

Embodied Fantasies

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Embodied Fantasies

International Conference and Artists' Presentations

School of Visual Arts

335 West 16th Street

New York, NY 10011

October 28 - 30, 2011

Conference organizers:

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Embodied Fantasies, a concept central to art history and art theory, philosophy and art practices has again become an important topic in psychology, medicine, the neuro- and cognitive sciences, and especially in new fields of research such as neuro-psychoanalysis, artistic research and neuro-phenomenology.

The relationships among fantasy, sensuality and embodiment have been prominent in discussions of philosophy and art theory in the West. It is remarkable that all the before-mentioned fields of knowledge production are currently readdressing fantasy – beyond traditional conceptions of the ungraspable – as a complex thinking process that is already embodied.

Thus, the idea of fantasies becomes much more prominent in relation to the most recent embodiment theories. Beyond the classical concepts of phenomenology and its idea of consequent and constant intentional relations between objects and environments, the combination of phenomenology and fantasy, under the auspices of embodiment theories is relevant in understanding complex processes of the “inner world” of the individual person. Hence, what is the relationship between subjectivity and environment?

During the 18th century, a distinction was made between the idea of fantasy, and the German *Einbildungskraft*, in which *Einbildungskraft* and imagination are considered more fundamental faculties. A specific distinction between fantasy and mimesis arises, in which the fantasy not only reproduces what is seen but produces what was never seen before; not imitating but creating a

reality.

The conference Embodied Fantasies investigates how fantasies are subliminally or manifestly embodied, and it will also shed light on the question, "how do sensory-motor and emotional embodiments appear in fantasy?" Another major issue might be the question: whether some embodied acts in the performing arts not only relate to mental fantasy, but also could be conceived of as fantastic activity for themselves? Or vice versa: What kind of embodiment is at stake in mental fantasies? Can they be thought of as encompassing a kind of subliminal mode of embodied fantasies? And if so: What difference does this make for aesthetics, for phenomenology, for image theory?

Discussion of these issues can have a very broad range and can be sketched along two lines of inquiry. On the one hand, for example, if we think about dance as an embodied fantasy, the question is whether to conceive of a dancer's performing body as an agent of fantasy, or as its expression.

Pre-reflective and reflective modes of experiencing (Dorothee Legrand) must be thought of as crucial for this fantasy – and this is true for both the dancer and the beholder. The second line would be dream experiences. Here the opposite question is crucial. It is quite obvious that, if in REM-sleep, limbs are still because of gravity, dreams occurring during this phase can only be off-line embodied experiences. Nevertheless, off-line motor activity is still relevant. So how do hallucinatory experiences and their intrinsic sensing and emotional meaning relate to a simulated kind of embodiment and hence to an embodied fantasy?

The most prominent point, indeed, might be the question of the relationship between fantasies and images. In the 18th century, changes in ideas created on the one hand a new visual meaning and a re-evaluation of image-perception.

On the other hand, fantasy is also connected to spatial parameters and bodily sensibility. This means a re-organization of how humans understand themselves as subjects. In this sense, fantasies create an idea and also envision images, in which active subjects relate themselves to the environment as an imagined image.

The major focus of the conference is as follows:

As soon as it is established that humans are able to think in images, the question concerning their constitutional set-up arises in all its clarity: Do both internal and external visions exist? Would perceptual "seeing" – looking at objects and persons – be a seeing of the first order, while consciousness – self-reflection – would define a seeing of second order?

If one speaks of mental images less as vision than as imagination and sensation, all these descriptions of the ability to produce visualized images often point to a distinction between a "self-awareness" and an "attention awareness." "Self-awareness" is defined as: "feeling that it is I who does something and experiences something and that I am awake and 'conscious'," which is different from an awareness that "concentrates on certain internal and external events, such as perception, thinking, feeling, remembering or imagining." In contrast to 'self-awareness', "attention-awareness is concentrated upon a certain event, so the more conscious it is." (Gerhard Roth)

If one would like to resolve the question of what a mental image is and what our ability to create mental images is about, and to think with them and through them, then it is neither sufficient –

and this is the conference-thesis of the following remarks – to establish and maintain this distinction between an internal and external scheme of seeing. Nor does it suffice to relate mental images to pure visual consciousness theories and thus restrict seeing to a physiological process.

Accordingly, it is rather necessary to link this seeing to a visual term, which can trace its origin back to the meaning: visio. (Georges Didi-Huberman)

It is exactly this process of seeing on which we would shed light. The actual 'sense of images' is not only in the eye, but the sense for the visual – and with it the pictorial self, naturally includes all forms of fantasy such as imagination, dream, illusion, hallucination, gaze and glance, and – finally, empathy. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand mental images that perform a double movement: assuming that an essential iconic structure is immanent in the mental, it is important to revise the term of a mental or imaginative image. This revision detaches itself from a simple reference to objects of the external world and leads to an image term which encompasses the images' own singularities and extends beyond the optical phenomenon of "image." Therefore, for the first time the episteme of visual thinking directs us to the term: embodied fantasies.

On the ground of these observations the following crucial question for Embodied Fantasies can be asked: What is an inner image if it is not an illegitimate substantialization of fundamentally immaterial objects? If there is no doubt that ideas about perceptions are immaterial, perceptions as ideas can possess structural features known from images.

Following these premises, images open up different approaches to the imaginary, a broader space of images and thereby prompt the question: "How can something be seen that is not there?" The debate also brings up issues about digital media, which in this sense will not be understood as amplifiers of perception but of imagination. (Lambert Wiesing) Therefore, the relationship between images and imagination is the crucial point in discussing embodied fantasies.

The conference will address other topics as well, such as the body's share in creativity. For example, if dancing can be understood as an embodied fantasy, the idea of creative flow – at least in this case – can perhaps be linked to an embodied flow as well.

Other questions for the conference might be:

- What is the relationship between fantasy and sensual erception/deception?
- How do collective and ideological formations of embodied fantasies work?
- Is there something like a social habitus involved in having fantasies? If so: How do fantasies relate to their social habitat?
- What ideological implications do collectively-embodied fantasies have?
- What are the means of controlling them – or of eluding this very control?
- Do culturally-coded fantasies exist?
- How does gender identity affect the content of fantasies?
- Can fantasies be categorized?
- What is the role and power of fantasies? Does it compensate for a loss of reality?
- What is the epistemic status of fantasies?
- What examples can be given of fantasies playing a central role in research?
- How factual are fantasies?

- What is the relationship between fantasy and imagination?
- How do attention and concentration operate for fantasies?
- How important are fantasies for mental health?
- What role do fantasies play in art-making?
- What are the creative processes within fantasies?
- How does one describe mediality in the context of fantasies?
- How important are fantasies for visual knowledge?

Scholars and artists interested in presenting are invited to send a proposal of 300 words and a CV, including publications/exhibitions to the following addresses:

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This conference is the first follow-up project after "Habitus in Habitat," managed by Dr. Sabine Flach from 2008 – 2010 at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin, that included three international conferences and the exhibition *The Glass Veil* (2009) showing artworks by Suzanne Anker. *Embodied Fantasies* will be the first international conference presented by the research-team "Aesthetics, Aisthesis and Media of Embodiment," with partners from Humboldt University, Berlin; Royal College of Art, London and University of Art and Design, Helsinki.

Reference:

CFP: *Embodied Fantasies*. In: ArtHist.net, Apr 18, 2011 (accessed Apr 23, 2026),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/1231>>.