

ihonische Differ.

The invisibility of images and images of a Second Order

I.

Revelation

In september 2013 the director of the Van Gogh Museum could proudly present a "once in a lifetime experience": the rediscovery of a Van Gogh from his greatest period when he lived in Arles.

Binking

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.

After Mustad's death in 1970, the heirs appointed the art dealer Daniel Wildenstein, who also looked at the rejected painting and judged it as a fake. Later owners contacted in 1991 the Van Gogh Museum to pursue the question, but the museum declined any further investigation with the motivation that "we think that the picture in question is not an authentic Van Gogh".

detail

This was the situation until 2011, when an artist friend of the present owner, who had grown up in Arles, noticed a similarity of the ruin at the upper left corner of the painting with 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 made the Van Gogh Museum to revise their rejection twenty years earlier and agreed to carry out an

Painting
& photo

investigation of the painting. After two years of analysis 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." By means of research into literature and records, they were also capable of producing a convincing provenance ~~of the painting~~. According to this it belonged first to Vincent's brother Theo, and ^{it} then passed on to Theo's widow, who, in her turn, sold it on to Maurice Fabre, probably in 1901 together with five or six other paintings, when it directly or indirectly was bought by Mustad.

180

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. In this 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 continues, "resembles that on Wheatfield with setting sun, now in the Kunstmuseum, Winterthur, which is also marked with a Bonger number."

180/100

Apart from that the handwriting is rather dissimilar, the difference of the placement and scale ^{as well as the} 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.

Photomicro
graphs

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 similar)~~ ~~difficult against analyses with High Performance Liquid Chromatography, not to speak about any Thread Count Automation Project.~~ Against such forensics we have to concede. But I do want to suggest, that the images this, and the many similar cases, project, have acquired such a degree of autonomy and visibility that they now ~~effectively~~ functions as the artistic image, and that these images of the second order are structurally identical with art forgeries. They are both reversed first order images, produced and viewed bottom-up, inside-out, and backside-front ^{as} images protruding from indices and traces.

Apartment

What interests me with the case of the Van Gogh is ^{rather} 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

Bredius

^{these} ~~this~~ specifications, the expert, Jens Thies, went out to identify an object corresponding to these attributes, that is: performed a series of measurements until an observation yielded the correct answer. The second known

Berenson

observation took place when Auguste Pellerin saw the painting at Mustad's and performed his own measurement and came out with the opposite result: "no", the measured object does not correspond to the attribute "van Gogh".

Mustad, himself without any measuring device, choosed 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 measurements behave like grooves in phonographic records,

Rembrandt

the results tend to get stronger and stronger the more the object is observed, Daniel Wildenstein could confirm

Louvre

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 -- it took this enormous effort with regard to apparatuses for the Van Gogh Museum in 2011 to be able to escape this observational gravity and present a new measurement.

Multispect
Photography
graphs
Scanning

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 about the rediscovered Van Gogh nevertheless contains an observation of an image, which is not a function of an index. It is when the present owner's artist friend notes

detail

that the "ruin" in the upper left corner resembles the Montmajour Abbey in the vicinity of Arles, where he had grown 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 for annihilating the observational gravity induced upon the object.

What struck me with this observation, was how exceptional it is, probably because it seems so irrelevant to how we have got used to observe art works. We usually don't observe any likeness and remembrance in relation to van Gogh's skies or Cézanne's apples, but to brushstrokes of van Gogh and Cézanne.

Prosecution

Now, a rediscovery as the one the Van Gogh Museum announced, 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. Art forgery, correspondingly, would then be a practice that re-imagines the index into art appreciation, very much in the same way van Meegeren was able to produce an exquisite crackle on his Vermeers, or Eric Hebborn's delightful reverse engineering to produce paper and ink from the time.

II.

"Der Fall Jägers" -- as it initially was called -- broke the headlines in ^{the} German newspapers during September 2010, when the 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 make 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 the painting had been ^{at} Alfred Flechteim's gallery, in the gallery "Der Sturm" and "Kunstsalon Emil Richter" were all faked, especially the Flechtheim-label, we are told, aroused suspicion, but obviously first when the chemical analysis of the pigments were done. Likewise it soon became clear that the provenance of the picture, from a certain "Collection Werner Jägers" was altogether fictitious and had never existed. ~~It didn't take long for the investigators and journalists to trace a number of pictures which also~~

Fast
↓

Red
Horses

Labels

* Dreht doch

~~stemmed from this "Collection Jägers" / and a contemporary,
equally fictitious "Collection Wilhelm Knops".~~

CSU.
Jägers

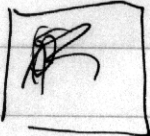
Wolfgang Beltracchi and his wife Helene had constructed a plausible art collection of her grandfather's, Werner Jägers, who had died in 1996, but never collected art. He ~~They~~ should ~~both~~ have bought pictures from the Alfred Flechtheim gallery which we know the existence of, but which have disappeared since. Beltracchi thus re-created paintings that evidently had existed, but since has disappeared, on or through indices. The images produced are ~~evidently~~ not any ^{portrait} ~~horse-scene~~, harbour-scape or landscape, but rather brush-strokes, labels on stretchers, cracquelures and provenances making up for the likeness and remembrance of -- for instance -- a Campendonck or a Derain.

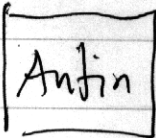
Helene

post

Consequently, one of the best piece the Beltracchis did was not any painting. It was the re-enactment of the Jägers Collection. This was very much a collaborative piece of Wolfgang and Helene. // Confronted with the lack of documentation of 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 ~~in~~ in a room. Helene dressed herself up in her grandmothers old dress and set her hair for to pose as her grandmother on a picture deliberately made slightly out of focus.

 This work has impressed all comment^{ators} of 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 Steyrl, or Eleanor Antin. The last ~~one who was~~ ^{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 the fascinating self-portrait as Florence Nightingale dated 1854. One commentator of the status of the Beltracchi case, Hanno Rauterberg ~~in Die Zeit~~, went even so far, as to suggest, that had Beltracchi, before the first suspicion fell upon him, divulged himself, he would have been the hailed as

the conceptual artist, "who has succeeded in a unique way to uncover the mafia structures of the art scene".

Beltracchi, de

I would very much like to agree with Rauterberg here, but it is ~~blatantly~~ obvious that this analysis is fundamentally on the wrong track. Helene and Wolfgang evidently enjoyed doing this re-enactment, but they did it of a necessity that was not at all artistic. Now, when Wolfgang Beltracchi has all the opportunities to contextualise his own work, he does what every forger before him has done: producing aesthetically pleasing but artistically mediocre pieces in a sort of stubborn insistence of "the good image".

Louis Pollock
Toroni

It is in this insistence that the forger differs from the successful artists of the twentieth-century, of which the common denominator is a certain iconoclasm; an iconoclasm Van Gogh and Cézanne shares with ^{Francis Bacon} ~~Linguley~~ and Pollock, namely of producing indices dressed up as images. Instead of producing a batch of different images, the modern artist produces one and the same image, over and over again. And this image is nothing but the recognizable attribute of traces and indices of "a Van Gogh" or "a Joseph Beuys", which as images contains a

certain inevitable reproducibility that finds its
~~Attributive~~ 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
images, but an image of a hand, a style, or a manner,
blown up, for to cover and penetrate the entire picture.
It is first and foremost an index, and only subsidiary --
if at all -- an image of anything outside of this index
or author function.

Rembrandt
detail

When art images is starting to be differentiated out of
the ordinary stream of images, beginning with the
collectors's desiderata for "a Rafael" in early 16th
century, the question of fake becomes an issue. This
question of authenticity was still -- during early modern
times -- regulated by notions of imitation, beauty and
taste, which ^{were} ~~are~~ the qualitative operators securing a
certain degree of unimportance to the problem of fakes.

Rembrandt
detail

This meant that if a painting is as good as by Rembrandt,
then, in a certain sense, it is a Rembrandt, regardless
of who painted it, because it answers to all attributes
agreed upon of, which "a Rembrandt" ought to contain.

When this differentiation is accelerated during the later
half of the 19th century, with the birth of art history

Labels
Flechtheim

as a discipline and modernity as a discourse, the regulators are no longer operating, or rather replaced by other concepts, as innovation, originality and authenticity, they are not longer regulating the quality of the image, but the measurement of the index. For instance, the quality of the brushstroke, the quality of the pigment, the quality of the canvas, or the quality of the marks on the verso of the canvas.

All these qualities begin to attain their own beauty, their own imitatio or likeness and their own taste. They are what is visible, not any arbitrary motif or subject matter the picture might or might not contain. Hence an image of a second order is established, and verily an image, behaving as images and performing all the operations of the image; that is: it is continuously imperfect in time and space, inherent reproducible and proliferating. ~~As an image, this image of the second order entails the same inherent reproducibility as any image.~~ Art forgery is the discipline which answers to this visual desire, that is: to produce images where art history is the subject matter.

Bosch