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Créolité and Iconoclash [\[1\]](#)

X is everywhere

In the early days of the German protest movement against nuclear power stations there was a simple yet effective way to produce slogans: Take the name of a given power station and put it into the phrase: »X is everywhere«. For instance »Brokdorf is everywhere« or »Lüchow-Dannenberg is everywhere«. People knew, of course, that these are well defined places, having exact lines of longitude and latitude on the map. Nevertheless, to say »They are everywhere« was part of the irony and was meant to make people think, and recognize a general danger that everybody should be aware of. This, then was the double-meaning of the phrase.

Looking back it occurs to me that things may have changed since then. It may well be that there is no longer a double-meaning – only simple truths. That is to say: The distinction between local and global may be fading away – the global being anywhere and the local being everywhere. In fact, one might argue that globalization does not contrast with local affairs, but that it is the abolition of a former distinction between local and global. And this would make it a far more dramatic event.

Cosmo-Politan

In the next 20 minutes (or so) we will be looking at more examples of the structure: »X is everywhere«. The oldest expression of this type is the term »cosmopolitan«. It is derived from the two Greek words *cosmos* (meaning the whole wide world) and *polis* (meaning the city of Athens). Literally translated it means that Athens may be found anywhere in the world: *Athens is everywhere*. That is the meaning, and hence a cosmopolitan is somebody capable of finding Athens anywhere.

DIOGENES LANTHORNE.

In *Athens* I seeke for honest men,
But I shall find them God know; & when.



He search the City, where if I can see
One honest man, he shall goe with mee.

Diogenes is everywhere - even in London,
English Woodcut, 16th century

The first person ever to be called *cosmopolitan* was the ancient philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who died about 320 before the Christian era. He was the archetype of the cynics and the subject of numerous apocryphal stories – anecdotes which have inspired hundreds of paintings in the history of art. Thus we see him living a provocatively independent life: with no house, no family, no money, not even a cup – living like a dog = *cyne*s (the expression *cynic* is derived from this word); sleeping in a barrel and expressing his philosophy in nutshells of coined phrases. One day Diogenes was asked, where his hometown was. According to Diogenes Laertius: *De vita et moribus philosophorum*, he answered: »I am a cosmopolitan«. [\[2\]](#) This is where the expression comes from. It was Diogenes who declared himself so independent of local circumstances that he could find Athens anywhere. And there is a dramatic sense behind this: It means that Diogenes cannot be sent into exile. As his home is everywhere, he can only be sent home, not into exile. Diogenes himself was familiar with this kind of punishment, for he had been exiled from Sinope where he was born. The expression »cosmopolitan« was thus a formula of resistance, depriving the mighty of the possibility of exiling him.

The most powerful man in those times was Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). There is a famous story about Diogenes and Alexander meeting. And, although it is highly unsure whether this meeting ever took place the story makes sense. It goes like this: We have Diogenes sitting in his barrel taking a sunbath, when Alexander turns up and offers him anything in the whole world – whatever he would like. And the famous answer was: »Would you just mind stepping out of my sun?«^[3] There are other stories connecting Diogenes and Alexander. The two are even said to have died on the same day.^[4] So why this interest in connecting the highly individualistic philosopher with the omnipotent emperor? My answer would be: They share the epithet »cosmopolitan«. On the one hand, there is the emperor who carried the polis of Athens all over the known world. After having conquered half of Asia he introduced Greek knowledge and craftsmanship to places as far away as India, and indeed traces of Greek influence could still be found in Buddha statues in Afghanistan before the Taliban blew them up. (I'll come back to that later.) – On the other hand, we have the philosopher who declared himself independent of any local circumstances, thus making the whole wide world (= cosmos) his hometown (= polis). So the coupling of Diogenes and Alexander makes us think about the question of whether individualism and globalization are but two sides of the same coin.

documenta 11

I was meditating on these things when I came home from the last documenta (no. 11) in Kassel. For in this huge art-show I had found a modern version of the barrel Diogenes lived in. I am talking about Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument*.

Documenta no. 11 was meant to present art in the age of globalization, where cultures and languages mix along new borderlines. The cultural effects have been described in terms of the model of *Créolité*. This means a mixture or a patchwork of languages and cultural practices like those found on West Indian islands. The basic assumption was: *Créolité is everywhere*. That is why the artistic director of this year's documenta, Okwui Enwezor, invited a lot of African and South American artists to participate. In addition, he organized four intellectual »platforms« – discussing democracy, justice, *Créolité* and the dramatic situation in the world's, and particular African, cities. These discussions took place in Vienna, New Delhi, Berlin, St. Lucia, Lagos – in other words on four different continents. These discussion platforms were regarded as an integral part of the overall documenta, thus stressing its global perspective.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*,
documenta 11, Kassel 2002

To see Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* you had to leave the main documenta display area – and this formed a basic message in itself. The idea of turning away from the main documenta was underlined by a poster asking why anyone should work for bored art people: rich, over-educated and without any fun? Hirschhorn's initial step reminded of the old game of anti-art versus art. We all know that this has been a highly successful strategy in art, often quite high-brow and somewhat arrogant. But the *Bataille Monument* was different. It could be looked at in one of the poor areas of Kassels, where lots of immigrants live, where unemployment is high and where nobody will ever have heard of George Bataille before.

Hirschhorn contacted the local Turkish boxing club. And these strong men helped him to construct the monument, which basically consisted of 3 wooden huts. In no. 1 food and drinks were sold. No. 2 contained a library of philosophical books and pornographic videos. No. 3 displayed an exhibition devoted to George Bataille's life. One could observe some very interesting and funny encounters between the local Turkish population and the documenta crowd. And in a certain way these encounters formed the actual monument, defining it as a social activity, emerging from three primitive huts. These temporary buildings were reminders of third-world-cities, where suburbs do not mean nice houses with gardens, but slums. These are places where many people have to sleep in boxes and poor shelters like Diogenes of Sinope did in his barrel. Diogenes can be regarded as the hero of a philosophical life sharing poverty. It's so easy to share wealth, it's much harder to share poverty. It is something we will have to learn in Europe. And by doing so Thomas Hirschhorn succeeded unintentionally in proving the basic documenta argument: *Créolité* is everywhere – it's even in Kassel.

Documenta_11, during its best moments, managed to change perspectives – watching Europe from the outside. Of course this change of perspectives implies a million possibilities to multiply the meaning of any piece of art. There was, for instance, a remarkable video called *Turbulent* (1998) by the female Iranian artist Shirin Neshat (*1957). »*Turbulent* (1998) opens a trilogy that brings to the forefront the dynamics between men and women in

Islamic society. In intensely ornamental choreographies, large, homogenous groups of men and women are moved through an impressively stark landscape. The editing rhythm and the film music give these allegorical productions an almost monumental character.«[\[5\]](#) That is what the catalogue says. Now, allegorical productions always imply a million possible ways of understanding. And all of them are right. Confronted with Shirin Neshat's video a lot of European visitors in this case thought of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – and unfortunately they were told by a leaflet that they were completely wrong and that we have to learn about Iranian mythology. Iranian mythology is very interesting – nevertheless, there was a basic problem here in the relation of the image and its context. In a patchwork of cultures called *creolité* you will always have a multitude of contexts changing the meaning of everything all the time. You cannot control contexts. The documenta tried to do that here and there. That is why so much text was produced: in order to control context, which is impossible. The intentions of artists and curators are important and should be recognized, but in the end it's up to the observers to develop possible meanings and to take part in the experiment of creating meaning. That's the spirit of *creolité*, and creative misunderstandings are part of the game. Let's have the courage to creatively misunderstand each other!

Iconoclasm

The balance between the image and the word is always a delicate one. By combining theoretical discussions with an art exhibition the documenta tried to create a certain balance between word and image.

We should not take this harmony for granted. There is a fundamental problem here that we should never forget about: That there are times during which and cultures in which people have a completely different approach to images in principle.

I wrote these sentences during a journey across the Mediterranean sea. Having arrived to Greek islands, I happened to see Byzantine frescoes depicting saints whose eyes have been scratched out and pinched by believers. This is a remarkable kind of iconoclasm. Here the destruction of art did not come from a suspicion that images may hide the truth – a truth, which can only be expressed in language, in holy words, in theory or whatsoever. The opposition of word and image is well-known from protestant iconoclasms when images were banned from churches in order to concentrate on the word and nothing but the word. However here in the Greek chapel it was different. The saint's image was destroyed not because of a disbelief in images but, on the contrary, because of an overwhelming belief in holy presence by the image. A kind of holy presence technology.

We should be remind of this, living in a postmodern world that is flooded with images, nobody believes in any more. This is a situation far more paradox than any other culture has produced – an inflation of images raising their circulation and reducing their meaning at the same time. This touches the very nerve of aesthetics, they may be critical or not.

That is why we have congresses every other day discussing the status of images today. I won't raise the notorious question »What is an image?«, for this question is everywhere. I

simply would like to point at a remarkable coincidence of exhibitions in 2002. On the one hand we had documenta_11 in Kassel; on the other hand an exhibition called *Iconoclash. Beyond the image wars in science, religion and art*. It was shown in the Karlsruhe Center for Art and Media (ZKM) from May to August 2002.



Arnulf Rainer at his arrestment
in the Wolfsburger Kunstverein, November 1962
At the prize giving and opening of the exhibition
Junge Stadt sieht junge Kunst
Arnulf Rainer painted over one
of the Volkswagen-award winning paintings.
He was sentenced in 1962

Iconoclash was curated by Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, Peter Galison and others. It meditated on the amazing consequences of the second commandment: »You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or in earth beneath or in the waters below.«[\[6\]](#) That is what the bible says and what has been impossible to obey. None of all the iconoclasm has been able to expel images from the surface of the earth – neither the Byzantine image wars (which some people take as a model for what is happening today[\[7\]](#)) nor Savonarola in Florence (although artists like Sandro Botticelli brought their own paintings in order to have them burnt on the market). Not even Calvin managed to expel images from the surface of Switzerland; on the contrary, these efforts created new temples of art, called museums. And nobody will forget the images of Afghanistan Buddha-statues in Bamiyan after the Taliban blew them up. These Taliban-fighters did exactly what the Italian Futurists suggested to do with Venice – a quite alarming reading of the expression »critical aesthetics«.

We now come to the counterpart of iconoclasm: a praise of images which has often resulted in the destruction of its own object. Sometimes it is hard to decide which side is which. (Is the yellow press a triumph of the image or its ruin?)

The basic strategy of the Karlsruhe exhibition was to avoid fixed positions and to have a look at the uncertain situations. In Bruno Latour's words: »Iconoclasm is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking [...]; iconoclasm, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive.«[\[8\]](#)

Let us look, for example, at the creation of one of the most famous collections of art: the Louvre. In its nucleus we have the French royal collection, which was transformed into a public gallery four years after the French Revolution in 1793. But the vast majority of pictures we admire today are based on the so-called Louvre Napoleon. During Napoleon's conquest of most of Europe, pieces of art were brought from all these countries. Long mule and donkey caravans with rolled up paintings piled up on their backs crossed the Alps from Italy to Paris. Witnessing these events, Johann Wolfgang Goethe expressed the ambivalence of the situation. According to him, the Italian body of art was destroyed and torn to pieces in order to create a new body of art: the Louvre.[\[9\]](#) Goethe described the Louvre Napoléon as an ambivalent mixture of destruction and construction – in short: as an *inconoclasm*, »when one does not know, one hesitates, whether it is destructive or constructive«.

The ambivalence of destruction and construction at the same time has often been used to describe modern societies in general. Joseph Alois Schumpeter's famous expression of »creative destruction« was originally meant to describe capitalist economies. It is a demonic expression which fits depressingly well to other phenomena, for instance to modern art. Bruno Latour has put it this way:

»Everyone and every detail of what art is and what an icon, an idol, a sight, a gaze, has been thrown into the pot to be cooked and burnt up in the past century of what used to be called modernist art. A last judgement has passed [...]. And yet, of course, as one might expect, here is another *iconoclasm*: so much defacement and so much ›re-facement‹. [...] The more art has become a synonym for the destruction of art, the more art has been produced, evaluated, talked about, bought and sold, and, yes, worshipped. [...] A sort of ›creative destruction‹ that Schumpeter had not anticipated.«[\[10\]](#)

The Karlsruhe exhibition has been meditating on these issues. To me it appeared like a necessary counterpart of the documenta and we should not be surprised that this exhibition was presented at the Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. It's in new media that a crisis of the image has emerged. And that is why I present these two events in Kassel and Karlsruhe like two corresponding wings: »Creolité is everywhere« – »Iconoclasm is everywhere«. Their coupling may help to discuss a plurality of meanings of the expression »critical aesthetics«.

Telepresence

Up to now we have met 3 different phrases of the structure »X is everywhere«, beginning with Diogenes' cosmopolitan claim of being able to find Athens anywhere. I will end with the latest offer to be everywhere: by means of telepresence. This is your chance to say: »I am everywhere«!

Telepresence is a notion that has been on the list for the last twenty years and has managed to gain rising interest lately. The International Society for Presence Research (ISPR) was only created in January 2002. (If you join now, you may still be regarded as a charter member.) And a lot of money from Brussels has been put into these projects.

So what is it all about? The basic idea was expressed in a famous paper by Marvin Minsky, published in June 1980 under the title *Telepresence*. Minsky suggested a combination of robotics and telecommunication. His example was a robotic arm somewhere in the universe controlled by the movements of a person's arm right here. This person would wear a jacket lined with sensors and muscle-like motors. Each motion of the biological arm would be transmitted to and reproduced by a mobile mechanical hand operating either next door, or on the bottom of the sea, in a broken down nuclear power station or on some other planet. By force-feedback the operating human could feel if the robot is handling something heavy or hot. The idea behind this is to create the impression of the robot's arm being yours: It's you who is operating on the moon. It's you who can be everywhere. That is what Marvin Minsky thought of: »The biggest challenge to developing telepresence is achieving that sense of ›being there‹. Can telepresence be a true substitute for the real thing?«[\[11\]](#)

Doing a seminar on *Presence Technologies* I studied this text with a group of Berlin students last summer. And we had long discussions on the expression: »a true substitute for the real thing«. It sounds like a confusing label one may find in supermarkets: *salmon made from salmon substitute*. Is it salmon or not? What is a true substitute? Either it's a substitute or it's true, but truth cannot be a substitute and a substitute cannot be the truth. »A true substitute for the real thing« – isn't it a wonderful paradox? In fact it is a kind of Byzantine idea. It was exactly this question that was at stake in Constantinople during the famous Byzantine image wars. Does an icon of god mean the presence of god? Is god's icon »a true substitute for the real thing«? People killed each other because of this question.

It is in Constantinople that we find a theory of the image combined with concepts of presence. That is why there is such a Byzantine atmosphere in current discussions on telepresence although most of the papers dealing with a history of presence technologies start with the invention of linear perspectives in the renaissance – an idea which is completely misleading. It's Constantinople, that we should look at.

You may regard these last sentences as being a bit exaggerated; they, in fact, answer to Marvin Minsky's exaggerations. If one looks at his texts, it is often hard to decide whether he himself believed in what he said or whether he exaggerated in order to raise funds and whether his pupils took his words for granted only by mistake, unaware of the history of image wars behind.

On a less theological and more technical level, his pupils have been quite successful. A lot of new interfaces have been created that include remote control and force-feedback via

senses other than the eye. Impressive new technologies have been developed to communicate touch and the movement of fingers, as one example. In this way remote controlled surgery has become a new tool for clinical use. We may have a surgeon in America, watching a monitor and by moving his arm he controls a far-away clinical robot. This has been tested successfully several times.

If haptic interfaces are included, one dramatically changes the character of the corresponding images. We should be prepared for these new technologies. That is why some efforts have been made at the University of the Arts in Berlin to discuss these things. (One of the recent diplomas created a new haptic interface.)

The aim of all these efforts, as expressed by the International Society for Presence Research (ISPR), is to make images look / feel more and more real and to make users forget about the images being an image. Users should have the impression that they are not looking at images but at the real thing. The future of all this is aimed at a scientifically controlled confusion of image and reality. The worst case scenario here could be a user looking at the media as a media, attempting to perform critical aesthetics.

Now let us assume that presence technologies some day succeed in creating a perfect illusion. In this case there would be a new task for critical aesthetics. They would not only have to discuss political implications plus the cultural semantics of images in principal, but they would have a far more basic question to deal with: Is this an image or the real thing? And what about virtual realities where the real thing is nothing but an image?

In order to discuss these questions, my students and I contacted the Heinrich Hertz Institute in Berlin. In cooperation with British Telecom, Sony, Heriot Watt University, Technical University Delft and the TNO (the Human Factors Research Institute of the Netherlands) they are creating a new video conferencing system called »VIRTUE – The step towards immersive telepresence in virtual video-conference systems«. It is an international project being heavily financed by Brussels. On a technical level these people are doing an amazing job producing life-size 3D-images which in regard to perspectives look right from any angle. This is remarkable. And yet we all feel that there is something missing: an idea of the paradoxes of the image.



Immersive telepresence in virtual video-conference systems.
Life-size communication partners meet around a desk,
half virtual and half real.

Critical aesthetics will not only have to deal with political implications and cultural semantics, with Creolité and Iconoclash, but as well with the principal status of images in a technical civilisation. That is why I feel that critical aesthetics will get more and more important. We should be prepared and we should prepare our students to be able to deal with these issues – knowing them from inside and from outside at the same time. Knowing Europe from inside / outside. Knowing technologies from inside / outside.

Notes

[1] Contribution to the ELIA symposium »Ethics and critical Aesthetics«, European League of Institutes of Art, 7th Conference, Dublin 22-26 Oct 2002, Dublin Institute of Technology, 25th October 2002.

[2] Diogenes Laertius, *Leben und Meinungen berühmter Philosophen (De vita et moribus philosophorum)*, VI, 63. Hamburg 1990, 326.

[3] Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes / Gespräche in Tusculum*, V, § 92, hg. v. Olof Gigon, München 1970, 386-7.

[4] Diogenes Laertius, *Leben und Meinungen berühmter Philosophen (De vita et moribus philosophorum)*, VI, 79, 334.

[5] Documenta 11_Plattform 5: Ausstellung / Exhibition, Short Guide, Kassel 2002, 170.

[6] Cit. *Iconoclash. Beyond the image wars in science, religion and art*, ed. by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Cambridge, Mass. 2002, 18.

[7] Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'image contemporain*, Paris 1966.

[8] Bruno Latour, »What is iconoclash? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?«, in: *Iconoclash*, op. cit., 14.

[9] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, »Einleitung in die Propyläen« (1798), *Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, I. Abt., 47. Band, Weimar 1896, 32.

[10] B. Latour, »What is iconoclash? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?«, 11.

[11] Marvin Minsky, »Telepresence«, in: *Omni*, June (1980), 45-52, cit. 48.

[Home](#) [Texte](#) [Kontakt](#)