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## **The Emancipated Referent: Introductory Note** O Referente Emancipado: Nota Introdutória

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# The Emancipated Referent: Introductory Note

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The verb “to represent” begins with the prefix “re”, which is one of the most commonly-used prefixes in the Portuguese language, also found in many other languages. It implies a sense of *repetition* or *recurrence* (words that also contain the same prefix); that is a phenomenon that occurs for a second time. To “represent” means “to be present once again”. This recurred presence — or *representation* — is not however limited to recurrence of the presence of a specific entity. It refers to the re-encounter with that entity, through a substitute. The original entity, that is free to move to a distant location, now reappears through a mediator, a vehicle, an element that has the transcendental capacity of seeming to place before us something that is not actually there. If, on the one hand, substitution can imply weakening the intensity of the experience of viewing a specific object, subject, place, and so forth, in many circumstances — especially in the realm of art — its representation can actually *intensify* its presence. With a certain perversity, the false supersedes the true. But a key question arises therein: what place is occupied by this represented entity — which linguistics defines as the “referent” — despite being absent in its representation?

Arthur Danto (1981) considers that the referent appears in its representation through a phenomenon of *transparency* (p. 159). This ability of images makes them “open windows” on the world, as argued by Leon Battista Alberti (1450/1991, p. 54) in the 15th century<sup>1</sup>. However, beyond Alberti’s idea of a window, through which a circumscribed portion of reality may be seen, Danto’s (1981) metaphor of transparency suggests that, between the beholder and the viewed object, there is a surface that although it does not prevent vision, guarantees enclosure of the viewed object somewhere beyond the place in which it is observed. In a literal sense of the metaphor, the referent is located *behind* a strip of film, a bit like a landscape that is viewed *behind* a pane of glass<sup>2</sup>. In this thematic section of *Vista* we propose to question the condition of being “*beyond*” that is imposed on the referent, placing the possibility of its emergence in the “*here and now*” or, in keeping with Danto’s (1981) metaphor, the possibility of breaking this surface of enclosure. Can the referent reappear, reclaiming the place that has been usurped by something else?

## Authority — or Authoritarianism — of the Author

Authorship is an authority. Representation is a phenomenon that manifests itself, from the supposed impossibility of being completely faithful to the original model (does art reside in absence of faithfulness, or can mimetism still be artistic?), to characterisations that, from an ideological perspective, aim to manipulate, distort and abuse.

This role of intermediation between the represented thing and the world — the author’s prerogative — may be questioned in different ways and, in particular, considering the power relations that are reflected and/or strengthened through representation of the “other”.

In 1972, in a conversation with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, stated that “representation no longer exists; there is only action” (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 206) based on the assumption that all groups have the capacity for self-representation. Deleuze considered that representation fails to

have any meaning, to the extent that there is no absent referent that needs to be replaced. Everything is present. Sixteen years later, Gayatri Spivak (1988) denounced the paradoxical nature of this poststructuralist statement: if, on the one hand, no representation is necessary (in the political sense of “speaking on behalf of”), on the other hand, by affirming this, Deleuze *represents* (in the aesthetic sense of re-presenting) either various political actors as being perfectly conscious beings, or himself as being transparent. In other words: the end of representation, as enunciated by Deleuze, presupposes (a) a terrain of neutrality that is no more than a false depoliticisation of the effective asymmetries between he who represents and he who is represented, and (b) the attribution to oneself of the type of transparency that, in the context of aesthetics, Danto (1981) identifies in artworks’ capacity of representation. Authorship is an opacity, to the extent that it offers resistance to the transparency of representation.

In addition to the problem of the *legitimacy* of representation of the “other” (the most political problem), this discussion also implies the problem of the *possibility* of representation itself. Two key questions arise in this regard:

- Deleuze (in Foucault & Deleuze, 1977) posits the possibility of ceasing to represent “the other”, as it implies the death of the desire for otherness and the seclusion of cultures or individuals in themselves (one can only be who one already is). Doesn't it also suggest the end of representation (beyond “making oneself represented”)?
- If we accepting that representation is possible, how can the referent liberate himself (albeit fictionally) from the yoke of authorship that mediates the contact with his beholders?

## When the Represented Thing Itself Appears to Its Representation

From a linguistic point of view, the readymade — a 100-year-old typology — can be defined as a coincidence between representation and referent. However, we must put a caveat on this affirmation: the represented object, apparently no longer absent from the representation, is not simply “present”. The urinal, *Fountain* (1917)<sup>3</sup> is not a urinal like the ones found in toilets, nor even the urinal that it once used to be, when it was in the shop where it was purchased. In the artistic context to which it has been displaced, it becomes a *representation of itself*. It undergoes a process, not only of re-signification, but also of re-substantiation as a new entity. If we consider the distinction that Plato established between *eikones* (images that are clearly distinguished from that which they represent) and *eidola* (images that are simulacra of what they resemble), the *readymade* can be understood as a category of absolute *eidola*, in which the simulacrum is fulfilled through the presence of the imitated thing itself.

These communication mechanisms were a central issue of “conceptual art”. The subject of *visual representation* has assumed special importance for artists within the broad field of communication, despite the porosity of the artistic categories of conceptual art. Millennia of practices of pictorial figuration of reality, complemented by a few decades of photography, have thereby been placed under scrutiny that, despite being pursued within the framework of the artwork and although it does not surrender its *artistic* condition, is often close to the mission of the theory of art, or of semiotics. In this circumstance, art has been placed at the service of consideration of its underlying phenomena — in particular those of communication — which is why it can be said that it is a self-reflective art: art about art.

In this context, several artists create works in which the phenomenon of visual communication is measured through confrontation between the representation and the referent. This occurs, for example, in Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* (the most famous embodiment of a statement that was also fulfilled by many other objects), in which a chair and an actual size photograph of the same chair are juxtaposed in the same place in which the object displayed. This confrontation highlights the representational nature of representation itself: it is evident that the representation

is not the thing that is represented, as happens when Magritte places the caption “*Ceci n’ est pas une pipe*” (this is not a pipe) next to a painting of a pipe. But he does more than that. The emergence of the thing represented in the realm of representation disturbs the inherent hierarchy of that representation. The referent, that usually concerns an existence that is far removed from the contact with the work, and whose distance is confirmed by the evident passage of the time that has elapsed since the work was made, becomes *present* (with all the aforementioned implications that are typical of *readymade* objects). The referent conquers a place of contact with the “receiver” that runs parallel to the privileged place occupied by the representation. Conversely, the sufficiency of the representation is relativised by the presence of the represented object that it is supposedly capable of replacing. This corresponds to an emancipation of the referent — a semiotic insubordination.

It is as if a historical figure appeared on a stage, in front of the audience, and began to talk with the character who is representing him — not with the actor, but with the character himself — a situation that constitutes an absolute state of transparency, in terms of Danto's (1981) dialectic of transparency/opacity.

Theodore Gracyk (2011) analyses a work by Sherrie Levine entitled *Sherrie Levine After Walker Evans* (1981) in terms of the coincidences between the representation and the referent, after referring to Marcel Duchamp's *readymades* and Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. In this case, the appropriated object already has artistic status from the outset. They are photographs of photographs: the artist Levine appropriates a set of portraits produced by the photographer Evans as an object of representation. This work interests Gracyk (2011) because it also creates a short circuit between the representation and the referent. He asks: “is it plausible to photograph someone photographing a photograph of that person?” (p. 17). If this phenomenon can be seen as identifying a double representation, or a meta-representation (which, for Danto, 1981, could be the superposition of two layers of transparency), one can look at it mainly in terms of the status acquired by Evans’ original photographs. If we admit, as Gracyk suggests, that the second set of photographs are also portraits of the people photographed by Evans, what can we say about the presence of the referent in the first set of photographs?

## An Excess Called “Agency”

“What do pictures want?” — asks W. J. T. Mitchell (2005).

In the early 21st century a series of works emerged which embraced the possibility that they can have a “life of their own” in view of the dominance that images have acquired in many cultures. This does not just concern the ability of images to have an effect, but also about being endowed with desire or will. In his *Theorie des Bildakts (Image Acts — A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency)*, Horst Bredekamp (2007/2015) refers to an act that is not performed *on* the image, but *by* the image. At a moment in time when the human/non-human hierarchy is being questioned, when we think about the world on the basis of things and matter, when we refer to an “object-orientated ontology”, Bredekamp looks at images. He shakes up history in order to analyse the excess presence that can be achieved by representations, becoming agents in their own right.

Images act. They can thereby be seen as entities where that which is represented in them emerges as a living thing — enchanting, magical, manipulative, media, political. This is a literal form of reincarnation: images do not reincarnate things through their *similarity* to them, instead they are endowed with the life of these things. They act as if they were infused by the energy of the referent, that is concealed behind them, as an “iconographic *poltergeist*”. It is as if a historical figure effectively manifested itself through the character that represents it on stage.

In the chapter that Bredekamp (2007/2015) dedicates to the “substitutive image act”, he refers to various types of images in which there is a *withdrawal of the author*. These are works in which the

author limits himself to allowing the referent to emerge in the representation through a particularly short and direct path — works in which the author is merely the propitiator of a phenomenon of representation that depends very little upon him, beyond the decision to provide that representation; works in which decisions about form are left to factors that lie beyond the author's framework of decision. In particular, this occurs when the referent is “stamped” on the representational support. In a list that begins with the *vera icon*, the “true image” — the imprint of the face of Christ that he left on the veil that Veronica extended for him, as he carried the cross —, Bredekamp (2007/2015) specifically refers to the engravings of natural elements by Alois Auer (p. 136) and the imprints that were tested by the photography pioneer, William Henry Fox Talbot. He writes about the former: “in describing his technique, Auer stated that the imprint appeared ‘through the original itself, without the need for the usual drawing or engraving produced by human hand’” (Bredekamp, 2007/2015, p. 139). And in relation to the latter: “Talbot himself was impressed by the miraculous character of an image that apparently produces itself, without human intervention: ‘The occurrence almost seemed to me to belong to the most astonishing phenomena ever brought to our knowledge by physical research’” (Bredekamp, 2007/2015, pp. 139–140).

Recent theories that explore the agency of images, viewing the limit of rationality as a limit to their own speculation, identify an important reference in the value that images may acquire in ancestral contexts — not to foster any return, but to pave the way towards evolution. Hence the importance of works such as Alfred Gell’s (1998/2018) *Art and Agency* or Hans Belting’s (2001/2011) *An Anthropology of Images*.

## Finally, Time

The ideas of *memory* and *trauma* (trauma often as the flip-side of memory) are frequently discussed in various fields of art, especially since World War II. We have questioned the relationship between memory, trauma and the referent in art, because, as we previously mentioned, images can often render the referent as a living thing in our presence. It is therefore possible to establish a temporal link between that which is represented — which belongs to the *past* (in this case, this is precisely how the absence of the referent is defined) — and its representation, in front of us, at the *present* time. However, the power of images cannot be subjugated to the linearity of time. As Maria Cantinho (2008) wrote, in a brilliant translation of Walter Benjamin’s work, “it goes without saying that the past clarifies the present or that the present clarifies the past. An image, on the contrary, is that in which the Past meets the Now, in a sudden flash” (para. 13)[4](#).

## This Issue of Vista

Considerable importance has been placed on the recipient of works from a wide array of different art forms as a producer of meanings for these works. Importance has been placed on this phenomenon that occurs downstream of the creation of the work itself and that, in the limit, determines that which we behold. In this issue of *Vista* we aim to highlight that which exists upstream: focusing on the entity that precedes representation and whose presence this representation aims to replace, in this case in the specific framework of the visual arts and images.

We propose to address different ways that the referent may be emancipated, in particular in relation to the following themes: the representation of mechanisms of *visual representation* within the framework of artistic practices; the condition of the referent (absent or present) within the framework of visual representation; the rights of the subjects that are represented and iconographic ethics, between self-representation and appropriation; the possibility of inserting the *readymade* in a work/image; animism in visual representation; memory, trauma and the possibility of emancipation of the referent.

Translation: Martin Dale

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## Notes

1. The original designation, often used without a translation, is "*finestra aperta*".
2. If, on the contrary, we adopt the metaphor proposed by Danto (1981), this film will be the material condition of the support underpinning the representation, associated with opacity. The simple opposition between these two aspects of the images may merit certain objections, but this would lie beyond the thematic framework of this text.
3. A recent controversy has cast doubt on the authorship of this work, and has identified the

possibility that it was actually produced by the Dadaist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. In the absence of any bibliographic sources on this subject, we recommend reading the summary available on Tate Modern's website (Tate, n.d.).

4. The author and also the translator clarify that the dialectical images referred to are found in the language.

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