

After Cultural Theory:  
The Power of Images, the Lure  
of Immediacy

Janet Wolff

Every object sees us: there are eyes growing on everything.

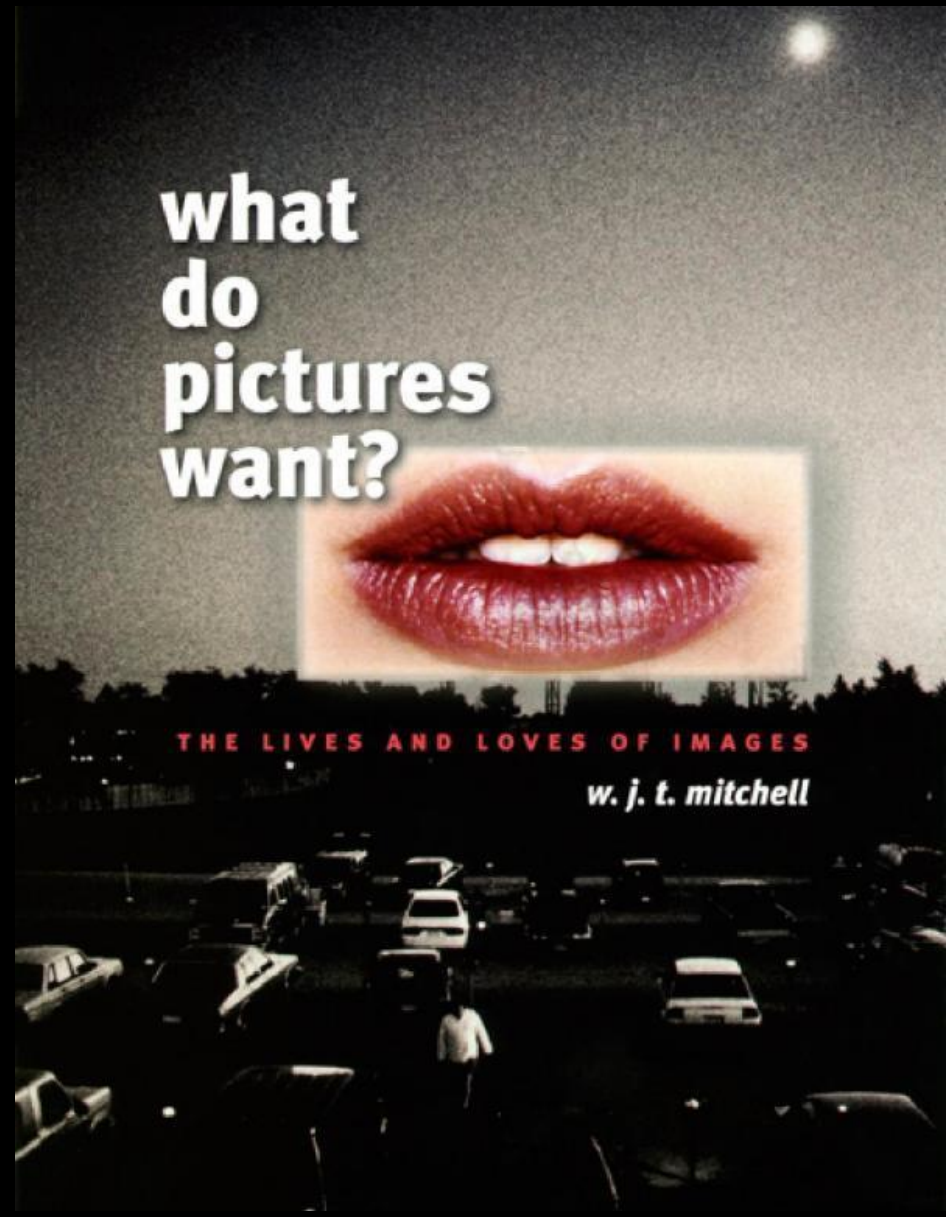
(Elkins, 1996: 51)

What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders ... What pictures want in the last instance ... is simply to be asked what they want.

(Mitchell, 2005: 48)

The object of art also possesses a subjecthood, in the sense of an agency distinct from the artist who made it – an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways.

(Holly, 1996: 11)



# Developments in the Humanities and Social Sciences

- the turn to 'affect'
- the (re)turn to phenomenology (and post-phenomenology)
- actor–network theory in sociology and science studies
- theories of the post-human (human/animal, human/nature, human/technology)
- theories of materiality
- emphasis on the agency of objects
- The turn to neuroscience in the humanities and social sciences
- the insistence on 'presence' as an unmediated encounter
- the foregrounding of the embodied nature of any act

# «Drastic threefold displacement»:

- of the separateness (and primacy) of the human in relation to nature
- of the primacy of the rational and the intellectual in human (and social) action
- of the primacy of analytic methods in the social and human sciences.



# THE POWER OF IMAGES

Studies in the History and Theory of Response



David Freedberg

**David Freedberg,**

*The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*

(1989)

Indeed, it seems to me that we should now be prepared to remove the evidence of phenomena like the **animism of images** from discussions of ‘magic’, and that we should confront more squarely the extent to which such phenomena tell us about **the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them**

(Freedberg, 1989: xxi–xxii).

1. Our relationship to images (*as to other objects*) is often an emotional, affective one
2. In some circumstances images (*and other objects*) are powerful, and hence may need to be hidden.

**BUT**

We can recognize the power of the image, while understanding full well that that *power is (socially, culturally, perhaps politically) given to it.*

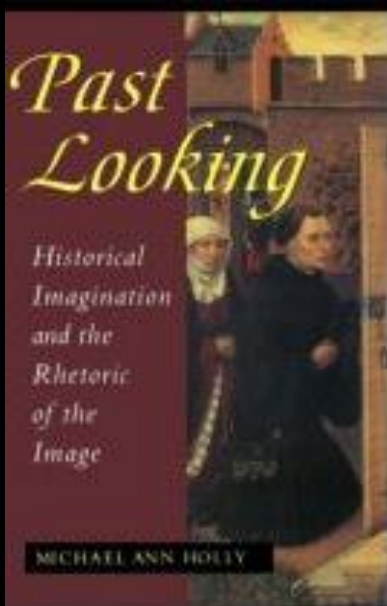
(p. 6)



# Michael Ann Holly

*Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image.*

(1996)



I argue by way of specific historical examples that **representational practices encoded in works of art** continue to be encoded in their commentaries

(p. xiii)

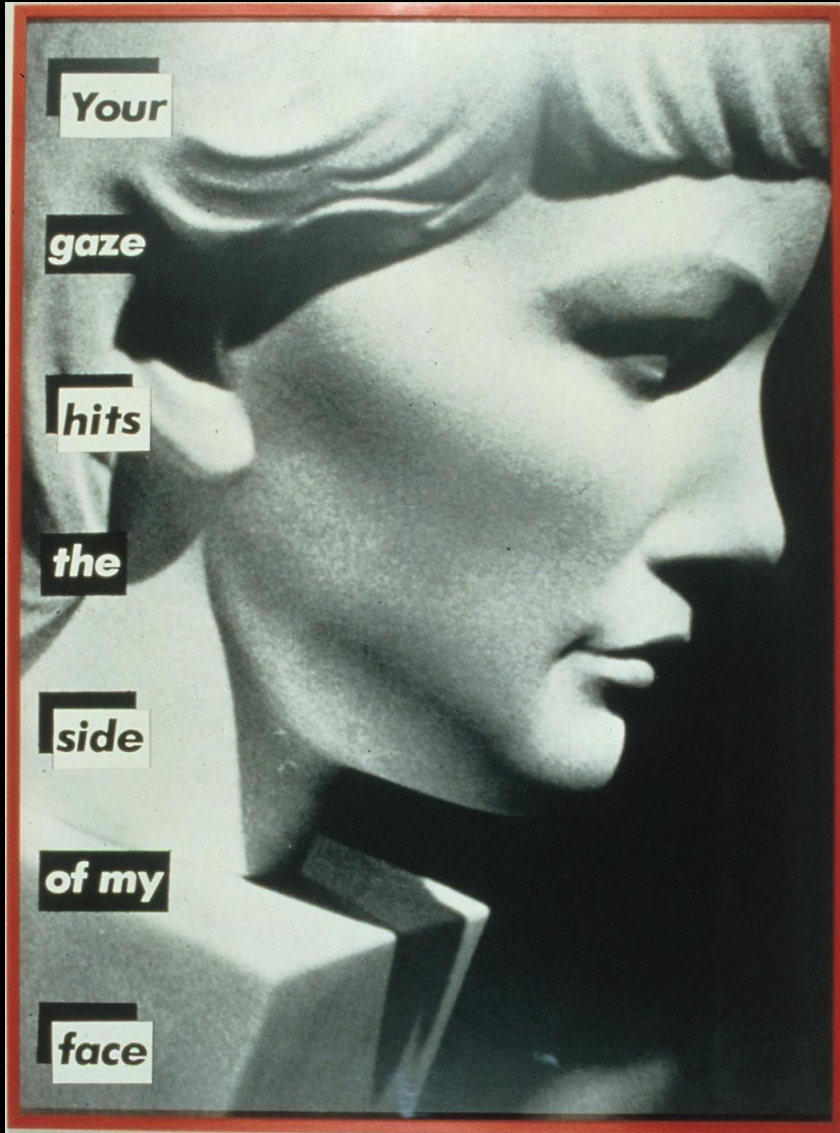
«the afterlife of the object»

(p. 14)



It is this to-and-fro-ness, the element of play between image and text, in which I am interested. As an amateur detective myself, I am employing this fifteenth-century image to uncover the disguised agenda in Panofsky's twentieth-century text.





**Mitchell, W.J.T.**

*What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*  
(2005)

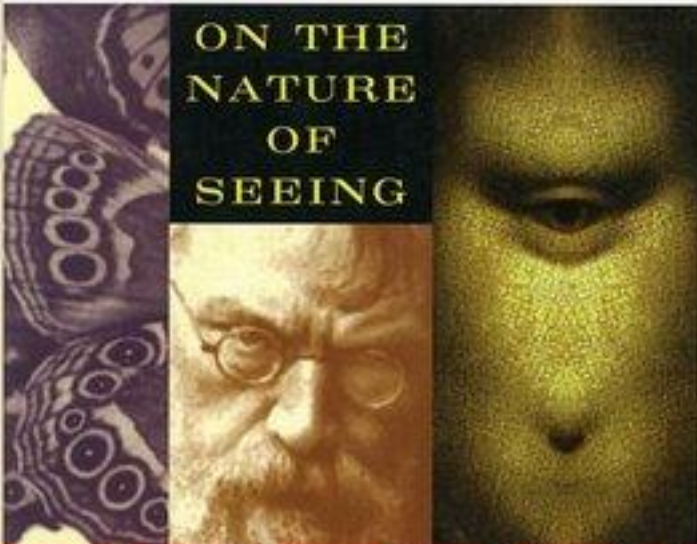
**BUT**

it quickly becomes clear that what at first sounds **animistic** (pictures with desires) is not that at all.

<...> more accurately, I suppose, Mitchell is asking 'what do pictures **need**?' (or 'how do we **need to think about pictures**?')

(p. 7)

# The Object Stares Back



"A ceaselessly thought-provoking  
book . . . on how we see and  
how we don't." —KIRKUS REVIEWS

James Elkins

**James Elkins**

*The Object Stares Back*  
(1996)

And objects do have eyes. The knife sees me: it gleams from the tabletop and says, 'Pick me up.' As in *Alice in Wonderland*, food seems to speak. A cookie looks at me with its single eye and whispers, 'Eat me.' And ultimately, objects all say one thing: 'Look at me.'

(p. 72)

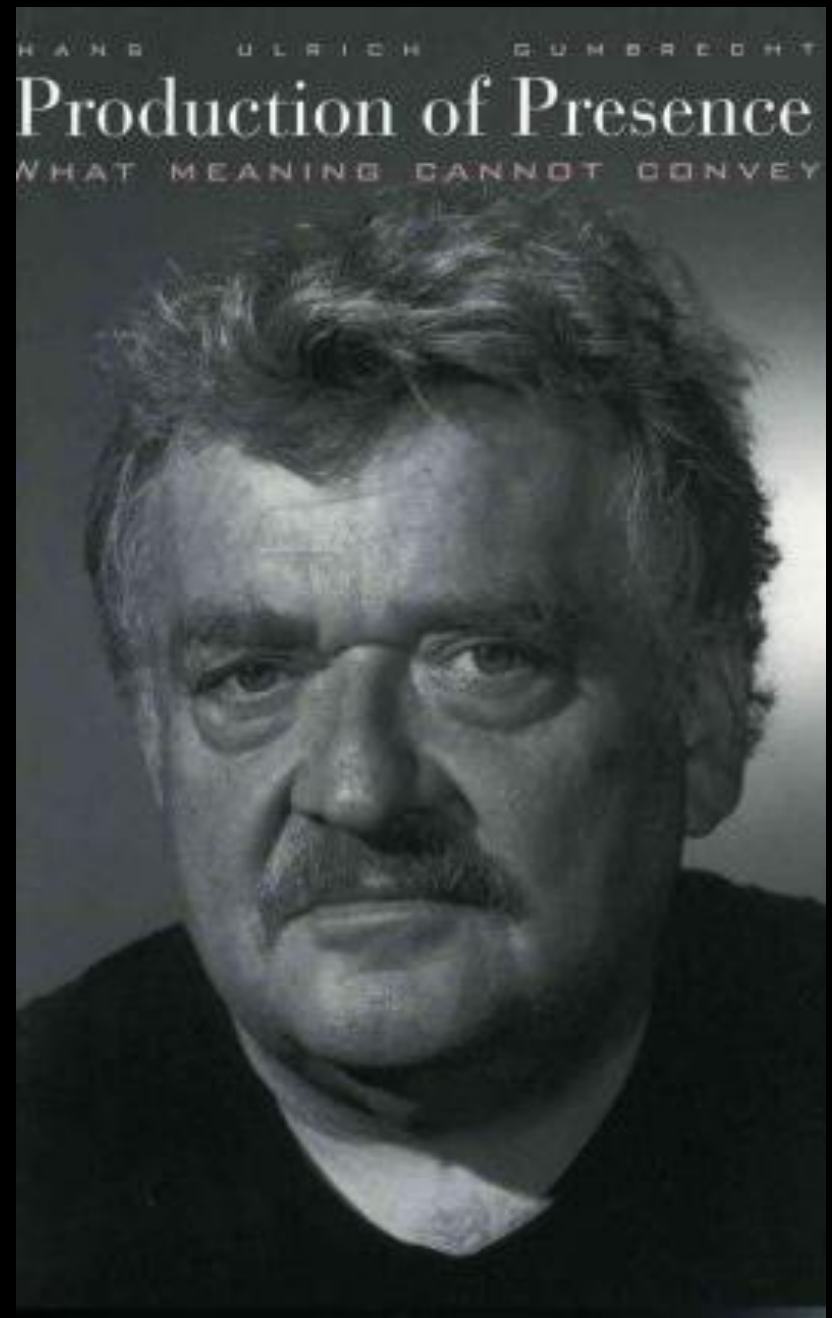
# Gumbrecht, H.U.

*Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey.*

(2004)

Theoretical support:

The 'power' of images (literary texts, other cultural objects) is **beyond the reach of analytic strategies**; its terms of comprehension are epiphany, presentification, deixis  
(Gumbrecht, 2004: 95)

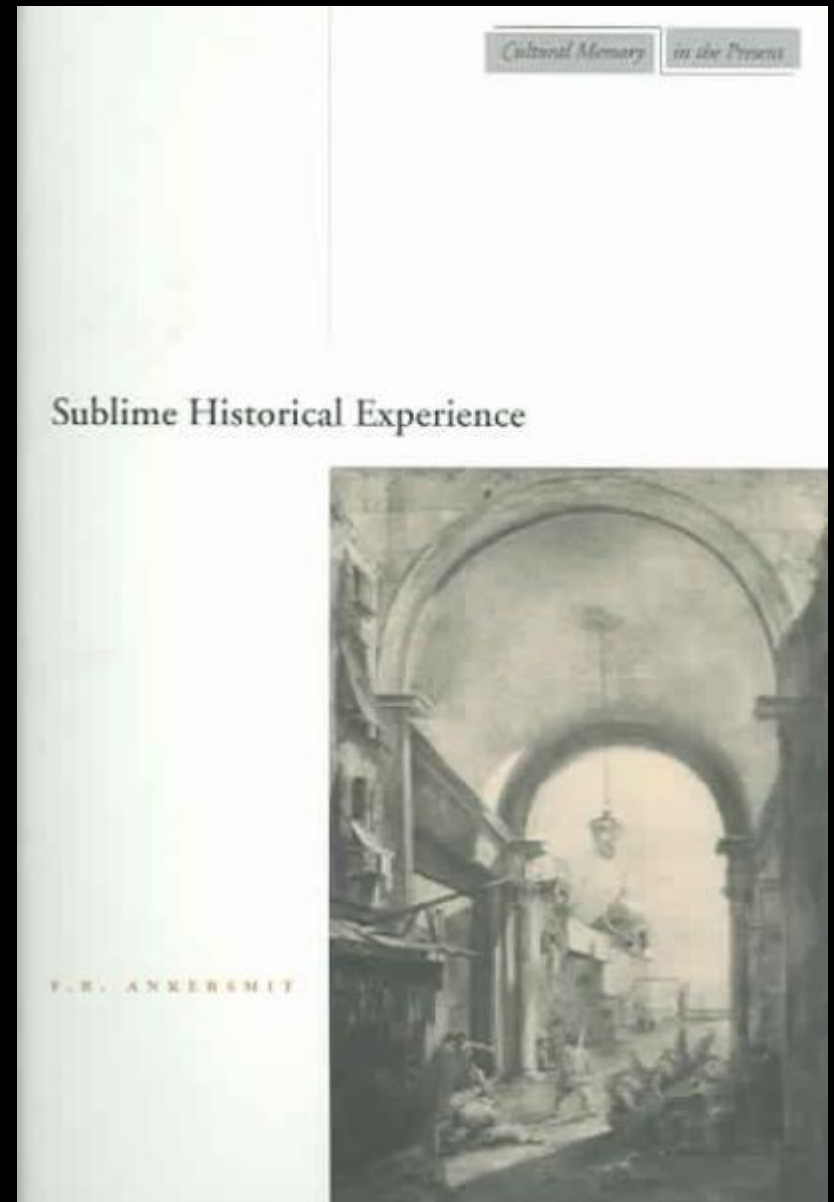


**Ankersmit, F.**

***Sublime Historical Experience***  
**(2005)**

...restore to thinking about history and history writing something of the warmth of the human heart and of what has a resonance in the depths of our souls

(Ankersmit, 2005: 11)



# Didi-Huberman, G.

*The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer – the Detail and the Patch*

(1989)

*Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*

(2005)

- ‘representational voids’
- ‘the “whack” of white’
- ‘phenomenology of gazes and touches’



We are seeing a variety of interventions whose effect is to displace a subject-centred humanist art history and cultural studies focused on meaning and interpretation

=>

**power-of-images discourse**

In all cases, **human agency** is re-figured in terms that go **beyond/before conscious thought** (and beyond/before the unconscious too, understood in classic psychoanalytic terms)

# REASONS

1. The **emotional and affective aspects** of personal and social life have been entirely ignored or marginalized in critical theory
2. Critical theory and cultural studies have had a tendency **to block the discourse(s) of aesthetics**
3. A misunderstanding of the normal operation of conceptual models has led some to embrace the notion that certain events, experiences and encounters somehow **'escape' language and meaning**