

# Echoing the Call for Multimodal Representation

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The editor's introduction to the *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, from fall 2016 emphasizes the necessity of anthropology to engage in multimodal methodologies of research and research communication. Jenny Chio and Rupert Cox specifically named images and wrote in the introduction:

— An expanded view of visual anthropology, and its methodological and analytical contributions to current debates, recognizes and builds on the field's commitment to a reflexive awareness of the social relationships at stake in the process of making images and an engagement with the politics of representation. It also encompasses an active approach toward learning to see how others see, how technologies of imaging picture the world, and a serious consideration of the technical capacities necessary for communicating ethnographic knowledge through visual composition, editing, and design. (Chio & Cox, 2016, pp. 101–102)

The claim that the reflection on images has been neglected compared to the reflection on language, echoing in the introduction of Chio and Cox (216), has been made in the context of the *iconic turn* in the mid-1990s. In reference to the *linguistic turn* in philosophy coined by Richard Rorty (1967) in philosophy, art historian Gottfried Boehm (1994, pp. 11–38) described the *iconic turn*, and Thomas W. Mitchell (1995, pp. 11–34) used the term *pictorial turn*, observing a significant shift toward communication by images. Both recognized the increasing power of images in society through the digital means of communication, which enables everyone to easily create and disseminate images. Both were aware of the lack of reflection on the meaning of images in Western thought.

Since Plato's proclamation of a hierarchical relationship between a sensuous experience and an abstract idea of an experience (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 121–128; Nietzsche, 2010, pp. 60–73; Plato, *Politeia*: VII 514–541), images were preconceived as secondary and deceiving simulacra of an original. The deeply rooted preconception of the sensuous as seductive and the conceptual as a means to attain the essence of an experience has prevailed until today in Western societies. Scientific projects are leading to a result that can be described by a system of abstract symbols—either by language or math. The call for a multimodal approach in the introduction of Chio and Cox as an epistemological methodology to broaden the window of perception can be seen as the necessary consequence of a long-lasting preconception of the superiority of language over sensuous perception.

The call for the “alphabetization” of images, following the *iconic turn* in many interdisciplinary research clusters, has also

resonated within the context of visual communication. Who would be more affected by the increasing image flood than a practice that is involved in creating images for everyday communication in a society? Who should be more aware than the visual-communication designer that images are a powerful agency in a society equipped with digital tools? Who would be more aware than the visual communication designer that the way images create meaning is the result of a process that is always connected to a sociocultural context? Who would know better that the effect images can create cannot be fully explained by semiotics, a theory derived from the analysis of language? Who would be more suited to reflect upon the effect of the digital medium being witness of the transformation digital tools have caused in communication since the mid-1980s?

Accepting the call to participate in the quest of unveiling how images generate meaning, the academic field of visual communication was challenged to define its own approach within an interdisciplinary research field. While cultural studies—such as art history, media studies, linguistic studies, or psychology—are reflecting on a given image, visual communication designers are creating images in the field of practice for the purpose of conveying a message. In the context of image research (*Bildwissenschaft*, or *iconic research*, as the research field is called in the European academic context), visual communication can employ its competence of creating image variations in order to differentiate their meaning or to describe the processes of their creation. Through a practice-led inquiry, we may differentiate what ornamental, documentary, diagrammatic, typographic, scientific, participatory, etc. images are. Or we can use the practice-led approach to extend our knowledge about the various influences on the processes of image creation with analog or digital tools. We called this approach, which we have been developing since 2005, practice-led iconic research (Renner 2010, pp. 76–82; Renner 2017/18, pp. 8–33) and defined it with this phrase: “creating images in order to add to their understanding.” In contrast to artistic research, which accepts the creation of a work of art as an epistemological methodology, practice-led iconic research uses the creation of images as a methodology in combination with verbal reflection (Renner 2017/18, pp. 8–33). In this context, language is not replacing the image, and images do not replace language. Language is used as a means to interpret the effect of an image variation in comparison to other ones, in view of the image variations discussed. This hermeneutic approach is based on the fact that a beholder/reader may question the interpretation of the image variations presented to follow the interpretation or to contradict it in a response to the research community. This approach is widespread in literature studies, art history, or media studies, but visual communication is reluctant to accept it. Very often, methods of the social sciences or psychology are employed in practice-led visual communication research in order to verify or falsify an interpretation. It is not surprising that a major protagonist of hermeneutics,

Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1992, pp. 71 – 85), has described the arts as the third approach, next to the humanities and the sciences, to understand our being in the world.

In this respect, anthropology might be further advanced than the field of visual communication. The call of Chio and Cox for a multimodal approach includes photography, film, drawing, etc. as a means to describe and understand cultural phenomena. The interest of the *Visual Anthropology Review* in the additional perspectives a practice-led approach can provide to a discipline goes along with the understanding that a theoretical approach can describe a practice from the outside to a certain degree, but the involvement in a practice leads to a different understanding of it (Barad, 2007, pp. 132–185; Heidegger, 2010, pp. 117–118; Ingold, 2013, pp. 2–4, Renner, 2011, pp. 92–116).

From an anthropological point of view, the politics of representation might not be addressed enough in the described methodology of practice-led iconic research. The socio-cultural fabric that influences our activities, including the creation of images, might be overseen at first glance, even though an aesthetic effect always depends on a specific sociocultural situation. This friction between the point of view of social sciences and the point of view of creative production is, as mentioned in the introduction by Chio and Cox, the interesting field in which complementing activities of anthropology and practice-led image research can initiate a productive dialogue.

An example of a successful collaboration between anthropologists and image researchers at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design, Institute Digital Communication Environments (IDCE), in Basel, Switzerland, is a project that is inquiring into the ability of images to foster dialogue and mutual understanding in processes of urban planning. In this context, practice-led iconic research means creating images that allow a multitude of interpretations for diverse groups of citizens, who are invited to participate in the architectural process of transforming a district.

From the point of view of anthropology, processes of participatory image-making have been developed in order to include diverse groups of citizens into the process of planning an urban transformation. In short, we can say that this research project and its outcome are exemplifications of Bruno Latour's observation that design, in this case visual communication design, like many other disciplines, has changed from providing matters of fact in the modern era to addressing matters of concern (Latour, 2008, pp. 2–10).

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