Edited Volume: Iconology of Abstraction

Deadline: Jan 10, 2018

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Edited volume ICONOLOGY OF ABSTRACTION. THE LANGUAGE OF NON-FIGURATIVE IMAGES (working title)

The volume will be published by a major international academic publisher in 2019.

For many people, images of abstract art still mean “nothing”, while at the same time rather complicated technical diagrams, mathematical and weather forecast graphs, subway maps, cartographic images, medical examination images (CT, MR), visualisations of outer space, computer generated blueprints, internet based digital paraphernalia and other forms of contemporary abstraction are being recognized and comprehended without much effort.

The human drive for abstraction is certainly not an invention of modern times: According to German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, “the urge to abstraction” arises not because of cultural incompetence at mimesis but out of a “psychological need to represent objects in a more spiritual manner”. The first radically abstract artists, such as Malevich and Kandinsky, wrote about abstraction as a way to unleash the “supremacy of pure feeling” or to make “the spiritual” visible. They wanted to represent the ineffable, the non-representable, that which resides in human spirit, is purely conceptual, and cannot be shown in a form of something we have already known from nature, history, other pictures, etc. The same is true with contemporary abstract, both art and non-art images.

Why is there urgency now more than ever before to plunge into manifold relations between art, science and technology? It is not only because contemporary art ever more often borrows its visual and technical material from communication technologies, computer industry and VR. It is because their very nature – that of art and that of technology – converge in unexpected ways. This book tries to explain some of these convergences.

Proposed contributions may fit into the following themes and topics (or be developed further):

PART ONE:
HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS OF ABSTRACTION

1.
The beginnings of the theoretical investigations of abstraction in the seminal works by Alois Riegl (Problems of style: foundations for a history of ornament, 1893) and Wilhelm Worringer (Abstraction and Empathy, 1907). The connection to contemporary theories of abstraction.

2.

Representation and abstraction – theoretical, philosophical and pictorial concerns. How is abstraction related to other forms of depiction, what are its capacities for enunciation, what levels of pictoriality are non-figurative images capable of achieving? The abstraction as an object of general image theory and theory of depiction.

3.
Problems of ornamentalization as seen through communicative power and weaknesses of repetitive signs and visual objects. Semiotics of “everyday abstraction”, pictograms and signs. Making meaning out of “formless” shapes, understanding ornaments by visual habit and by abstract inference.

4.
Typology of abstraction in relation to art, history, science and technology. The possibility of a general theory of abstract images. How abstraction overrides the ontological fissure between presentation and re-presentation in images.

PART TWO:
ABSTRACTION AS ART IN ANALOG, DIGITAL AND MIXED MEDIA

5.
How art history deals with abstraction. The explanation of abstract art based on traditional art-historical teleology. Truths and fallacies of the genesis of abstract pictures. The concept of the “end of art” and its amalgamation with pure spirit. The consequences of formlessness in historical periods and modern times.

6.
Abstraction and meaning through the semiotic and visual studies perspective. Can we re-invent the communicative power of non-figurative images by creating a sort of anti-history of art and adopting a kind of inverse logic of historical development? After “the end of art history” everything that occurs in the realm of art is happening in the radical present. As a consequence, contemporary abstract art has its roots in science and technology, not in history.

7.
Art and science interrelations, contemporary abstract art and forms of visualization based on mathematical concepts and algorithms. The aesthetic and semiotic concerns of digital abstraction, vectors, pixels and fractals. How modern world is being radically reshaped by technical and ontological concerns of abstraction, both in historical and contemporary times.

8.
Digital landscapes of the net and the phenomenon of glitch art; the semiotics of error; lost and false data; randomness and aesthetic experience. Internet art in the expanses of the World Wide Web. Technical and philosophical concerns of digital art. What kind of media is the digital, where it resides and how can it be experienced sensorily?

PART THREE:

APPLIED ABSTRACTION, NATURE AND TECHNICAL IMAGES

9.
Forms of visualizations of outer space and “invisible” things in general. Technical, historical and artistic predispositions for such images. One example: Telescopic depictions of the planet Venus strongly resemble “Snow Storm” by the romantic painter J.M.W. Turner. To what extent are modern visualizations of invisible objects based on what we really know about them (the Venus), and inversely, to what extent are they based just on what we want them to look like?

10.
Images in medicine, biotechnology and genetic engineering: MR, CT, the human genome as seen through their visual form. Micro-images of cells, the relationship between their communicative and artistic potentials. The aesthetic values of colours, shapes and lines, independent of medical visual language.

11.
Abstract images as epistemic tools. On visual practices in the natural sciences. Living beings, no matter how small, are not abstract entities, but very real and present. Still, we can deliberately choose how to depict them: different resolutions and lenses create different visual shapes and levels of abstraction.

12.
The creation of abstract imaginary shapes based on algorithmic calculations: weather forecast reports, pictorial characteristics of hurricanes and other extreme weather conditions; geological visualizations.

Deadline for the submission of abstract (250 words), together with short CV and recent affiliation, is January 10, 2018.

Deadline for the submission of final article (complete information to follow) is November 1, 2018.

Please send your abstracts to Krešimir Purgar: purgar@vizualni-studiji.com

Reference:
CFP: Edited Volume: Iconology of Abstraction. In: ArtHist.net, Dec 12, 2017 (accessed Nov 6, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/16960>.