

BAND XII  ACTUS
et IMAGO

Berliner Schriften für Bildaktforschung
und Verkörperungsphilosophie

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Bildakt at the Warburg Institute

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ON WARBURG, *BILDAKT* AND EMBODIMENT

London, January 25th, 2013

Dear Peter Mack, dear colleagues, dear friends,

Before I say a few words about our research group and what it is all about, I want to thank you for the honor of inviting us to the Warburg Institute. For our group, the *Kolleg-Forschergruppe Bildakt und Verkörperung* ("Collegium for the Advanced Study of Picture Act and Embodiment"), this place is not just one learned institution in London – a very prestigious institute, of course – but it is a legendary place. Aby Warburg's intentions are simply fundamental for our work: the fusion of the history of art with philosophy and other humanistic disciplines – anthropology, ethnology, philology, literature, theology, sociology etc.–, transcending the history of art into a philosophy of the image or into a discipline that considers human cognition as the creation of symbolic forms. The structure of the Warburg Library beautifully represents the structure of the New Science founded by Warburg: image – word – orientation – action. This way of thinking is crucial for our research group. And we are also explicitly connected to Warburg: Horst Bredekamp, the director of our group, is one of the editors of Aby Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften*. Two of our books are directly Warburgian: In our book series *Handapparat*, Pablo Schneider has edited a beautiful Warburg volume: *Nachhall der Antike* ("Echoes of Antiquity") as well as a Fritz Saxl book: *Gebärde, Form, Ausdruck* ("Gesture, Form, Expression").

Hence, coming to the Warburg Institute is like coming home. And since for many of us, it is the first time they are here, this is a very special emotional moment. The more so as we are aware of the fact that the London Warburg Institute is a glorious testimony of our country's very inglorious past. Britain became the home of one of the great cultural activities Germany had evicted in her cultural suicide. The Warburg Library could survive and flourish in Britain and became one of the glories of Britain's scholarly achievements. Inviting us here is a very generous gesture.

So thank you for giving us the opportunity to be in a place we consider as something like our mythical place of origin. We feel as Franciscans must feel in Assisi.

What is "Picture Act and Embodiment"? Horst Bredekamp and his friend, the American philosopher John Krois, had, years ago, the idea to join their philosophical endeavors. They both felt that the abstract and logical rationalistic approach to human thought, which was and still is the main conception of modern philosophy, was contrary to their philosophical convictions as well as to their human and artistic experiences. And, as far as their understanding of art was concerned, the widespread reductive view on art as representation was just as unsatisfactory: Art or images or pictures cannot be dealt with as primarily representing the world outside. Modern artistic production had already made that very clear: Art is a creative process, the picture thereby comes alive, it takes on an active role in the process of its reception. These modern artistic activities opened the eyes, if I may say so, of the theoreticians of the image and showed the way to a new conception of the image. The production of an image is not just the production of a dead object – flat and rectangular, or three-dimensional and static – but a process that, in its material manifestation, maintains all characteristics of a human activity and is therefore also perceived as such: It is a form, it is alive, and it calls for an inter-subjective encounter. In these characteristic features, the theory of the image comes very close to the theory of speech as a dialogical activity and an *energeia*, as Wilhelm von Humboldt called it. This theory transcends ages and spaces, it concerns all periods and cultures.

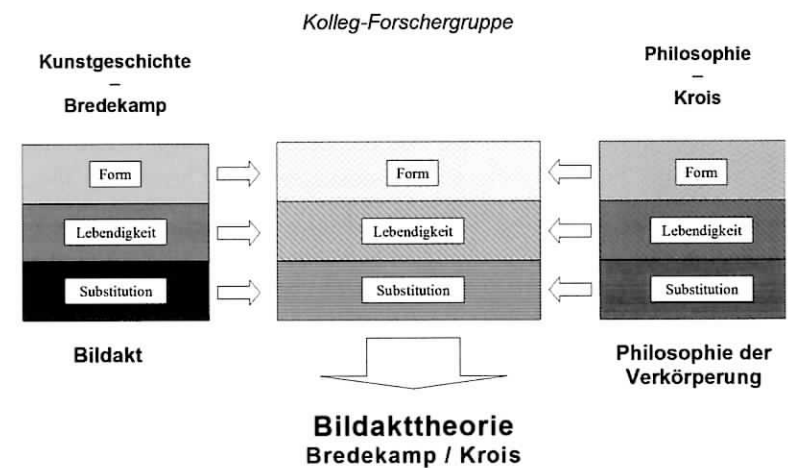
Not only modern artistic experiences, but also the development of the visual media made it clear that art history as a philosophy of the image has to transcend the limits of art – a very Warburgian move: The picture has to be regarded as something fundamental in the human appropriation of the world.

Here the theory of the image – already philosophical in itself – clearly joins philosophy. And Bredekamp joins Krois: The theory of the image is just one version of a theory of human thought. Art history as a philosophical reflexion of images imposes the image upon philosophy. The idea of *embodiment* is the connecting concept. For the philosophical art historian, the appropriation of the world through the creation of images is embodiment, the image is a creation of mental forces inseparable from the human body and then a body itself. The idea of "pure thought" – Kantian "reine Vernunft" – is necessarily an absurd idea for an art historian; but also for a philosopher like John Krois whose philosophy of embodiment was inspired by Cassirer and Charles Sanders Peirce. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is a philosophy that explicitly conceives of human understanding not as a creation of purely mental, immaterial thought but always as thought materialized in symbols, embodied forms. Here, the philosophy of language comes in: Language as an embodied way of thought shares

fundamental structural characteristics of the image. The same – post-Kantian – move can be found in Peirce's philosophy: Human thought is always materialized in signs, and signs are not fixed objects but bodily and inter-subjective, interpretative processes. The term "embodiment" is a Peircean term.

Thus, it becomes clear what attracted the theory of the image to the philosophy of embodiment: The triad of a modern picture theory – cognitive bodily process, aliveness, dialogical or inter-subjective embedding of these processes – is also the basic structure of a philosophy of embodied cognition.

The motivation for Bredekamp and Krois to found a research group was the confluence of parallel philosophical intentions. A theory of the picture act had to be developed in close cooperation with a philosophy of embodiment and the philosophy of embodiment had to be developed in close cooperation with the theory of the image. This is the twofold main idea you can see in the schematic presentation of the founding document of our research group.



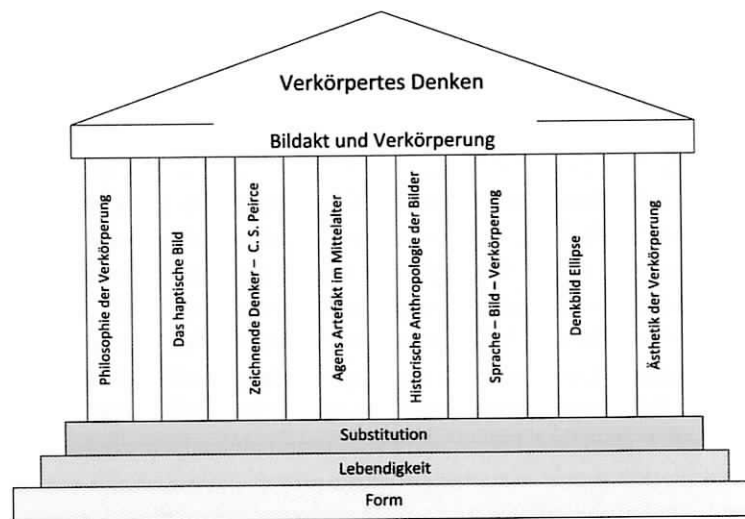
For their innovative project Bredekamp and Krois received a very generous funding by the DFG, the German Research Foundation, and they started the research group in 2008. The main structural feature of that specific kind of research group – Kolleg-Forschergruppe – was that it should be organized like Institutes for Advanced Study: complete freedom for research, generous possibilities to invite visiting fellows, funding for colloquia and conferences. External expertise for the permanent members of the research group was explicitly requested. And, indeed, I think all the important philosophers and art historians and theoreticians able to contribute to the project "Bildakt und Verkörperung" were invited to give talks or to stay with us for a couple of days or months. These

invitations as well as the specific investigations of the permanent members of the group considerably advanced the elaboration of a theory of picture act as well as of a philosophy of embodiment.

In fact, *Sehen und Handeln* ("Seeing and Acting") was the first volume, edited by Bredekamp and Krois, of our book series *Actus et Imago*. Horst Bredekamp published his *Theorie des Bildakts* in 2010.

The tragic death of John Krois right in the middle of the way unfortunately weakened the philosophical part of the project. John could not finish his book. Although we published his essays on embodiment in the volume *Bildkörper and Körperschema* in 2011, we did not succeed in convincing our evaluators that we are vigorously pursuing the project of a philosophy of embodiment. Therefore, the funding for the project will end at the end of this year. It will end notwithstanding the fact that Bredekamp's *Theorie des Bildakts* was one of the major publication events in 2010, that we have published seven volumes of Bildakt studies in our book series *Actus et Imago*, and four Warburgian volumes of our series of re-editions of classical texts, that seven doctoral dissertations, two Habilitationsschriften, and at least four master's theses have been completed in the four years of our existence. But we will not scatter, we will try to find other financial support, and we will exist as an Ideal College ever after.

Therefore, I want to show you the form our Collegium has taken on in the meantime, the form of the project we are presenting here: After the completion and publication of the *Theorie des Bildakts* by Horst Bredekamp, our project is aiming for a substantial contribution to the philosophy of embodiment and for the further elaboration of the picture act theory in eight columns, as depicted in the following schema:



We are honored and glad to be here, in our mythical founding place, in our Assisi. And in order to thank you once more for the invitation, we would like to donate to the Warburg Library the seven volumes of our book series with the Warburgian title *Actus et Imago*.