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As a ten year-old, passing by the Forbidden City of the East German Head of State and his functionaries sparked my imagination. The walled complex, tucked away in a forested area near Berlin, was guarded by an armed division of the Stasi. Back then, you couldn't Google for images of this residential compound; Pinterest, Google Earth, and civilian drones were not around. And even if they were available, there was no grassroots way of mass-reproducing images or texts.

Images invade our consciousness. They can bear witness when words are used up. They can mobilize, gratify and inform. They can be put to work as evidence, argument, accusation, and proof. Images can help us to make sense of our surroundings. We surrender to the onslaught of images; sometimes the anti-punctum: senseless, lackadaisically composed, and extraneous. But images also fail us: the desensitizing overabundance of visual material does not stop all the atrocities depicted.

Visuality in the early decades of the 21st century is not merely about image manipulation software though, it is about entirely new attitudes toward visuality. In the early years of the 21st century, the collection of essays Imagery in the 21st Century, edited by Oliver Grau with Thomas Veigl sets out to understand what will constitute an image, and what are novel ways to generate, project, and distribute pictures.

Imagery in the 21st Century resulted from a conference that Oliver Grau convened. It traverses the disciplinary divides between art history, anthropology, and cell biology, focusing on: the ecological and ethical dimensions of screen technologies (Sean Cubitt), a course on image practices in the university (James Elkins), machinima aesthetics (Thomas Veigl), medical illustration (Dolores and David Steinman), the obsession with source code (Wendy Hui Kyong Chun), novel cultural interfaces (Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau), the museum as Noah's Arc (Peter Weibel), and the Warburg Image Atlas for a digital age (Martin Warnke).

At first, I asked myself, what holds the twenty chapters in this book together. What do all the puzzle pieces add up to? An analysis of contemporary imagery felt like an uncomfortably all-embracing ambition. John Berger, for example, focused on the way oil paintings primarily reflected on the status of those who commissioned the artwork. What are we talking about when we are thinking about contemporary visuality? The advent of infographics, games, CCTV, animated gifs, art generated by algorithms, histograms, 4D visualizations, or Instagram? Constructively, the authors reflect on imagery not merely through the lens of a specific device, genre, social practice, or social function, and it becomes clear that image literacy can no longer

be the exclusive domain of art historians. But are we really, as the book suggests, amidst an image revolution? "The curse of the 'perpetually new' is perpetual," Bruce Sterling writes. Today, visual culture invades societies that are largely unprepared. We surrender. Appropriately, one important axis of discussion in Imagery in the 21st Century concerns the question of much-needed image literacies. The editors aspire to extract a crosscutting literacy that can catch the elusive phenomena of contemporary visuality. Grau calls for an image competency for our culture that is still largely dominated by writing. Do we speak the language of the image? Illiteracy, Grau suitably suggests, has largely been overcome in most countries but the inability to interpret images adequately, has not been sufficiently considered.

With the proliferation of digitization, we are inundated with heaps of information. In this Age of Big Data, the ever growing pile of data becomes unknowable as David Weinberger and others have pointed out. There are ever more data but fewer theories to make sense of them. The world has become harder to know. Visualization, aggregation, curation and the filtering of data become core competencies not only for designers but also for journalists, scholars, artists, and scientists. There is no such thing as information overload, there's only filter failure, as Clay Shirky declared. This is also true when it comes to "abuses of the visual," as James Elkins put it referring to compulsively created, senseless images. Oliver Grau and Thomas Veigl demand new forms of visualization to face this explosion of knowledge.

For me, the visual should not merely connect us to the sciences, as Elkins suggests, but also to the political power of images. Think of the work of the British cultural critic Judith Williamson (e.g., Decoding Advertising), the artworks by Alfredo Jaar, Emily Jacir, Trevor Paglen or Alan Sekula. Or, take the recently published book Right To Look, in which Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that "visuality has been central to the legitimization of Western hegemony." Such discussion of global image power as political force is indispensable. In his chapter in Imagery in the 21st Century, "Visual Practices the University: A Report," James Elkins suggests that today, learning mainly happens through images. Already in 1924, the German art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg used arrangements of images from distant times and places. In his Mnemosyne-Atlas he combines images to create meaning. In fact, Warburg's writing is hard to understand without comprehending his Atlas.

Do images really push themselves in front of words, as Elkins claims? Have words hopelessly deteriorated? The editors argue along those lines: "It would appear that images have won the contest with words." (6) Indeed, long-form platforms like WordPress grow slower than short-form writing and image sharing through micro-blogging services. The image sharing board Pinterest grows at an explosive rate. An Instagram photos make sharing even faster than tweets. But thinking of the media representation of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 or the Kosovo War in 1999- images failed to make these atrocities vivid enough; they did not do very much. Susan Sontag concludes that narrative and contextual framing establish more meaning than images.

But luckily learning in colleges and universities is still largely based on texts. Part of my responsibility as a professor is to bring students into the intimate, delicious sphere of reading. The visuality of Khan Academy's hand-written lectures on videos is an interesting hybrid. But still, we largely discover the universe through words. The long sentence is worth defending against the click-click moments of the networked cacophony.

Sean Cubitt's in his chapter "Current Screens" instructs us to consider specifically the ethical-ecological layer of discussions about screen technologies. Her emphasizes that our culture is highly material, especially when you consider the ecological footprint of the raw materials. LCD screens, for example, are poorly biodegradable and potentially significant water contaminants. Sean Cubitt demands that next steps cannot be achieved without respect for the poor and for the ecosphere. Cubitt's essay also reminded me of the fact that an avatar in the virtual world Second Life consumes as much electricity as a real life person in Brazil. The "immaterial" can't escape the burden, the solace, and social costs of the material world.

In this discussion of visual culture, media art has a role to play. How can we rescue digital artworks from oblivion? Oliver Grau's warns of the total loss of our cultural memory of digital art of the past ten years. Most definitely, hardware and operating systems change and without explicit, thoughtful, and well-funded efforts, most works will indeed be lost. There is no one-fits-all preservation solution. Oliver Grau, who is also the author of Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion, provides impressive examples of indispensable media artworks like Jeffrey Shaw's T-Visionarium.

Peter Weibel, in his chapter, states that a degree of democratization and personalization of technology has helped to empower users. We are all consumers and producers of visual culture. Art, too, is included in this democratization. Painters no longer have a monopoly on creating images ever since photography made it possible for everyone to take pictures. Artists have lost their monopoly on creativity. Museums, Weibel suggests, are floating crates. They are meant to store works in their bellies, just like Noah's Ark. They are meant to assure that artworks do not perish. If we inquire how many works have been preserved during the last century, the estimates vary between 1% and 7% of the whole production of art. Museums have done a poor job, Weibel states. They have passed judgments with the guillotine of history—separated out the majority of art and rejected it.

Today, when I return to the former East Germany, my GPS powered cellphone will not only lead my way, but it will also reveal all that was hidden back when I drove by Erich Honecker Secret City. Smartphones embed geographic location in the photos that I capture. While pressing my fingers into the hardcover of Imagery in the 21st Century, I can't stop myself from asking why a publication that is so much about the liquidity of the frameless image, the shrinking shelf life of the jpg, a book that so heavily relies on hyperlinked references, is not published online. High quality images, animated gifs and videos could be included this way. An interactive, web-based publication, however, could have better served as an open educational resource, made the content available to far more people, very much supporting the kind of thinking that the publication encourages. This is not a shortcoming of the editors but it behoves all of us to find adequate and creative responses to the old business models of mechanical reproduction. I was thrilled to read Grau's Imagery in the 21 Century and I will use it in my teaching. The book can be brought into productive conversation with Nicholas Mirzoeff's Right to See, David Weinberger's Too Big To Know, Cathy Davidson's Now You See It, and also Design Studies: A Reader, edited by my New School colleagues Hazel Clark and David Brody. Imagery in the 21 Century is a fabulous resource for the reflection on contemporary visuality.

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