gold).

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?*

The *mise-en-scène* of an image, as well as any performer and/or guide explaining it, obviously has a fundamental impact on its meaning. A Christological cycle of mosaics could be understood in a completely different way if used during a bishop's homily – the story of Christ's life can represent an anti-heretical visual project. A hidden image, revealed only periodically, will of course be more attractive, an aspect which also enhances its meaning. In the second case, "meaning" can take on a very important social dimension as well, an aspect again closely linked to the materiality of the image itself.

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?*

I believe we certainly have more tools and data to better understand the expectations of the potential viewer. On the one hand, textual evidence can be accessed more easily thanks to digital tools: image databases are making comparative approaches easier, and of course research in neuroscience is paving the way for unexpected discoveries. On the other hand, we should admit that our training is of much lower quality in some essential aspects: compared to scholars a century ago, we have an ultimately lower overall culture of literary sources, and our knowledge of other disciplines is much weaker. For the smartphone generation, the growing problem of concentration and personal memory represents a clear weakness. We have more tools but less knowledge.

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

I believe knowledge of images is an obvious tool to better understand other visual elements. This is particularly true for pre-modern images, where the repetition of patterns and/or prestigious models is essential to visual culture. In a more banal way, certain images can enable the viewer to reconstruct other missing ones, contributing to a more comprehensive outlook.

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

As stated above, the material dimension of an image is absolutely fundamental in all stages of its life, from conception to use and reception. A golden sculpture covered with

shining precious stones could be both an image of a saint and a metaphorical image of Heavenly Jerusalem. An object's materiality cannot be dissociated from its meaning. In this regard, our perspective is truly biased, due to the modern hierarchy of the arts and digital technologies. A painting on wood may be considered more relevant for scholarship because it was done by Giotto, than an ivory altar, which in the past would have been considered more valuable because of its materiality. The screen, then, as a threshold, obviously flattens any possible material dimension. It is perhaps not surprising that the material turn arrived precisely when personal screens started to dominate society.

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?*

As mentioned previously, the interaction between images and rituals has played a crucial role in my own understanding of art history. This is a classic case where images have a social life. They can contribute to inclusion in or exclusion from a community and become real actors within social groups. "Walking images" (e.g., devotional images in procession) interact directly with the viewer, who can, in certain cultures (thanks to masks or paintings), become an embodied image himself.

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.*

Definitely the latter. Images imply a multisensorial experience. In my research, the most classic example are the 5th century doors of Santa Sabina in Rome. These are composed of carved wooden panels with images in relief that can be touched. Engraved in yellow cypress wood, they originally had a very intense scent, like the smell of incense. And as recently discovered, they were also conceived as an acoustic box to amplify the sound from inside the basilica. And this is in addition to the bishop, who possibly used them as counterparts to his preaching.

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?*

I absolutely believe that the image notion should be expanded to all these phenomena. Within my research group, we have been investigating issues related to landscape as part of a visual act for at least five years. Especially in the Armenian context, the combination of material – such as the color of stones – with the flora and the surrounding environment play a key role in the understanding of space as an image. Furthermore, much of the early medieval culture I am investigating is non-figurative, while being extremely meaningful as an image. We can cite, for example, aniconic reliquaries, where only the association of materials have a clear visual meaning. I would also like to mention the research of Bissera Pentcheva and the question of "aural" images "decorating" aniconic spaces by sound.

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

When speaking of objects and images reappropriated for different contexts, the first notion we encounter is of course the widely-studied "spolia". As shown by Dale Kinney, this is a largely abused word. However, the idea of "memory" constructed through ancient material culture is fundamental. Within collections, especially in museums, object stories can also play a pivotal role in suggesting new narratives for otherwise "mute" objects. The mutilation of images can obviously be a tool of rare violence, while reappropriation of faces has been recognized as an anthropological act of domination.

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?*

I believe that the way English is now becoming the only possibility for scholarship in the humanities could indeed make it an instrument of colonial domination. As is demonstrated by the recent dominance of British universities in European Research Council grants, the perfect mastery of English as a native language remains a clear advantage. Besides this competition, it could contribute to the flattening of intellectual dynamics. On the other hand, especially for countries that never spoke any of the dominant languages of academia, "scholarly English" is a chance to bring new contributions to the global scene. Basically, I see the hegemony of English as a very dangerous issue, especially on the part of Anglo-Saxon editors and institutions, but also as a great opportunity to make the research of linguistic minorities more accessible.

From a terminological perspective, this is obviously a challenge for global art history. We are currently working on a project dealing with the translation of Western medievalist terminology into the Chinese context, and we should definitely consider how the issues of translation and diversity are still very much present in the multicultural spaces still existing within our field.

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

I do believe that Art History needs to undergo a significant self-transformation, moving from individual research to "laboratories" of the human sciences. The amount of knowledge and the acceleration of data production does not leave us many other alternatives. At the same time, such a collaboration may, if used properly, allow us to overcome one of the main limitations of traditional academia, i.e., its extremely hierarchical structure. Art History also needs more "real" transdisciplinary research, in the sense of collaborative projects with a shared goal. By this, however, I am not speaking of the sometimes very empty requests of some grant agencies. On the contrary, I believe in transdisciplinary dialogue only as the result of a true shared enthusiasm for research.

At the same time, we need a different place for humanities in society, with less precarious positions. The current situation is devastating for both young researchers and senior scholars – the first broken by insecurity, the second unable to build on stable ground and at the same time tempted by the abuse of power. In this context, I believe new ethical standards in the field are essential: too many publications appear simply for career-related purposes or because of cronyism – justified by these precarious situations. If the field becomes a career-oriented industry above all, it will lose its essential purpose, not to mention its relevance to society.

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