

## Imagining Imagination

London, Royal College of Art, Jun 10–11, 2011

Deadline: Mar 15, 2011

Sabine Flach

Imagining Imagination

International Conference

10 & 11 June 2011

CFP deadline: 15 March 2011

Royal College of Art

Kensington Gore

London SW7 2EU

Conference organizers:

Dr. Michael Schwab, Royal College of Art, London

Dr. Sabine Flach, SVA – School of Visual Arts, New York City

Dr. Aikaterini Fotopoulou, King's College London

Imagination, central to art history, art theory, philosophy, artistic practice and research, has again become an important topic in a number of fields outside the arts, including medicine and the sciences.

Significantly, all these fields of knowledge-production are currently re-addressing imagination beyond romantic conceptions, as a complex thinking process.

The transdisciplinary conference Imagining Imagination investigates different conceptualizations of imagination, the capacities through which imagination can be imagined, and images of imagination that are being produced as part of research on the subject.

As the conference title suggests, an extraordinary reflexive position is required to appreciate the phenomenon: the complex mental process of imagination calls for imaginatory thinking that makes imagination addressable by giving contours to its particularities. Without such exceptional cognitive modes, imagination remains indescribable.

Imaginatory thinking processes need to be employed before a sufficiently sharp description can arise, which even then is dependant on the imagination of the recipient. This is directly related to the double structure that is at the heart of every imaginative process. The very nature of imagination lies beyond simple brain functions and can be envisioned in the interrelationship between the brain, the body and its environment. How exactly this interactive process is developed and

organized is one of the main questions of the conference.

Imagination is related to *imaginatio*, which embeds a notion of image - a picture or *imago* - in bodily processes. Imagining Imagination will take this broad idea of 'image' as the active ingredient both in visual thinking and perception, acknowledging that the act of seeing (which is more than just a capacity of the eye) implicates self-perception. However, it will question the nature of a way of seeing that constantly oscillates between 'external' and 'internal' determinations of perception and imagination, as often suggested by the sciences. Is the correspondence of external given and internal appearance even possible? Once it is established that humans are able to think in images, a key question concerning the imagination's constitutional set-up arises: can it be maintained that an internal and an external vision even exists? Would the seeing of objects and persons and even one's own body then be a seeing of the first order, while consciousness – self-relation or reflection – defines a seeing of a second order? The assumption that the mental can be framed as an image does not at all establish that the consciousness is a box into which small material images are inserted through the act of seeing, to be looked at and perceived like paintings on a wall in a gallery. Although there is no doubt that ideas within perception are immaterial, this does not imply that such ideas do not possess structural features known from images. Assuming that an essential iconic structure is immanent to the imagination, it is also important to revise the imaginatory status of the image.

This revision detaches images from simplified optical references to objects in the external world and leads to a notion that encompasses the image's agency. Images of this kind do not necessarily have to reproduce what is visible, but instead what has not yet been seen. They are neither purely retinal phenomena, nor representations of a view of the self that allows for a glimpse of the soul in order to constitute itself as an organ of knowledge. Pictures have their own dignity and their own organization of movement.

Imagination has long fascinated and divided the sciences of the mind. In cognitive sciences, debates focused on the commonalities, differences and hierarchical relations with visual perception, language and imagery. The healthy marriage of imagination with creativity challenged scientists who looked for a simple 'extension of perception' model. In typical Popperian fashion, the cognitive sciences have progressively focused on operational definitions and the subordinate cognitive processes of imagination, including inhibition, visuo-spatial thinking, fluency and abstraction. More recently, cognitive neuroscience has endeavoured to provide the neural correlates of the 'black box' processes described above. And yet imagination resists such simplification by the sciences. Dreams and fantasies, creative neuropsychiatric symptoms and the anticipation of the world in which the body moves have all led to theories that portray a complex view of imagination and an even more complex relationship between mental processes of imagination and the brain that serves them. Scientists are nowadays called upon to look for the brain processes that allow the mind to dream up both itself and the world, creatively, through imagination. This allows humans not only to manipulate the world by mere thought and imagination (as in studies of motor control by human-computer interfaces), but also to ultimately change its own brain through psychogenic neuroplasticity.

Imagining Imagination will bring together researchers from multiple disciplines in order to create novel crossovers between artistic and scientific research and their respective methodologies. For

this to happen, imaginatory knowledge requires picturing, mapping or description of some sort, and the modes in which this happens are of great importance in particular in respect to the discussions surrounding artistic research.

The conference will explore the implications that interdisciplinarity has for our understanding of the role and function of imagination in knowledge production in particular, when image and imagination are more than agents of visibility.

The conference aims to open up a dimension in which seeing itself gains an additional value based on the certainty that art does not necessarily have to reproduce what is visible, but instead what one has not yet seen.

Questions that might be addressed include:

- What is the role and power of the imagination? Does it compensate for a loss of reality?
- What is the epistemic status of the imagination?
- What examples can be given of imagination playing a central role in research?
- What is the importance of the fictive, the possible and the projected within research processes?
- How factual is imagination?
- How does one describe the particular state one is in when one imagines?
- What is the relationship between imagination and fantasy?
- How do attention and concentration operate in the imagination? Is a lack of focus beneficial to the imagination?
- How important is imagination for mental health?
- What are the social implications of imagination?
- What role does the imagination play in art-making? Is imagination a creative process?
- What are the creative processes within imagination?
- How much imagination is hidden in scientific knowledge?
- How does imagination actually work?
- Are there different types of imagination?
- How does one describe mediality in the context of imagination?
- How important is imagination for visual knowledge?
- How is imagination (re)presented in research and its methodologies?

The conference will take place at:

Royal College of Art  
Kensington Gore  
London SW7 2EU

Conference fee: £150 full/£60 reduced

Scholars and artists interested in presenting at the conference are invited to send a proposal of 300 words, their CV and a list of publications/exhibitions to the following address by 15 March 2011: michael.schwab@rca.ac.uk

Reference:

CFP: Imagining Imagination. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 4, 2011 (accessed Oct 16, 2025),  
<<https://arthist.net/archive/878>>.