

What Persists in Iconoclasm

We are regularly reminded that the urge to destroy or deface an image, or else to violate a taboo, could only ever attest to a contradiction much greater in the beliefs of the iconoclast than in the ideas he or she rejects, insofar as the iconoclast can be shown to remain beholden, in an at least partial way, to what he or she once professed to oppose. Something of what we oppose persists, it is said, no matter what we decide to be done with, no matter when—or even *if*—we decide to think differently about what remains a part of us. In order to deface an image, the argument so often goes, one must know that image all too well; one must have been enchanted by the image and what it shows *at least once*. If we once believed in what we now reject, the violence that we do now can only betray the depths to which we remain held by whatever it is we are currently rejecting. To have believed once, then, is to be guilty forever. To have believed once is to be locked in a state of hypocrisy refreshed by every gesture we now make in the opposite direction.

What I want to ultimately defend here—or at least make an allowance for as something better left outside of the realm of moral discourse—is a version of what it means to be a hypocrite, and to consider what it would mean for us to try and not be one, as we regularly assume we ought not be. The problem of hypocrisy, as we will see, is a problem of the image and what the image gives to thought, which is why the case of iconoclasm and the attack on figuration, in particular, is such an important example. The so-called problem of hypocrisy, as it is suggested in various discourses about iconoclasm, should give us a way to understand what remains in thought as something once perceived as an image that we have encountered in material form, as well as the very process of imagination itself, which takes memory and memorization—which are themselves different and yet related things—as a point of departure.

The charge against the iconoclast has been led most fervently by Bruno Latour, both in his increasingly influential anthology, **Iconoclasm**, and also more recently in **On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods**. While others could be cited in concert, I want to restrict my example here, for the most part, to Latour, since his aim is to expose the supposed hypocrisy of every iconoclasm, which is what concerns me the most. In **On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods**, for

instance, Latour asks “[W]hy is it that all those destroyers of images, those ‘theoclasts’, those iconoclasts, those ‘ideoclasts’ have also generated such a fabulous population of new images, fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators, greater flows of media, more powerful ideas, stronger idols?”¹ Shortly after posing this question, Latour himself lashes out at what he calls the cheapness of the iconoclastic gesture and its reproductive potency; the result of which, he supposes, is that every instance will mean much less.

One could say, with more than a little dose of irony, that there has been a sort of miniaturization of critical efforts: what in the past centuries required the formidable effort of a Marx, a Nietzsche, a Benjamin, has become accessible for nothing, much like the supercomputers of the 1950s, which used to fill large halls and expend a vast amount of electricity and heat, and are now accessible for a dime, and no bigger than a fingernail. You can now have your Baudrillard’s or your Bordieu’s disillusion for a song, your Derridean deconstruction for a nickel. Conspiracy theory costs nothing to produce; disbelief is easy, debunking what is learned in 101 classes in critical theory.²

What comes forward here is an understanding of iconoclasm as a synonym for “critique,” which I take to be an exceedingly common usage of the term—one that nevertheless covers over a number of interesting problems. If we consider these passages together, we will have to understand “critique” in at least two related ways. First, critique will have to be understood as an image that has some material aspect or form, even if it is nothing more than words on a page. How else would we be convinced to let go of our nickel? Second, if critique is necessarily an image—that is, if critique takes on a material aspect, and does so despite the fact that it is also something more than its material form—then it will be something that multiplies and never negates, is never something that destroys what it negates.

Certainly, Latour is not alone in thinking that iconoclasm is, by design, a creative rather than a destructive act. In **What Do Pictures Want?** W.J.T. Mitchell tells us that “iconoclasm is more than just the destruction of images; it is a ‘creative

destruction,’ in which a secondary image of defacement or annihilation is created at the same moment that the ‘target’ image is attacked.”³ For Mitchell, just as it is for Latour, the second image is not the mental remainder of an image destroyed or defaced; it is yet one more painting, one more object, whether or not the image lingers in our memory long after the object has passed from our sight. Hence, the paradox of creativity in iconoclasm: the more one seeks to destroy an image, the more completely do they multiply.

For this reason, we will need to know why the image generated by the iconoclast is always something material and tied to reproduction. And why must the iconoclast’s image be always “secondary”? For one, it would seem that the creative dimension of iconoclasm, in which critique simply means multiplication, is necessary as evidence of what continues in the anti-artwork of what has been rejected. Without its creative and reproductive dimension, iconoclasm wins its freedom from what it rejects. With its creative and reproductive dimension, the anti-art object is forced to sit alongside what it rejects and does so on the basis of a categorical belonging that draws its strength from what the anti-artwork features in terms of resemblance rather than by virtue of what distinguishes it from its predecessor. A generality in style trumps the particularity of the anti-artwork, insofar as the part is assimilated to the whole—which is true of moral discourse in general—and remains achievable only in discourse and never in reality, even if we can never know “reality” in a nondiscursive way. Thus, the continuity elaborated as a principle of stylistic regularity finds itself justified on the basis of a hypocrisy that is only possible, in turn, on the basis of a supposed creativity: this one object more. The discourse of creative destruction that haunts the iconoclast, depends, it would appear, on a visual catachresis, under which every difference is subsumed, and along with it, every critical gesture.

Isn’t it obvious, we might say, that Duchamp loved Da Vinci’s **Mona Lisa** and the institution it represents, since he could not actually destroy it? Since it remains featured in **L.H.O.O.Q.** (1919) beneath the comparatively minor marks made? Hypocrisy, we might now say, is what happens when resemblance—which is something other than identity—

gives way to the discursive force of categorical belonging. Hypocrisy is now the name given to both the one who made the anti-art object and also to the one who now notices that the two things before us, as material objects, are not the same, even if they share most every other thing in common. How will any of us escape *that* charge?

One answer to this question concerns a relation between value and critique, restriction and silence. If we follow Latour's suggestion and leave the image alone—which demands that we suppress every critical gesture—then we will also have fewer images, which will only increase the value of the images already in circulation. In exchange for our silence—as compensation for the end of criticism—we win our immunity to the charge of hypocrisy.⁴ Put this way, the argument against iconoclasm, made on the basis of its material creativity, is an argument in favor of the marketplace, which pursues the by-now superannuated idea of value that depends on a reduction rather than a production or reproduction. The notion would almost be quaint were it not for the fact that valuation is so badly tied to the silencing of criticism and to negativity, more broadly.

In this respect, the argument against iconoclasm is no different from the ban on graven images. If Martin Luther, in his zealously literal invocation of the Second Commandment, demanded that all images and idols be smashed, he did so expressly as a way to forestall the critique of God, which is what occurs any time the image takes material form, and no matter what it shows, insofar as the proliferation of paintings—especially figurative ones, could only imply the presence of more than one divinity, which means that the Judeo-Christian God will be worth a whole lot less; he will become the Judeo-Christian God, just one of many.⁵ In Latour's account, the image is what is to be protected, but what it is protected from—and no differently than the ban on false idols—is criticism, which only expands and thereby reduces the worth of what already exists.

It is difficult to not notice in Latour's discourse about the iconoclast a relation between religion and the marketplace. In describing his method, his way of treating iconoclasm as a subject rather than as an action with some potential, Latour tells us that "It prays for an angel to come and arrest our arm, holding the knife ready to cut the sacrificial lamb's throat. It is an attempt to turn around, envelop, and embed the worship of image destruction: to give it a home,

a site, a museum space, a place for surprise."⁶ And, it should be added, a restrictive place for the accumulation of value enabled by the absence of criticism, even if what is shown there was generated by a criticism that was itself generative of the last object standing.

What is most striking in Latour's discourse against the iconoclast—indeed, of his desire to historicize the last instance of critique—is that it is predicated on a respect for images and mediation that is in much shorter supply in critical theory than it should be. And yet, the stipulation pinned to respect, in this case, is that we say nothing about what we see; or, if we say something, then what we say should add nothing further, even if we go on talking. Art-historical method has never come more easily; never have we been less prone to hypocrisy.

If we repress our criticism, which we can now understand as *any thought about an image that has some material aspect and that generates one more object that is also one more image, still*, then what takes its place will be a form of thinking that is provoked by an object but fixed to that object in a noncreative, nongenerative way. If the museum of the last object standing is a place for surprise, as Latour suggests, then we have every reason to believe that we will be capable of thinking in more than just one way about what we see. However, each way that thought moves, each pathway that the object opens for thought, will have to remain held in its sway and then re-joined to the image-object in a noncreative relation. Thinking will not be an act of picturing, but an act of devotion imperceptible to others and yet present. Only the object, or the last generative instance of critique, will bear the status of Image. Whatever else our thinking about the image-object does, in this scenario, it can never be generative of an image. Thus conceived, the image-object could only be a source of mental constipation, the market value of which lies not in production, consumption, and expenditure—as one might reasonably expect—but in repression. What we stand to gain from repression is a permanent exemption from hypocrisy. And what could possibly be wrong with *that*?

For one, the work of repression requires a thinking that makes nothing further, because it's never in disagreement with what appears already. More pragmatically, we might say instead that thinking will soon no longer be valued or acknowledged as what we do with objects. To be alleviated of the charge of hypocrisy, then,

is to be denied the capacity to think. And while we have come to understand "hypocrisy" as inconstancy, pretense, or as a willful deception predicated on the preservation of a belief that runs counter to what is said, we need not observe that usage any more than we ought to assume that the image that comes after is nothing more important than what came before. The common usage of "hypocrisy" as pretense may very well represent nothing more than the sedimentation of a much earlier injunction against thinking that was predicated on a willful misreading of being; or rather, a moral charge against the appearance of thought as happens in being. It should be noted that "hypocrisy" is derived from the Greek word hypokrisis, which is a sifting and a decision (*krinein*) from under (*hypo*).⁷ Not surprisingly, the term is related in Ancient Greek usage to acting, to putting on a performance, which is where the moral bias against thinking emerges as a disdain for representation as a form of deception and an offense to nature. Rather, the very work of acting as a mode of fictional representation, by which we perform the signs of something or someone that we are not, might very well have been recognized—and feared, as such—as a staging of the problem of transparency and our incapacity to know other minds with the clarity that we are expected, in a moral framework, to know our own—should it ever become possible that we can know our "own." That is, what might very well have been feared about the theater and its actors is not the illusion and excess of poetic modes, as one finds in Plato, for instance, but the incisive model of the undeterminable interrelation of thinking and being that it presents to us and that makes it, in the end, no model at all. After all, what else is an actor if not the being capable of performing one thing while thinking of another? Or, a being that knows all the while that what he shows is other than who she is?

Curiously, in **The Life of Mind**, Hannah Arendt describes the entwinement of thinking and being in terms related to questions of performance, spectator, and hypocrisy. In this book devoted to the history of conceptions of thinking in Western philosophy, Arendt never makes a sharp distinction between thinking and being, epistemology and ontology, as so many are now so inclined to do.⁸ In the section devoted to appearance in **The Life of the Mind**, Arendt describes what she takes to be the inescapable fact that we are always an appearance for others, just as every other remains an appear-

ance for us. And we do so, she says, even as we withdraw, in the course of our reflections, from the very world in which we nevertheless remain situated for every other as an appearance. And if we remain an appearance for others as we withdraw in the course of our reflections, then, we can—and likely *will*—be interpreted in ways that bear no relation to what it is that we may actually be thinking, or else wishing to signify.

Most importantly, perhaps, Arendt is careful to make a distinction between what she calls “self-display” and “self-presentation,” both of which are understood in relation to the image that we all cannot help but be for others. She writes:

Since appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming, pretense and willful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent potentialities. Self-presentation is distinguished from self-display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown; self-display has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses. Self-presentation would not be possible without a degree of self-awareness—a capability inherent in the reflexive character of mental activities and clearly transcending mere consciousness, which we probably share with higher animals. Only self-presentation is open to hypocrisy and pretense, properly speaking, and the only way to tell pretense and make-believe from reality and truth is the former’s failure to endure and remain consistent.⁹

And yet, as Arendt is quick to point out, the very consistency in self-presentation—the unwavering relation between what I think and what I show to others, so much so that self-presentation looks like self-display—is, in fact, rather difficult to achieve.

By way of an example, Arendt proposes the problem of color in our perception of the animal, which leaves her thinking about the hypocrite:

To uncover the “true” identity of an animal behind its adaptive temporary color is not unlike the unmasking of the hypocrite. But what then appears under a deceptive surface is not an inside self, an authentic appearance, changeless and reliable in its

thereness. The uncovering destroys a deception; it does not discover anything authentically appearing. An “inside self,” if it exists at all, never appears to either the inner or outward sense, since none of the inner data possess stable, relatively permanent features which, being recognizable and identifiable, characterize individual appearance.¹⁰

In other words, if a lack of consistency between what I think and what I show emerges, which is bound up, here, with what I intend to show on the basis of what I will—in and as *thought*—then what is exposed is the untruthfulness of the sign that I make for others, which only appears in the instance of variation. In this respect, I can only be shown to be a hypocrite and now become so on the basis of an accidental change in the outward aspect that I have featured, up to now, in a consistent way.¹¹ The image that I have been for others changes or moves in some way that can only be related to an unsteadiness of what I think when it becomes obvious that self-display and self-presentation are at variance. And yet, as Arendt points out, the presence of an “inward self” that is meant to be confirmed by outward appearance in a transparent relation of truth—rather than as an expression of mere semblance—is precluded by the necessarily impermanent and unstable character of the “inner data” that exists as the very stuff for self-presentation.

Perhaps most importantly to my argument here, this “inner data” consists of images derived from material objects in the world and the trace of those objects as they persist in memory. For this reason, an image is both something material and also something that can—indeed most often does—exist with us independently of its material incarnation. An image, in Arendt’s telling, is nothing more nor less than what we perceive on the order of appearance, which is also the world in which I stand in appearance to others, even when I “recede” in a moment of reflection about something that has appeared at least once before. Thus, to be thinking is also to open an at least temporary gap between self-presentation and self-display, which is also the opening that the moralist requires in order to characterize me, in turn, as a hypocrite. *To think is to sift or decide from under the appearance I make for others. I am accused of lying at the very moment in which I am thinking.* If this uncovering destroys a deception, as Arendt rightly claims, the deception destroyed is not something

untrue; rather, what is destroyed is a belief in the consistency of thought behind every appearance, so much so that no one is able to detect a difference between self-presentation and self-display.

What this asks of us is that we recognize every existing thing—and most provocatively, ourselves—as an image of some description, and as one that is no less material or describable as an object for being so. In this regard, the difference between humans and mere things is that humans are capable of thinking about something other than, or at least in addition to, what we nevertheless feature for others, who are themselves thinking about something other than, or in addition to, what they themselves display. Yet, humans appear to us in the process of reflection *like* objects, as Arendt has demonstrated, when we recede in the realm of immediate appearance in order to make sense of something now before us, in order to decide what we think about what we see in relation to what we have seen at least once before. We sift from under, even though there is no inside, since what appears before us as a mental image is derived from something that exists “outside” of us.

If we agree with Arendt’s conception of being as always being for others, while still sifting from under, then a problem emerges for the anti-iconoclast and the attendant charge of hypocrisy. Most broadly, if we are all an image for others in some way, and sift from under in the work of self-presentation, then the image—by definition—will not be something that one can leave alone, or prevent from multiplying, lest we ourselves remain in place like the art object, which happens only in death, or permanent exile. The most basic condition of thinking, and featuring for others what comes of that thinking, involves both proliferation—insofar as we ourselves keep seeing something—and recurrence, insofar as I withdraw in a moment of reflection to consider what I’ve just seen in relation to what I have seen before. And if such moments of recession that characterize reflection are possible, they owe their possibility to images that are no longer something solely material, even if they owe their existence to something that was, and potentially still is, seeable in its material aspects. All the better, in fact, if so. In this respect, the argument against critique is an abstention from life, from within life.

What we ought to say, instead, is that if an image persists apart from its material form or aspects that allow for something else to be created

by virtue of the encounter we have had in the realm of appearance—and that we featured in self-presentation, or as yet one more work of art—then what we are describing here *as thought* is also what has earned the iconoclast the status of hypocrite. If the iconoclast cannot help but be a hypocrite, it is because he or she cannot stop thinking; he or she cannot cease to engage in critique, which is a manner of being responsive to what one sees in a vital way, and with reference to what persists, even if what persists does so now only as an image, which is all that it ever did in the first place. And if an image, then also one image more, even if the cost of our critique—which takes the form of an image, or a material object—means living with less, which is a consequence that any iconoclast worthy of the name should be prepared to live with.

1
Bruno Latour, **On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods** (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 69.

2
Latour, 82.

3
W.J.T. Mitchell, **What Do Pictures Want?** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18.

4
Another way of thinking about this problem is to be found in Alexander García Düttmann's important theorization of fidelity in relation to Badiou in "What Remains of Fidelity After Serious Thought." Opening a space for dissent within fidelity, which also describes difference within continuity, García Düttmann writes:

On the one hand, fidelity would not be a commitment if it did not defy its identification; on the other hand, fidelity would abolish itself and resemble a symptom of delusion or madness if it did not test itself against the possibility of its own failure. In other words, fidelity must be an event, or remain indistinguishable from an event, and it must also mark its essential difference from the event to which it relates, or trace the outline of a more or less recognizable behavior.

In **Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy**, ed. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

5
Sergei Eisenstein makes much the same point in the "Of God and Country" sequence in **October** (1927), in which we see a series of sculptural objects of a divinity from various countries and opposed religious traditions. Indeed, I am certain that what I am saying here is an at least partial result of the way in which Eisenstein's images persist for (with? in?) me. Could Eisenstein have made his critique of monotheism without making at least one more image? What would it have meant to simply film the Winter Palace as just one thing, and not many different things?

6
Latour, 70.

7
See the **Online Etymology Dictionary**, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hypocrisy>, accessed January 13, 2014.

8
This is also a way of describing the impact that Quentin Meillassoux's **After Finitude** seems to have had on the rise of Object Oriented Ontology

9
Hannah Arendt, **The Life of the Mind** (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1971), 36.

10
Ibid., 39.

11
This is at the core of what has endured—it now seems—as Arendt's most notorious claim, which she makes of Eichmann in **Eichmann in Jerusalem**. What Arendt noticed most provocatively about Eichmann was that he acted in a lawful way—that is, he did nothing that had not been lawful in Nazi Germany, regardless of how terrible his actions in fact were. In Arendt's telling, what Eichmann seemed most keen to do, in a court of law that was other than the legal framework under which he operated, was not to contradict himself in his original context—to avoid hypocrisy—which is what he would have to do in order to show remorse or demonstrate overwhelming coercion. This is also why Arendt thought Eichmann was stupid, despite her concerns about the potential unlawfulness of the proceedings themselves: he was unable to think. He could only concern himself with consistency. See Hannah Arendt, **Eichmann in Jerusalem** (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963).