

Iconic Presence: The Evidence of Images in Religion¹

Hans Belting

2015 Balzan Prize for the History of European Art (1300-1700)

Balzan GPC Adviser: Victor Stoichita

Project Directors: Sigrid Weigel; Klaus Krüger; Ivan Foletti

Balzan Fellows: Johanna Abel, Henry Kaap, Zuzana Frantová

Associates: Birgit Meyer; Martin Tremml; Friederike Wille; Sven Jakstat

Student Assistant: Philipp Hubert

Participating Institutions: Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin; Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz, Freie Universität Berlin; Center for Medieval Studies, Department of Art History, Czech Masaryk University, Brno

Period: 2016-2020

Hans Belting is Emeritus Professor for Art History and Media Theory at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe.

The Balzan project *Iconic Presence* was initiated in 2016 and scheduled for a period of three years. What follows is a summary of activities and research outcome from 2018-2019. The research project of the 2015 Balzan Prize involving the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin, the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz at the Freie Universität Berlin, and the Center for Medieval Studies in the Department of Art History, at the Czech Masaryk University in Brno offered the occasion to reconsider the central importance of *presence* in religion. Time and again in the Christian religion, the desire for such images to capture the presence of an unseen world went beyond the artefacts' offering themselves as material likenesses. As a result, the faithful expected live presence in the image depicted. This was not the archetype in heaven, which in the theology of Greek icons was justified as veneration,

¹ This is the final title given to the project, which was originally entitled *Iconic Presence and Real Presence in Religion*.

but a presence that took place in the material image and before the eyes of a community. Thus, in the case of religion, *iconic presence*, which in the English language means simply visual presence, is not confined to the presence of the image as such. It was also mediated as an event in which the artefact was expected to become a placeholder for a real presence, and an invisible face took possession of the visible face which the faithful had provided for it to inhabit.

Lectures 2018-2019

A new format was introduced, where members of the Balzan project held individual lectures at different occasions throughout the year. These lectures were connected to content through questions of (iconic) presence in religion and art as well as the intricate relationship of iconic presence and real presence in a religious context. These questions are also central to the project as a whole. Lectures were held in Leipzig, Berlin and Marburg, and were welcomed with inspiring discussions.

Prominent lectures included those held by Hans Belting, first of all, his talk entitled “Iconic Presence and Real Presence: A Neglected Aspect From the History of Religious Images” at the conference *Picturing the Present: Gegenwart im Bild und Bild in der Gegenwart*. This conference was organized by Armin Bergmeier and Andrew Griebeler at the University of Leipzig from 14 to 15 June 2018. At the same venue, Ivan Foletti gave a talk entitled “Experiencing the Medieval Object through the *Technique du Corps*.” Furthermore, Belting gave two lectures, “BildPräsenz und Präsenz im Bild” at the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz – Geschichte und Ästhetik at the FU Berlin on 10 September 2018, and “Luthers Bildpolitik” at the conference *Bild und Text. 1. Evangelischer Bildertag* organized by Malte Dominik Krüger at Philipps-University Marburg from 9 to 10 November 2018.

Birgit Meyer from the University of Utrecht was invited to give an evening lecture at the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz, Geschichte und Ästhetik at the FU Berlin on 12 December 2018, when she spoke about “Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen. ‘Idolatry’ beyond the Second Commandment.” Her works on “sensational forms” and “theologies of immediacy” were discussed in a shared reading session at ZfL in preparation for her lecture, and could thus be contextualized with her current research. Her contribution on *iconic presence* as just one form of “mediated presence of the transcendent” among others that all draw on interrelated media of conveying presence with their own properties and limitations (objects, bodies, images, sound, smell, dreams, etc.) was a clear benefit for the interdisciplinary dialogue between art history/*Bildwissenschaften* and religious studies. The fellows

and associates of the research centre discussed the lecture with Birgit Meyer. In particular, her anthropological approach to art works and her field research drew a great deal of attention.

Finally, on 24 July 2019, Henry Kaap gave the concluding lecture of his sub-project on presence in religious images and art in Renaissance Venice, again at the Center for Advanced Studies *BildEvidenz – Geschichte und Ästhetik* at FU Berlin. His talk, “Wirkmacht – Kunstfertigkeit – Präsenz: Der Kreuztragende Christus aus San Rocco neu betrachtet” focused on the re-evaluation of miraculous images in the sixteenth century, their artistic *misé-en-scene* as well as the literary reflections of presence within the art discourse of early modern Venice.

General Overview of Lectures Delivered in 2018-2019

- “Iconic Presence and Real Presence: A Neglected Aspect from the History of Religious Images,” lecture by Hans Belting at the conference *Picturing the Present: Gegenwart im Bild und Bild in der Gegenwart*, organized by Armin Bergmeier and Andrew Griebeler. University of Leipzig, 14–15 June 2018.
- “Experiencing the Medieval Object Through the *Technique du Corps*: The Experimental Project *Migrating Art Historians*,” lecture by Ivan Foletti at the conference *Picturing the Present: Gegenwart im Bild und Bild in der Gegenwart*, organized by Armin Bergmeier and Andrew Griebeler. University of Leipzig, 14–15 June 2018.
- “BildPräsenz und Präsenz im Bild,” lecture by Hans Belting at the Center for Advanced Studies *BildEvidenz. Geschichte und Ästhetik*. FU Berlin, 10 July 2018.
- “Luthers Bildpolitik,” lecture by Hans Belting at the conference *Bild und Text. 1. Evangelischer Bildertag*, organized by Malte Dominik Krüger. Philipps-University Marburg, 9–10 November 2018.
- “Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen. ‘Idolatry’ beyond the Second Commandment,” lecture by Birgit Meyer (Utrecht University) at the Center for Advanced Studies *BildEvidenz – Geschichte und Ästhetik*. FU Berlin, 12 December 2018.
- “The San Rocco *Christ Carrying the Cross*,” lecture by Henry Kaap at the Center for Advanced Studies *BildEvidenz – Geschichte und Ästhetik*. FU Berlin, 24 July 2019.

Workshops 2019

Over the past years, several workshops and conferences have been organized. The first served as a kick-off event, and was held at the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin. It was followed by a second conference entitled *Iconic Presence, Real Presence and Sacred Art*, held at the Freie Universität in Berlin, as well as a third, *Walking to Places of Iconic Presence*, which took place in the Hans Belting Library at Masaryk University in Brno (Czech Republic). In 2019, two more workshops were organized, both of which took place in Berlin, the first at the Freie Universität and the second at the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung.

1. Präsenzeffekte – Claudio Coello und die Inszenierung der Hostie von Gorkum im Escorial, Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz, FU Berlin, 22 January 2019

In cooperation with the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz – Geschichte und Ästhetik, associate Sven Jakstat organized a half-day event in two individual lectures by Sven Jakstat (FU Berlin) and Johannes Gebhardt (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg) that focused on the historical *misé-en-scene* of the miraculous Host of Gorkum in the sacristy of the royal monastery El Escorial in Spain. While Johannes Gebhardt analysed the long tradition of so-called ‘altar machines’ (altarpieces with moving images installed, used to highlight miraculous icons in Italy and Spain during the Baroque period), Sven Jakstat on the other hand placed emphasis on the artistic creation and reception of presences in the cross-media display of Claudio Coello’s altarpiece (1684-1690). In a complex artistic installation, the altarpiece combines narrative marble reliefs, a canvas painting that can be lowered into the floor, a gilded bronze *Crucifix* by Pietro Tacca (1577–1640), as well as a luxurious Baroque clock refashioned as a tabernacle to hold the miraculous Host.

The story of the miraculous Host of Gorkum predates the construction of Coello’s *retablo* by approximately one hundred years. According to legend, the miraculous powers of the Host were discovered in 1572, when Protestant soldiers raided the church of the city of Gorkum in the Netherlands. Supposedly, one of these Protestant military men stepped on the Host, which as a result began to bleed. Because of the wondrous event, the soldier realized his mistake, converted to Catholicism, and handed the Host over to Church authorities. After a detour via Antwerp, Vienna and Prague, the Host of Gorkum came into the possession of King Philip II of Spain in 1594, as a gift from Margarita de Cardona. In Spain, a commission (*junta*) was

convened to prove the authenticity of the object. However, not entirely convinced by its miraculous powers, the commission recommended that the Host not be venerated. Herein lies the reason why the Host seems to have been locked away in a reliquary at the Escorial without further mention for the next hundred years. In the aftermath of an act of profanation of the monastery early in the year 1677, the Host of Gorkum reappeared and was re-evaluated during the reign of King Charles II (1665–1700) – the last Habsburg sovereign of the Spanish Empire – as an imperative symbol of the power of the Catholic dynasty of Spain. Hence it became one of the most significant cult objects of the Escorial monastery. To highlight the political and religious importance of the *Sagrada Forma* for the Spanish crown, Claudio Coello created a cross-media altarpiece for the sacristy of the Escorial, within which the Host of Gorkum serves as the centrepiece of a monumental display of the *Presencia Real* – a play-on-words that in the Spanish dictum unites the real presence of the Eucharist with the presence of the king (*real presencia*) as head of state.

In the course of the workshop, Sven Jakstat and Johannes Gebhardt presented the intricacies of Coello's *misé-en-scene* and contextualized it within the art historical tradition of Baroque altarpieces. The two lectures were concluded by a discussion between colleagues and fellows of the Center for Advanced Studies BildEvidenz.

2. Image and Performativity in Iconic Presence, ZfL Berlin, 8 March 2019

As Johanna Abel's work on her sub-project *Corpus Christi Plays and Corporeal Presence: the Hispanic "Auto Sacramental" in the Mirror of an Anthropology of Images* (ZfL) was concerned with images in ritual and theatre, Sigrid Weigel proposed to organize a thematic workshop on *Performativity in Iconic Presence*, which also connects to many of the questions which were raised at the conference on movement and images in Brno in 2017. Having presented her ongoing work in two articles submitted in 2018 at the workshop, Johanna Abel gave a concluding presentation of the outcome of her project with a lecture on "Performing the Absent Body in Hispanic Sacramental Theatre."

After an intensive morning discussion on representation, re-enactment and performance in the context of *Iconic Presence* on the basis of Sigrid Weigel's contribution on image theory, the case studies of the Berlin and Brno project partners interlocked inspiringly and allowed passionate and controversial discussions on the (un)limited potential of the presence of images. After Weigel's lecture "The Production of Appearance. Grammatological Approach to the A-visible and In-existing," the discussants clearly distinguished the Eastern from the Western concept of the image.

While Bissera Pentcheva's prominent defence of the Eastern image stated that from its beginnings, it had always integrated performativity and needed no 'plain image' as dominant in the West, Sigrid Weigel argued that in her understanding of imaging (*Bildgebung*) as the process of visual embodiment of immaterial notions that crosses time frames, site-specific performativity as such was not necessarily a parameter thus far. In her understanding of the interaction with images as replacement bodies that create "substitute-real contact-presence," however, performativity and corporality gain their own relevance. In reaction to several speakers, Martin Trembl defended the undeniable contribution of flat paintings and sculptures in contrast to spatial images due to their special quality of being counterparts to humans, which he also saw as a quality that bridged temporalities.

The afternoon section began with Johanna Abel's case study. She highlighted the material implementation of transubstantiation on the seventeenth century Hispanic stage, especially in the use of image-transfiguration and shapeshifting in the sacramental plays by Lope and Calderón. To show the intricate entanglement of Corpus Christi rituals and their theatrical extension, she isolated the on-scene image procession as a performative element in ritual drama itself. Finally, the Sacramental performance in Sor Juana's Corpus Christi play *El divino Narciso* (1689) served as an example of a self-referential, cross-cultural anthropology of the Christian image cult, centred on the absence and substitution of Christ's body on stage.

Pavla Tichá's paper on "Iconic Production through the Social Body in Twelfth Century Processions in Nevers" served as the starting point for a shared thinking session about social hierarchy and its representation in sacred space, joining the image presences of the cathedral's apse and of the Church's popular body in the streets. She showed the degree to which movements between holy places play a prominent role in picture veneration and the general religious performance in Medieval Europe.

Martin Lešák's contribution on "Iconic Presence as a Unifying Element in the Stational Liturgy (Rome, Ninth Century)" worked with the suggestive subject of the mediation of a vertical vision in space using architecture and liturgical texts. The presence effect of the floating of images and people was made highly plausible by the analysis of the displaced feet of ascending sacred figures in the mosaics of Roman station churches and the analysis of the intercalation of the semantics of upward movement and soaring into heaven in the singing and reading.

As an outcome of these presentations, the vivid workshop discussions were characterized by the terms of 'activation' and 'animation.' Sigrid Weigel stressed that

while listening to the case studies, it had become much clearer to her how fundamental performance with images was for the understanding of presence. She found it very striking that all these elements (pictures, wall paintings, sculptures, theatre figures) were ‘waiting’ for their moment to be ‘activated,’ that is, to come into operation to display their image presence.

Finally, Ivan Foletti’s presentation entitled “Becoming Radical? Material, Visual, and Performative Culture in the Conversion of Europe (Fourth to Sixth Century)” spoke about how the spectacular mediation of late-antique baptismal rituals with their careful orchestration of light display, painting, text, and body techniques might have contributed to the rapid Christianization of Europe by offering a ‘radicalized’ or even violent experience of presence. While his thesis of stimulus satiation in baptismal buildings with kinaesthetic focus on revelation was very convincingly argued, Martin Treml (based on Peter Brown’s research) objected to this radical interpretation of conversion, pointing out that it could also have been a much less dramatic issue. However, he conceded that the ritualistic approach is a very promising one.

As an overall outcome, the subject of presence gained a great deal in terms of clarity, and there were some general regrets that the *Iconic Presence* project was not starting now, but would soon be coming to its end. For the questions raised by the Balzan project, it was also quite reassuring to see how over the years of research, the concrete case studies have corroborated how the thought-terminating cliché of the ontologization of presence can be contested by all of the concrete historical evidence attesting to the immense financial and aesthetic effort put into the mediation of presence over the centuries.

Publications 2018-2019

In the course of the project overall, numerous publications by several project members were published in relation to Hans Belting’s Balzan project. The following list serves as an overview:

- Ivan Foletti et al., eds. *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*. Rome: Viella, 2018.
- Klaus Krüger. *Bildpräsenz – Heilspräsenz. Ästhetik der Liminalität*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018.
- Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti, Martin Lešák, eds. *Movement, Images and Iconic Presence in the Medieval World*. Convivium VI/1. Brno: Brepols, 2019. This special issue contains the following articles by project participants:

- o Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti, Martin Lešák. “The Movement and the Experience of ‘Iconic Presence’: An Introduction,” pp. 10-15.
- o Johanna Abel. “Ritual Drama and Dramatic Ritual in Spanish Sacramental Plays. *La Margarita Preciosa* (1616) between Procession and Stage,” pp. 148-165.
- Johanna Abel. “Schatten und Kopie im Sakraltheater. Der *auto sacramental* als ikonologisches Reflexionsmedium.” *HeLix – Dossiers zur romanischen Literaturwissenschaft* 12 (2019): 89-106.
- “Hans Belting und Victor Stoichita. Interview on Iconic Presence. The Evidence of Images in Religion.” *Balzan Papers* 3. Florence: Olschki, 2020.
- Zuzana Frantová. *Constant Vision of God. Theophany and Its Repetition on Portals of Pilgrimage Churches*. Forthcoming.
- Sigrid Weigel. *Grammatology of Images*. Translated by Chadwick Smith. Bronx NY: Fordham University Press, forthcoming 2020.
- Sigrid Weigel, “Blasphemy and Infamy. On the Dialectics of Secularization in Visual Politics of Desecration and Defamation.” In *Blasphemy. Media – History – Affect*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood. Forthcoming 2020.
- Sven Jakstat, Johanna Abel, Johannes Gebhardt. *Präsenzeffekte*. Göttingen: Wallstein, forthcoming 2021.
- Henry Kaap. *Lorenzo Lotto: Bilderverehrung – Bilderskepsis – Bildwitz*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, forthcoming 2021.

Perspectives on Further Research

Zuzana Frantová has returned from maternity leave and is currently working on her article on the frequent image of Christ on Romanesque tympana from the pilgrim’s perspective. Despite all the iconographic variations, the image evokes the impression of unity during pilgrimage. The article aims to prompt a discussion about the different levels of the ‘power’ of an image, e.g., on the role of such repetition and the effect it has on the pilgrim’s mind. It will be based on research not only from art history but also from the fields of psychology, philosophy and musicology.

Building on the initial questions of our research project as well as its results, further research is much needed, e.g., on the intricate relationship of *Presence* in art and religion after the Council of Trent. An investigation of this matter would help to continue and to strengthen the dialogue between the disciplines of art history, religious studies, and literature studies that our Balzan project has not only initiated but also profited so fruitfully from.