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The Invisible Image and the Index of an Imaginary Order
Jan Bäcklund

The most conspicuous feature of any Old Master Exhibition or scholarly monograph on an Old Master Painter today is the abundance of transilluminations of the picture surface. X-ray, Infra-red, raking-light photographs, dendrochronological—or thread-count—diagrams, pigment analysis through Scanning Electron Microscopes and many other physical and chemical methods of dismemberment and analysis of the picture are used to determine the correct attribution. This is said to be done in conjunction with another measurement: traditional connoisseurship, which is just another art historical self-delusion. In reality, the technical investigation of art works has everything to say and connoisseurship nothing. No visual argument can be upheld against technical data, whereas the opposite happens all the time; technical data always, without exception, trumps connoisseurship. This is because the display of technical data is not in itself a visual form of knowledge, but visualized logical arguments.

Examples of this feature are countless, but one of the best articulated attempts in this regard was the Vienna exhibition of Giorgione in 2004, “Giorgione. Mythos und Enigma,” where all the paintings attributed to Giorgione were hung on the inner walls of a built structure within a gallery of the museum. Copies, followers and forgeries were hung on the inside of the permanent walls of the gallery. On the outside walls of the constructed room within the gallery, and placed exactly where the attributed paintings hung on the inside, were large X-ray photographs and infra-red-reflectographies of the same size as the paintings hanging on the other side of the constructed wall, thus effectively evoking the impression that we could see through the painted surface.

In 1931 the National Gallery of Denmark owned an important collection of ten Rembrandts, “The Painter of the Soul,” as he was often called, which says something about the kind of images we were observing. With the rise of art historical forensics, following the Van Meegeren affair after the Second World War, the numbers where continually reduced, until in 1987 the National Gallery was stripped of all its Rembrandts. They were still good pictures, it was argued, but any “soul” had nevertheless evaporated from the images. It was therefore a sensational surprise for the museum when in 2006 it turned out that one of the least appreciated ex-Rembrandts, the oil sketch of The Crusader, could be re-attributed to Rembrandt after extensive technical analysis, in which the
central argument was that the canvas stems from the same bolt as other established paintings by Rembrandt.²

[Figure 1 around here]

Before this re-attribution this painting had even been characterized as a Parisian pastiche from the nineteenth century. And I strongly remember my own skepticism when, before the exhibition, I was looking at some reproductions—good reproductions, but still reproductions—of the painting. Everything, and especially the brushwork in the face and the extravagant hat, seemed indeed to point to a pre-Impressionistic painter with at least one leg solidly placed in Paris. But I, like everyone else, had to bend before technical evidence (that is, except for Christopher Brown, who even in 2007, “to judge by the photographs,” maintained that it was a mediocre copy,³ but he will eventually surrender as well).

Nevertheless, we still look at the paintings as they—that is, the painted sides—continue to be reproduced. For me, when I stood before the painting itself with my glasses on my nose, the incongruity between my observation and the measurements became even more acute, as I suddenly found the re-attribution to Rembrandt altogether reasonable and almost obvious. Nothing now diverted me to mid-nineteenth century Paris. But, after returning home, and with the catalog before me, the measurement of “being painted by Rembrandt” again evaporated into something rather in the vicinity of Parisian academic painting. But my point here is not to be coquettish about my lacking visual competence or art historical myopia, but rather just that we believe what we see and that we always see, not only through a medium (glasses, canvas, paper), but also through an observation device.

Yet, it is a matter of fact that the use of spectacles began in Florence during the late fifteenth century and that this technical innovation—perhaps the most underrated innovation in the history of early modern Europe—is perfectly paralleled by the emergence of the idea of the fine arts in the West, as if it were the optical prostheses which condition specific perceptions. The philosopher and dromologist Paul Virilio has argued that this is not entirely a coincidence in a series of works in which he warns about the industrialization of vision and the visual dressage that characterize our culture. From television technology (cutting, zooming, telefocus) whose purpose of a rhythmical-progressive deprivation of sight, to the direct production of images on the retina or even through
stimuli on the eye’s rods and cones, Virilio sees a progressive series of optical instruments and prostheses that completely redefines the relationship between the observer and the observed. For Virilio this re-definition is an effect of the accelerating processing of images that replaces opaque and immobile supports with translucent and mobile screens, without which we soon will be unable to orient ourselves. The video artist Gary Hill concluded something similar when he said that “Vision is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing.”

There is a seemingly involuntary relation in our observational apparatuses in relation to the image (eikon) on the one hand and trace (ichnos) on the other. The hypothesis I will propose is that no observational apparatus—from High Performance Liquid Chromatography, to photographic reproductions, the connoisseur’s eye and the casual museum goer or devotional remembrance—can perceive both image and trace at the same time. If one is visible for an observer, the other is invisible. An observation of the image will inevitable have as an effect the invisibility of traces, which we could call a (medieval) “ichnoclasm” or disregard of the material support. More disturbing is that if this hypothesis is correct, then we are endowed with a corresponding inability to observe images, which means that we are trapped within an inherent iconoclasm.

[Figure 2 around here]

A Rediscovered van Gogh

In September 2013 the director of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Axel Rüger, could proudly present for the press a “once in a lifetime experience”: the rediscovery of a Van Gogh from his greatest period, when he lived in Arles and painted works such as The Yellow House and The Sunflowers.

[Figure 3 around here]

The unsigned painting turned up in 1970 with the estate of the Norwegian industrialist Christian Nicolai Mustad (1878–1970). The family knew about the painting and Mustad had bought it early in his collecting career. They also knew that it was a fake. The painting had initially been bought with the help and advice of the director of the National Gallery in Oslo, Jens Thiis (1870–1942). According to the family story, the French ambassador to Sweden had visited Mustad not long after
the picture was bought and suggested that it was a fake. Mustad reacted promptly and banished his painting to the basement.

When the family were selling the art collection after Mustad’s death, they enlisted the help of art dealer Daniel Wildenstein, who also looked at the rejected painting and judged it as a fake. Its later owners contacted the Van Gogh Museum in 1991 to pursue the question, but the museum declined any further investigation with the explanation that “we think that the picture in question is not an authentic Van Gogh.”

This was the situation until 2011, when an artist friend of the present owner, who had grown up in Arles, noticed a similarity between the ruin in the upper left corner of the painting and a description in one of Vincent van Gogh’s letters to his brother, identifying the location (Montmajour Abbey) where the work was done. This observation led the Van Gogh Museum to revise their rejection of twenty years earlier, and they agreed to carry out an investigation. After two years of analyses of the samples “in cross-section and examined with the light microscope and Scanning Electron Microscope with Energy Dispersive X-ray Analysis. The indication of pigments with handheld X-ray Fluorescence Spectrometry, and analyses with High Performance Liquid Chromatography and the types of canvas in the framework of the Thread Count Automation Project,” the museum’s two senior researchers said in a statement: “Stylistically and technically speaking, there are a plenty of parallels with other paintings by Van Gogh from the summer of 1888.” With research into literature and records, they were also able to trace the history of the painting. It belonged first to Vincent’s brother Theo, and was then passed on to Theo’s widow, who, in her turn, sold it to Maurice Fabre, probably in 1901, together with five or six other paintings, after which it directly or indirectly was bought by Mustad. Due to the vague nature of the written sources, this reconstruction of the painting’s provenance would not have been possible without the presence of the painting itself.

The central argument of the provenance chain of the picture is the “Bonger number” on the back of the canvas. This number refers to a list that Andries Bonger drew up in 1890; it was listed under number 180 as “soleil coucant à Arles.” “The subject and size of the picture match that description, but the clinching piece of evidence is simply that the number 180 is written on the back of the canvas.” “The handwriting,” the authors continue, “resembles that on Wheatfield with setting sun, now in the Kunstmuseum, Winterthur, which is also marked with a Bonger number.”
Apart from the fact that the handwriting is rather dissimilar—the number 1 in “100” is executed with a prominent top left stroke and considerably larger than the zeros, whereas the number 1 in “180” is a smaller simple vertical line—the difference of the placement and scale of the two numbers couldn’t be more different, making it hard to see how they could be written by the same hand for the same purpose.

Now you might think that I wish to suggest that the discovered painting is a fake. But this is not the case. It is impossible to argue against Scanning Electron Microscopy with Dispersive X-ray Analysis, and very difficult against analyses with High Performance Liquid Chromatography, not to speak of a Thread Count Automation Project. Against such forensics we have to concede.

What interests me in this case is the series of observations, which I prefer to call measurements, performed in front of this physical object. Firstly, Christian Nicolai Mustad was never interested in “an image” or even “a picture”; Mustad was interested in “a Van Gogh,” not necessarily a landscape, and definitively not one depicting any specific location or painted in any specific manner, but just that: a canvas with oil, attributed to van Gogh, preferably framed. With these specifications, the expert, Jens Thiis, sought to identify an object corresponding to these attributes, that is: he performed a series of observations until a measurement yielded the correct answer. The second known observation took place when Auguste Pellerin saw the painting at Mustad’s and performed his own measurement, but found the opposite result: “no,” the observed object does not correspond to the attribute “van Gogh.” Mustad, himself without any measuring device, chose to believe in the last measurement and decided not to exhibit the object, which he probably would, had it been, for instance, an image of his mother. Because observations behave like grooves in phonographic records—the results tend to get stronger and stronger the more the object is observed—Daniel Wildenstein could confirm this last measurement, adding his own alternative attribution as “maybe made by a German painter.” This measurement was twenty years later confirmed by the Van Gogh Museum. Because of the now very heavy observational gravity around the object—the deep grooves earlier measurements had inflicted on the probability density for any future measurement—in 2011 it took an enormous effort for the Van Gogh Museum to escape this observational gravity and present a new measurement.

As you must have noted: there is no talk about “image,” likeness or representation here. There are only indices: during the first part of the century indices of styles and manners, during the second part indices of pigments, thread patterns and electro-microscopy. But this history of the
rediscovered van Gogh nevertheless contains an observation of an image, which is not a function of an index. This occurs when the present owner’s artist friend notes that the “ruin” in the upper left corner resembles the Montmajour Abbey in the vicinity of Arles, where he grew up. Here we note the two central concepts, intrinsically linked with the problem of images: likeness and remembrance, and it is evident that this identification of a vision with a material object through likeness and remembrance was paramount in annihilating the observational gravity induced upon the object.

[Figure 4 around here]

How is this possible? How do images produce this annihilation of the probability density in the observation of an object to produce a new measurement? I believe the answer lies in a discussion Walter Benjamin had with Max Horkheimer on the science of history: “What science has ‘determined’,” Benjamin wrote, “remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.”12 If remembrance (das Eingedenken) is to understand—which I believe—as eine ästhetische Bildhaftigkeit (an aesthetic imaginability), then it is this compound of remembrance and likeness which can make the completed, the perfected and the closed open, incomplete and imperfect, which is a condition for annihilating the probability density of an observation.

On the other hand, even though the measurements are not visual in themselves—they are composed of a cluster of algebraic relations between attributes and indices—they are nevertheless the source for a proliferating number of new images directing future observations to the gravitational groove of the measurement. That is, in the same way as an image made the measurement of the van Gogh imperfect for the present owner’s artist friend, images are also responsible for perfecting the imperfect, or making the uncompleted complete.

This proliferation probably stems from observations themselves in the way that indices, precisely “pointing fingers,” reproduce images through captures or frames, which again, through a new indexification, reproduce the reproduced images—and so on in an accelerating process similar to
how a needle deepens the grooves in a phonographic disc. This is a process of remembrance—or *Eingedenken*—as well, just working in the other direction, closing the open or perfecting the imperfect, or, with other words, making the continuous discontinuous.

I think it is this paradox (this *atopos*) that bothers Plato, the *symploke*—or entanglement—of likeness and being. When The Stranger asks “Then what we call a likeness (*eikona*), though not really existing, really does exist?” and Theaithetos concludes that non-being has become entangled with being, I will interpret this as an superposition of image with index: image as non-existing, index as material; image as transcendental, index as historical—and from this experimental design discuss this entanglement (*symploken*).

As I started to say, this rediscovery is not at all any “once in a lifetime experience,” but rather an intrinsic and systemic feature of art. This iconoclastic indexification is the stuff art history is made of.

[Figure 5 around here]

**Index of an Imaginary Order**

“Der Fall Jägers”—as it initially was called—broke the headlines in German newspapers during September 2010, when a Maltese company of unknown purpose, Trasteco Co., Ltd., filed a lawsuit against the Cologne auction house Lempertz. The company had in November 2003 acquired a Heinrich Campendock, *Red Picture with Horses*, for 2.9 million euros, and, for some reason, wanted to conduct a scientific investigation of the picture. This investigation unfortunately showed traces of titanium white, a pigment not available in Campendock’s time. The auction house refused to reimburse the company, and thus the whole affair became a public matter. It soon turned out that the labels on the back of the Campendock painting, documenting that it had been at Alfred Flechtheim’s gallery, in the gallery *Der Sturm* and at Kunstsalon Emil Richter, were all forged. [Figure 5 around here]. In particular, it was the Flechtheim-label, we are told, that aroused suspicion—but only following the results of the chemical examination of the pigments. Likewise, it soon became clear that the provenance of the picture, from a certain “Collection Werner Jägers,” was altogether fictitious. It didn’t take long for the investigators and journalists to trace a number of pictures which also stemmed from this “Collection Jägers,” and a contemporary, equally fictitious “Collection Wilhelm Knops.”
The forger, Wolfgang Beltracchi, is in many ways a typical forger, and the case bears many resemblances with that of John Myatt and John Drewe from 1995, with its emphasis on producing convincing provenances as much as convincing pictures. While Drewe went to art libraries to replace pages from exhibition catalogs with his own printed pages, featuring reproductions or physical descriptions of John Myatt’s production, Wolfgang Beltracchi and his wife Helene constructed a plausible art collection for her grandfather, Werner Jägers, who had died in 1996, but never collected art. They should both have bought pictures from the Alfred Flechtheim gallery, which we know existed, but which have since disappeared. Beltracchi thus re-created images that evidently once existed—on or through indices—but since had disappeared.

The best piece the Beltracchis made was not, however, a painting. It was undoubtedly the re-enactment of the Jägers Collection, and this was very much a collaborative piece by Wolfgang and Helene. Confronted with a lack of documentation for this Jägers Collection, the Beltracchis bought an old camera, old unexposed filmrolls, old photographic paper and everything they would need to set up a dark chamber. Because most of the pictures they wanted to document were already sold, they made black and white photocopies of their own photographic documentations of Wolfgang’s fakes in scale 1:1, framed them and hung them up in a room. Helene dressed herself up in her grandmother’s old dress and set her hair to pose as her grandmother in a picture deliberately made slightly out of focus.

This work has impressed all commentators on the Beltracchi case as a clear-cut and convincing piece of conceptual or appropriation art. And it is. It corresponds perfectly to the works of Walid Raad, Hito Steyerl or Eleanor Antin. The latter was presented in Documenta XI in 2007 with a project dating from 1977, purportedly about a projected but never realised film about Florence Nightingale and the Crimean War. This was staged in an installation as a series of old-looking photographic prints, culminating with a fascinating self-portrait as Florence Nightingale dated 1854. One commentator on the Beltracchi case, Hanno Rauterberg in Die Zeit, went even so far as to
suggest that had Beltracchi divulged himself before the first suspicion fell upon him, he would have been the hailed as a conceptual artist, “who has succeeded in uncovering in a unique way the mafia structures of the art scene.”

I would very much like to agree with Rauterberg here, but it is obvious that these analyses are fundamentally on the wrong track. Helene and Wolfgang evidently enjoyed this re-enactment, but they did it for a purpose that was not at all artistic. Now, when Wolfgang Beltracchi had all the opportunities to contextualise or re-invent his own work, he did as every forger before him has done: excelling in overly kitschy, painfully bad pieces functioning as tasteless, self-promoting memorabilia, as can be seen on his homepage (beltracchi-project.de). And when the interviewers of Der Spiegel asked Beltracchi if he ever had thought about revealing himself, the answer came promptly: “No.” “Fame never interested me. I could have exhibited more of my own works in the 1970s, but I didn’t want to. It’s sort of like being a child. When you’re finished with school, you have only one thing on your mind: to get out and experience life. Did I want to spend all my time working on a painting? No, I wanted to have fun, travel, meet women, and live life.”

It is in this refutation of making a name by “working on a painting” that Beltracchi differs from the successful artists of the twentieth century, whose common denominator is a certain iconoclasm; an iconoclasm van Gogh and René Magritte share with Jean Tinguely and Jackson Pollock, namely of producing indices dressed up as images. Instead of producing a batch of different images (like Beltracchi or any other forger), the modern artist produces one and the same image, over and over again. And this image is nothing but the recognizable attribute of “a van Gogh” or “a Joseph Beuys,” which as image, is indefinitely reproducible and finds its distributive correlation in Alfred Barr Jr’s dictum “one of each.” That is, “a Rothko” can be distributed all over the world, one of each in every museum. It is still an image, but an image of a hand, a style, or a manner, blown up, to cover and penetrate the entire picture. It is first and foremost an image of an index, and only subsidiarily—if at all—an image of anything outside of this index or author function.

When art images began to be differentiated out of the ordinary stream of images, beginning with the collector’s desiderata for “a Raphael” in the early sixteenth century, the question of fakeness suddenly becomes an issue. During early modern times authenticity was regulated by notions of imitation, beauty and taste, which were the qualitative operators securing a certain degree of unimportance to the issue of copies, imitations and forgeries. This meant that if a painting was as good as if it were by Rembrandt, then, in a certain sense, it was a Rembrandt, regardless of who
painted it, because it answered to all the attributes “a Rembrandt” ought to yield in a measurement. When artistic differentiation was accelerated during the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the birth of art history as a discipline and modernity as a discourse, forgeries and the regulative powers of imitation, beauty and taste lost their currency; the consequence was that the concept of fakeness surfaced as a distinct “modern obsession,” as the very antithesis of art. Not so much as a financial crime, nor as a moral or aesthetic offense, but rather as crime “against the spirit of art.”

When imitation, beauty and taste are superseded by other concepts, such as innovation, originality and authenticity, the latter no longer regulate the qualis of the image, but rather the qualis of the index—for instance, the quality of the brushstroke, the pigment, the underdrawing, the canvas or the qualis of the marks on the verso of the canvas.

_Dreht die Bilder doch mal um!_ “Just turn the pictures around” is the headline for an interview with the German provenance researcher Ute Haug, as a direct answer to the art world’s failures in the Beltracchi case, suggesting that the pictures are not turned around on a routine basis. My take here is slightly different. For art forgers, working inside-out and back to front, the turning around of pictures has always been a mandatory procedure—and for connoisseurs and dealers as well. It was precisely by turning the painting around and observing the Flechtheim label on the back that Werner Spies became convinced of the authenticity of the Max Ernst pictures by Beltracchi. To avoid future failures like the Beltracchi case, the German Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung, a common initiative by a large group of German art museums, published high resolution images of the fake labels produced by the Beltracchis together with authentic labels from the Alfred Flechtheim gallery, all of which are naturally _gefundenes Fressen_ for any aspiring art forger. Thus, in very much the same way as one historian said that document forgery marked the beginning of historiographical science, we see here how the turning inside-out and back-to-front of the forgers has produced not only a new observable, but an entirely new imaginary, new observations apparatuses like Infra-red photography, dendrochronological—or thread-count—diagrams and Scanning Electron Microscopes, obfuscating any image that may or may not be observable on the recto or surface of the support.

[Figure 8 about here]
In the process, these latter qualities, of the brushstroke, the pigment, the canvas or the marks on the verso of the canvas, becomes images. All these qualities begin to attain their own beauty, their own imitatio or likeness, consequently acquiring their own aesthetic. They are what is visible—not any arbitrary motif or subject matter the picture might or might not contain. Hence, at the same time as the image is turned around, becomes translucent or otherwise invisible, an index of an imaginary order is established, and indeed an image, behaving as an image and performing all the operations of the image; that is: it is continuously imperfect in time and space, inherently reproducible and proliferating. As an image, this index of an imaginary order, or index-image, calls for reproduction, else it would disappear like any image which is forgotten. If “a Campendonk” isn’t reproduced, the image of “a Campendonk” would disappear into oblivion, in the same way the image of my mother (or the Virgin Mary) would fall into oblivion if it wasn’t continuously reproduced.

The pictures are primarily observed back to front and inside out because it is there that the (late modern) image is situated. The Mustad canvas would never had been “a van Gogh” if it weren’t for the reversed image, because the first order image on the recto was too weak to annihilate the observational gravity it had acquired. And though Werner Spies liked what he saw on the recto of at least five “Max Ernst” presented to him, it was the provenance of the Flechtheim gallery on the label on the back of the stretcher which convinced him of the object’s likeness to “a Max Ernst.” “Because,” he later explained, “from Max Ernst I knew that Flechtheim owned around 50 works of him, many of which he, Ernst, never recovered after the war.”27

We know that Werner Spies made a lot of money with his expertise judgements, but as long as we don’t feel sorry for Steve Martin, Daniel Filipacchi, the Fritz-Behrens-Stiftung or Tradesco Co., Ltd., he had the authority to authenticate and judge if it was “a Max Ernst” or not. This is because, as one reporter put it, Werner Spies “is Max Ernst.” Ultimately it was Werner Spies who decided which objects to attribute to Max Ernst and which to reject. Thus, Werner Spies was effectually identical with this indexing operator, that is, the author function of “Max Ernst.” But as the image, “a Max Ernst,” is intrinsically in need of observations and reproductions, the differentiating skills needed for these observations have to be continuously maintained and developed. The observations have to be measured repeatedly and for this we need indexed sample objects with which to test this likeness.

It is at this point that a figure like Beltracchi becomes inevitable. If people like Beltracchi didn’t exist, indices of this imaginary order wouldn’t exist, and art works like Eleanor Antin’s Myself
1854, from *The Angel of Mercy: The Nightingale Family Album* (1977), would just be a portrait of Florence Nightingale, operating exactly as a *Madonna and Child* operated during the Middle Ages. The properties such a likeness should contain are in Beltracchi’s presentation fascinating in their mimicking of durations, rhythms, movements and forms of time. As Beltracchi said:

I believe that the most important requirement is to capture the essence of a piece of art. You look at it, essentially absorb it, and you have to be able to understand it visually without having to think about how it was done. I was already able to do that as a child. . . . The time it takes to create a painting like that, as well as the movements, that’s what constitutes the style. If it took the original painter two or three hours to do a small canvas, you can’t finish it in only an hour or, conversely, in four hours. Then something about the style won’t be quite right.  

Later in the interview Beltracchi repeats the typical commonplace by forgers of “the *becoming* of the dead artist”:

I became one with Derain and his time. (Alfred) Dreyfus was about to be acquitted, (Georges) Clemenceau was about to become prime minister, and World War I was still nine years away. Derain painted fantastic pictures that summer. I recognized what was special about a particular artist, in order to do it just a little better than he had managed himself. Which is certainly possible: After all, we know today how art history has developed since then. . . . In doing so, I wanted to find the painter’s creative center and become familiar with it, so that I could see through his eyes how his paintings came about and, of course, see the new picture I was painting through his eyes—before I even painted it.  

To this two things. Firstly, Beltracchi insists on the possibility of seeing what André Derain—or Max Ernst—saw through inverse causality, a kind of reverse engineering. Secondly, even though the image Beltracchi produces is a likeness of “a Derain,” that is an index as an image, the first-order likeness, the subject matter or motif, is smeared out in time. For Beltracchi, history exists as we know it, else he couldn’t say “how art history has developed since,” but parallel to this history, the image exists *dynamically*—that is, unfixed or unfused—before Derain’s time, during Derain’s
time and after Derain’s time. This is why Édouard Manet could rediscover an image from Titian or Francisco de Goya, and Gustave Courbet rediscover Diego Velázquez, and it was this type of transhistorical image Aby Warburg sought. And it was precisely this that made it possible for the present owner’s artist friend to recognize this painting as “a first order image”.

Beltracchi is just tapping this image while he is observing “Derain,” which is a measurement, on his canvas, as Derain would do, producing, essentially, the same image as Derain would. The image is there before Beltracchi’s eyes, even before Derain had seen it. It was Eric Hebborn, the English forger of Old Master Drawings, who most clearly formulated a theory of the “identity of discernables,” which essentially consisted of a hypothesis that artists as different as Leonardo da Vinci and van Gogh were tapping a common source. This common source we have to understand as a kind of wave dynamics of images, where the question of identity doesn’t make sense, because they are all identical to each other. It is the “tapping,” or, should we say, measurement that distributes them in space-time as discreet units. “Defying time and space,” Hebborn wrote, “they were working in some shared dimension, exploring a world of universals common to all great art.”

Forgers usually stay put with this tapping of images from this world of universals, but if this were all forging was, it would mean that our relations to such images would be like that to religious images during the Middle Ages or newspaper images of our time, which of course contain indices—as every material image must—but unactivated, irrelevant. It is with the measurement through the index as lever—which is perfect and discontinuous in space-time—that it becomes possible for the forger to open history, to make the complete incomplete as long as it is not exposed. When it is exposed, and measured as “wrong,” it is just art, just conceptual and appropriation art, and perfectly in alignment with the way images of the Atlas Group or Eleanor Antin operate. But artists such as Walid Raad, Eleanor Antin or the contemporary Chinese painter Zhang Hongtu demonstrate that what is in fact going on with forgeries is much more than the forging of an origin (as art lovers would say), and much more than a natural talent for images (as the forgers would say). It is about the disalignment of history and time as perceptual operators.

[Figure 9 around here]
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Of considerable impact in this regard has been Paul B. Coremans, *Van Meegeren’s Faked Vermeers and de Hooghs: A Scientific Examination* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1949).


Tilborgh et al., “Sunset at Montmajour,” 703n51.


Tilborgh et al., “Sunset at Montmajour,” 700.

Tilborgh et al., “Sunset at Montmajour,” 703.


It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. It has no legal status, nor is it located in the fiction of the work; rather, it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being.” Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984. Volume Two*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 211.


This is the strong argument put forward by Thierry Lenain, *Art Forgery: The History of a Modern Obsession* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

To paraphrase Alfred Lessing, “the offense felt to be involved in forgery is not so much against the spirit of beauty (aesthetics) or the spirit of the law (morality) as against the spirit of art.” Alfred Lessing, “What Is Wrong with a Forgery?,” in *The Forger’s Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Denis Dutton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 66.


Eric Hebborn, Confessions of a Master Forger: The Updated Biography, with an epilogue by Brian Balfour-Oatts (London: Cassell, 1997), 94.