Question Posed

Often, when we pose our gaze to an art image,* we have a forthright sensation of paradox. What reaches us immediately and straightaway is marked with trouble, like a self-evidence that is somehow obscure.† Whereas what initially seemed clear and distinct is, we soon realize, the result of a long detour—a mediation, a usage of words. Perfectly banal, in the end, this paradox. We can embrace it, let ourselves be carried away by it; we can even experience a kind of *jouissance* upon feeling ourselves alternately enslaved and liberated by this braid of knowledge and not-knowledge, of universality and singularity, of things that elicit naming and things that leave us gaping. . . . All this on one and the same surface of a picture or sculpture, where nothing has been hidden, where everything before us has been, simply, presented.

We can, conversely, feel dissatisfied with such a paradox. Want not to let things lie, want to know more, want to *represent to ourselves* in a more intelligible way what the image before us still seemed to hide within it. We might then turn toward the discourse that proclaims itself a knowledge about art, an archeology of things forgotten or unnoticed in works of art since their creation, however old or however recent they might be. This discipline, whose status thus can be summed up as offering *specific knowledge* of the art object, this discipline is as we know called the history of art. Its invention was quite recent, by comparison with the invention of its object: we might say, taking Lascaux as our reference point, that it postdates art itself by roughly one hundred sixty-five centuries, of which ten or so were filled with intense artistic activity solely within the framework of the

*quand nous posons notre regard sur une image de l’art.*
†*comme une évidence qui serait obscur.*
western Christian world. But the history of art gives the impression that it has made up for all this lost time. It has examined, catalogued, and interpreted countless objects. It has accumulated stupefying amounts of information and has taken over management of an exhaustive knowledge of what we like to call our patrimony.

The history of art presents itself, in fact, as an enterprise ever more victorious. It answers needs, it becomes indispensable. As an academic discipline, it never stops refining itself and producing new information: thanks to which there is of course a gain in knowledge. As an authority for the organization of museums and art exhibitions, it likewise never stops expanding its horizons: it stages gigantic gatherings of objects: thanks to which there is a gain in spectacle. Finally, this history has become the cogwheel and guarantor of an art market that never stops outbidding itself: thanks to which people make money. It seems as though the three charms or three "gains" in question have become as precious to the contemporary bourgeoisie as health. Should we be surprised, then, to see the art historian take on the features of a medical specialist who addresses his patients with the statutory authority of a subject supposed to know everything in the matter of art?

Yes, we should be surprised. This book would simply like to interrogate the tone of certainty that prevails so often in the beautiful discipline of the history of art. It should go without saying that the element of history, its inherent fragility with regard to all procedures of verification, its extremely lacunary character, particularly in the domain of manmade figurative objects—it goes without saying that all of this should incite the greatest modesty. The historian is, in every sense of the word, only the fictor, which is to say the modeler, the artisan, the author, the inventor of whatever past he offers us. And when it is in the element of art that he thus develops his search for lost time, the historian no longer even finds himself facing a circumscribed object, but rather something like a liquid or gas expansion—a cloud that changes shape constantly as it passes overhead. What can we know about a cloud, save by guessing, and without ever grasping it completely?
Books on the history of art nonetheless know how to give us the impression of an object truly grasped and reconnoitered in its every aspect, like a past elucidated without remainder. Everything here seems visible, discerned. Exit the uncertainty principle. The whole of the visible here seems read, deciphered in accordance with the self-assured—apodictic—semiology of a medical diagnosis. And all of this makes, it is said, a science, a science based in the last resort on the certainty that the representation functions unitarily, that it is an accurate mirror or a transparent window, and that on the immediate (“natural”) or indeed the transcendental (“symbolic”) level, it is able to translate all concepts into images, all images into concepts. That in the end everything lines up and fits together perfectly in the discourse of knowledge. Posing one’s gaze to an art image, then, becomes a matter of knowing how to name everything that one sees—in fact, everything that one reads in the visible. There is here an implicit truth model that strangely superimposes the adaequatio rei et intellectus of classical metaphysics onto a myth—a positivist myth—of the omni-translatability of images.

Our question, then, is this: what obscure or triumphant reasons, what morbid anxieties or maniacal exaltations can have brought the history of art to adopt such a tone, such a rhetoric of certainty? How did such a closure of the visible onto the legible and of all this onto intelligible knowledge manage—and with such seeming self-evidence—to constitute itself? The uninitiated and people of good sense will answer (a response not wholly irrelevant) that the only thing the history of art, being an academic knowledge,* looks for in art is academic history and knowledge; and that to go about this it must reduce its object, “art,” to something that evokes a museum or a limited stock of histories and knowledges. In short, the said “specific knowledge† of art” ended up imposing its own specific form of discourse on its object, at the risk of inventing artificial boundaries for its object—an object dispossessed of its own specific deployment or unfolding. So the seeming self-evidence and the tone of certainty that this

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*savoir.
†connaissance spécifique.
knowledge imposes are understandable: all it looks for in art are answers that are already given by its discursive problematic.

A full answer to the question posed would entail entering into a veritable critical history of the history of art. A history that would take into account the discipline’s birth and evolution, its practical ins and its institutional outs, its gnoseological foundations and its clandestine fantasies. In short, the knot of what it says, does not say, and denies. The knot of what is for it thinkable, unthinkable, and unthought—all of this evolving, circling back on itself, recurring in its own history. We will make do here with taking an initial step in this direction, first by interrogating some paradoxes induced by practice when it stops questioning its own uncertainties. Then by interrogating an essential phase in its history, namely, the work of Vasari in the sixteenth century, and the implicit ends that this would long assign the entire discipline. Finally, we will attempt to interrogate another significant moment, the one in which Erwin Panofsky, with uncontested authority, tried to ground in reason historical knowledge applied to works of art.

This question of “reason,” this methodological question, is essential, now that history makes more and more frequent use of art images as documents, and even as monuments or objects of specific study. This question of “reason” is essential, because through it we can reach a basic understanding of what the history of art expects from its object of study. All the great moments of the discipline—from Vasari to Panofsky, from the age of the academies to that of scientific institutes—always came down to posing the problem of “reasons” anew, to re-dealing its cards, even changing the rules of the game, and always in accordance with an expectation of, a renewed desire for, requisite ends for these changing gazes posed to images.

To question anew the “reason” of the history of art is to question anew its status as knowledge. Is it surprising that Erwin Panofsky—who feared nothing, neither the exacting labor of erudition nor committing himself to a theoretical position—should have turned to Kantian philosophy when rearranging the cards of art history so as to give it a methodological configuration that, by and large, has not lost its cur-
rency? Panofsky turned to Immanuel Kant because the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* had managed to open and reopen the question of knowledge, by defining the play of its limits and its subjective conditions. Such is the specifically “critical” aspect of Kantism; it has shaped and informed, consciously or unconsciously, entire generations of scholars. By grasping the Kantian or neo-Kantian key—via Cassirer—Panofsky opened new doors for his discipline. But no sooner were these doors open than he seems to have securely closed them again, allowing critique only a brief moment of passage: a current of air. Kantism in philosophy had done likewise: opened the better to close, called knowledge into question, not to unleash a radical whirlwind (the inalienable negativity of not-knowledge), but to reunify, resynthesize, and reschematize a knowledge whose closure henceforth found self-satisfaction through an elevated declaration of transcendence.

Are you already saying that such problems are too general? That they no longer concern the history of art and should be considered in another building on the university campus, the one off in the distance occupied by the department of philosophy? To say this (one hears it often) is to close one’s eyes and ears, to speak without thinking. It doesn’t take much time—only the time needed really to pose a question—to realize that the art historian, in his every gesture, however humble or complex, however routine, is always making philosophical choices. They silently aid and abet him in resolving dilemmas; they are his abstract éminence grise, even and especially when he doesn’t know this. Now nothing is more dangerous than to be unaware of one’s own éminence grise. This state of affairs can quickly lead to alienation.* For it is well known that making philosophical choices unwittingly is the fastest possible route to the worst possible philosophy.

So our question about the tone of certainty adopted by the history of art is transformed, along the bias of the decisive role played by the work of Erwin Panofsky, into a question about the *Kantian tone* that

*aliénation; here, primarily in the sense of removal from office, but see below, pages 33, 39, 234.
the art historian often adopts without even realizing it. What’s at issue here is not—beyond Panofsky himself—the rigorous application of Kantian philosophy to the domain of the historical study of images. What’s at issue, and this is worse, is a tone. An inflection, a “Kantian syndrome” in which Kant would scarcely recognize himself. To speak of the Kantian tone of the history of art is to speak of an unprecedented kind of neo-Kantism: it is to speak of a spontaneous philosophy that orients the historian’s choices and shapes the discourse of knowledge produced about art. But what, fundamentally, is a spontaneous philosophy? Where is its motor, where does it lead, on what is it based? It is based on words, only words, whose specific usage consists of closing gaps, eliding contradictions, resolving, without a moment’s hesitation, every aporia proposed by the world of images to the world of knowledge. So the spontaneous, instrumental, and uncritical use of certain philosophical notions leads the history of art to fashion for itself not potions of love or oblivion but *magic words*: lacking conceptual rigor; they are nonetheless efficacious at *resolving* everything, which is to say at dissolving or suppressing a universe of questions the better to advance, optimistic to the point of tyranny, a battalion of answers.

I don’t want to counter predetermined answers with other predetermined answers. I only want to suggest that in this domain the questions survive the articulation of every answer. If I invoke the name of Freud to counter that of Kant, this is not in order to place the discipline of art history under the yoke of a new conception of the world, of a new Weltanschauung. Neo-Freudism, like neo-Kantism—and like any theory issuing from a powerful body of thought—is far from immune to spontaneous, magical, and tyrannical practices. But there are, incontestably, in the Freudian field all the elements of a critique of knowledge fit to recast the very foundations of what are often called the human sciences. It is because he reopened in dazzling fashion the question of the *subject*—a subject henceforth thought as split or rent,* not closed, a subject inept at synthesis, be it transcendental—that Freud was also able to throw open, and just as decisively, the question of knowledge.

* *pensé en déchirure.*
It should be clear that this appeal to the work of Freud concerns precisely the putting in play of a critical paradigm—and absolutely not the putting in play of a clinical paradigm. In particular, the fate allotted the word symptom in this book has nothing to do with any kind of clinical “application” or resolution. To expect from Freudism a clinic for art or a method of solving enigmas is tantamount to reading Freud with the eyes and expectations of a Charcot. What can be expected here of “Freudian reason” is rather that it resituate us in relation to the object of history, for example, about whose extraordinarily complex work psychoanalytic experience teaches us much, along the bias of such concepts as Nachträglichkeit,* repetition, distortion, and working-through. More generally, Freudian critical tools will make it possible to reconsider here, within the framework of the history of art, the very status of this object of knowledge with regard to which we will henceforth be required to think what we gain in the exercise of our discipline in the face of what we thereby lose: in the face of a more obscure and no less sovereign constraint to not-knowledge.

Such are the stakes: to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge. To proceed dialectically. Beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to know (which amounts precisely to denying it), but to think the element of not-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image. Not to think a perimeter, a closure—as in Kant—but to experience a constitutive and central rift: there where self-evidence, breaking apart, empties and goes dark.

So here we are back at our initial paradox, which we placed under the aegis of an examination of the “presentation” or presentability of the images to which our gazes are posed even before our curiosity—or our will to knowledge—exerts itself. “Considerations of presentability” (Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit);† such is the language used

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†Not the translation used in the Standard Edition. Cf. below, Chapter 4, note 35.
by Freud to designate the work of figurability specific to unconscious formations. We might say, in very abridged form, that the requirement to think loss in the face of gain, or rather as coiled within it, and not-knowledge as coiled within knowledge, to think the rend as part of the fabric, amounts to interrogating the very work of figurability operative in artistic images—on the understanding that the words “image” and “figurability” here far exceed the limited framework of what is usually called “figurative” or “representational” art, which is to say art that represents an object or action of the natural world.

Let’s not fool ourselves, by the way, about the “modern” character of such a problematic. Freud did not invent figurability, and abstract art did not implement pictorial “presentability” as opposed to “figurative” representability. All of these problems are as old as images themselves. They are also expounded in ancient texts. And it is precisely my hypothesis that the history of art, a “modern” phenomenon par excellence—because born in the sixteenth century—has wanted to bury the ancient problematics of the visual and the figurable by giving new ends to artistic images, ends that place the visual under the tyranny of the visible (and of imitation), the figurable under the tyranny of the legible (and of iconology). What the “contemporary” or “Freudian” problematics have to tell us about a work or a structural constraint was formulated long ago—in very different terms, of course—by venerable Church Fathers, and was brought into play by medieval painters as an essential requirement of their own notion of the image.¹ A notion now forgotten, and very difficult to exhume.

Which brings me to what occasioned this little book. It’s only a matter of accompanying a project of longer gestation with some reflections aimed at laying to rest, through writing, a land of malaise experienced within the framework of academic art history. More precisely, it is an attempt to understand why, during my study of certain works from the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the iconographic method inherited from Panofsky suddenly revealed its inadequacy, or, to put it another way, the nature of its methodological sufficiency: its closure. I tried to clarify all of these questions with regard to the work of Fra Angelico, then, in a class given at the École des hautes Études en Sciences sociales in 1988–89, through a reconsider-
eration of the book by the “master of Princeton” on the work of Albrecht Dürer. Invited to one of these seminars, the psychoanalyst Pierre Féida answered some of our questions with still more questions, notably this one: “In the end, was Panofsky your Freud or your Charcot?” Another way of posing the question. And this little book is but a prolonged echo of the question, like the always open notebook of an endless discussion.