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Preface



Diagram 1. Designed
by Geoff Kaplan.

There are three dominant attitudes toward images that parallel those pillars of grade school education—reading, writing, and arithmetic—with three Ds: derivative, dumb, and deceptive.

- *Derivative*: Images are thought to derive significance from external sources. Whether tethered to a historical era or a philosophical idea, they are treated as illustrations—as vessels for borrowed content.

- *Dumb*: Images are dismissed as merely intuitive—incapable of the rigorous formalization that transforms visual data into communicable knowledge. In an otherwise excellent book by Ian F. McNeely with Lisa Wolverton, *Reinventing Knowledge: From Alexandria to the Internet*, for instance, art is considered a form of “informal knowledge.” In their preface McNeely and Wolverton state, “[Our book] hardly touches on informal knowledge, the type of knowledge we get from reading a newspaper, fixing a motorcycle, parenting a child, or creating a work of art.”¹ The (widely shared) assumption of these authors is that visual intelligence is insufficiently disciplined to cross the threshold of “formal” (i.e., *genuine*) knowledge.
- *Deceptive*: As sources of pleasure, images *deceive*. They create the ideological fantasias that Guy Debord so lustily condemned in his 1967 manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle*, and that critics from both the right and the left have loved to hate ever since. As spectacle, images are the opposite of knowledge—they are the epitome of ignorance.²

After Art will assert that images possess vast power through their capacity for replication, remediation, and dissemination at variable velocities. In order to exploit this power for progressive ends, it is necessary to understand the potency of images on their own terms rather than dismissing them as derivative, dumb, and deceptive. To this purpose, *After Art* will shift critical emphasis from art’s production (and the corollary of artistic intention) to what images *do* once they enter circulation in heterogeneous networks. While

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the prefix *after* signifies belatedness, it is not synonymous with the more commonly used prefix *post*, which, as in the vexed category *postmodern*, or its more recent successor, postmedium, indicates both the termination and transformation of a previous era and its signature styles.³ *Post* leaves the art object in tact albeit transformed or negated, whereas *after* shifts emphasis to its effects—its power—under the conditions of circulation.

The term *image* is a slippery one. I will use it here to indicate a quantum of visual content (say a digital photograph) that can assume a variety of formats.⁴ For instance, any digital photograph may remain a computer file, or be printed in a variety of ways on a variety of surfaces; it lends itself to editing with software like Photoshop, and it can be degraded in quality by emailing or uploading it. In short, an image is a visual byte, vulnerable to virtually infinite remediation. The icon that heads this preface, which appears in a sequence of diagrams punctuating *After Art*, was designed by Geoff Kaplan to signify a new, more productive understanding of the power of images. Here are three of its aspects:

- Eye and I: the letter *i* in the center of the icon suggests both a pupil and a pronoun, just as images combine sensory and conceptual forms of information that, together, constitute their connection or link with spectators.
- Scalability and transformation: Images are a form of information that may shift from two dimensions to three, from

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tiny to huge, or from one material substrate to another, just as the image-icon in this book will move through several formats or situations in its sequence of diagrams.

- Power and currency: The icon approximates a plug where the *i* functions as a prong entering a disk. I will argue that images produce power—a current or currency—that is activated by contact with spectators. The more points of contact an image is able to establish, the greater its power will be.