

# Anne Neukamp

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Into the Universe of Unforeseen Images: On the Painting of Anne Neukamp

Two short, white bands with black stripes loosely flatter over a light brown, slightly faded background - or do they emerge from it, as the sharp lines at the ends might suggest? Although these lines seem to be sharp incisions into the background, they could also be hovering on the surface like metal fasteners attached to a rubber band. The lines are reminiscent of graphically abstract characters or slashes between words in written sentences. This perspective suggests yet another association: the banderoles flanking the visual narrative in medieval paintings, thus emphasizing the communicative function of the panels. The few clearly defined graphic elements of *Torsion*, the title of a vertical-format work from 2017 by Anne Neukamp, prove on closer inspection to be quite ambiguous and difficult to decode. This applies just as much to their spatial arrangement in the image as to their capacity to represent: it is impossible to identify them as concrete objects in the world of tangible things, and they evade the principles of imitation or mimesis.

Formal and semantic ambivalence is a characteristic of Neukamp's painting; this publication presents a selection of her work from the past seven years. The motif of keys or keyholes—all dysfunctional—in several paintings clearly refers to this state of remaining vague, to the indecipherable nature of the content. *Picklock* from 2017, for example, features a nonfunctional key in the center of the painting. Its size and diagonally soaring shape lend it a brilliance in terms of visual rhetorics that is only slightly diminished by the lack of a key tooth that would have allowed it to fulfill its actual purpose. Instead, the object leaves a brilliant white and red trail, the graphic idiom of which further increases the key's visual degree of abstraction. At the same time, the bright red lines push the delicate metallic shape upward, underscoring its optical dominance. In *Imprévu* (2018), on the other hand, a deep shadow is cast by the silhouette of a keyhole from which a solid blue slab vividly emerges. Its short, black shadow lends a sense of three-dimensionality to the interlocked pictorial elements and hints at a palpable, concrete world. All the more puzzling is the space "behind" the opening that the blue slab blocks so effectively: it is objective and metaphysical at the same time. The slabs return, somewhat thinner and in a cooler blue, as props in a vertical-format painting from 2017 aptly entitled *Props*. The term prop came into prominence in American Minimalist art with Richard Serra's *Prop Pieces*, fragile constructions of geometrically shaped lead panels and bars that demonstrate the material's weight. Through their simplicity and the seriality that they evoke,

Neukamp's Props also refer to the visual cosmos of Minimalism, which represents a redefinition of sculpture and art in general, as in the work of Donald Judd.<sup>1</sup> Using repetition Judd strove to avoid the subjectivist contingency of the composition; by doing away with the plinth, he also decreased the distance between viewers and the artistic object, thus raising awareness of the actual exhibition space beyond all illusionism. Minimalism's use of industrial material and basic forms arranged in series also challenged art's claim to autonomy; its "compositional syntax" and "efficacy of form" also found an aesthetic equivalent in contemporary corporate design, as the artist and critic Buzz Spector later concluded in his reconstruction of the cultural context of Minimalism.<sup>2</sup>

Neukamp's Minimalist slabs in Props are flanked and superimposed by forms that oscillate between graphic forms and objects: are they punctuation marks or abstracted clubs? Their sketchy rendering contrasts with the homogenous, quasi-industrial character of the blue companion pieces against which they lean as playful variations on Serra's Prop Pieces, but without sharing a unified visual space with the slabs, as shown by the lack of a cast shadow. Similarly, Familiar Object plays with such formal vocabulary of Minimalism as the L-Beams, the oversized lacquered plywood brackets that Robert Morris arranged in the exhibition space in the mid-1960s. Typographical elements nestle against them, generating associations that range from viscous smears to propeller wings, lending the composition an additional dynamism; but they still reject the striking perspectival shortening of the dark red brackets. Not only do Props and Familiar Object use the same format and painterly basics of oil, tempera, and acrylic on canvas that all of Neukamp's paintings have in common; they also divide the painting surface by means of intermediate rectangular areas (also found in many other of her paintings) that function as pictures within the picture.

In the large-format work Grid two white puzzle pieces interact with delicate pound signs—which we today immediately associate with hashtags from social media – that are isolated from the picture's background twice over. While hashtags in social networks mark a buzzword in a blocky, objective way, the filigreed symbols here dance and spin playfully between the puzzle pieces, getting caught in the white areas, thrusting themselves in front, and penetrating a shared level parallel to the image. Both the strained two-dimensionality and the cross-shaped structures allude to the grid structure that gives the painting its title, as well as to an entire body of works that since Classical Modernism have shown allegiance to this

1 See Judd's texts in Caitlin Murray, ed., Donald Judd, Writings: 1958-1993 (New York: David Zwirner, 2018).

2 Buzz Spector, Objects and Logotypes: Relationships Between Minimalist Art and Corporate Design (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, 1980), 3.

objective visual structure.<sup>3</sup> As Rosalind Krauss has outlined, grids become the signature characteristic of modern painting that upheld its aesthetic autonomy by excluding figuration, illusion, and narration.<sup>4</sup> Grids became a declaration of independence vis-à-vis art from the past and despite its formal rigor had a broad palette of possible thematic attributions: ranging from Piet Mondrian's spiritually charged tableaux to Agnes Martin's fine webs of lines that infinitely expand the visual space, from Gerhard Richter's pixelated color-field compositions to Sarah Morris's colorful façade grids that are deliberately left open to interpretation. Neukamp's painting engages in discourses regarding the legacy of modernism, from the shape of a composition like *Grid*, where flat, interlocking puzzle pieces enter into a dialogue with interlinked hashtags, to the confident play with a whole series of additional painterly idioms and motifs that refer to the universe of painting in the twentieth century—and sometimes beyond that, as in *Torsion*.

In *Picklock* and *Progression* we encounter the modernized lines of movement as in Futurism, and the rhythmically staggered blocks of color in *Triad* echoes the dynamized canvases of Constructivism. A mystification of motifs as in Surrealism resurfaces in *Picklock*, but also in works like *Juggler* and *Routine* from 2015. Some paintings lead us back to the illusionism of figuration that American Pop Art mobilized against gestural, informal abstraction, Color Field painting, and Minimalism. *Memo* from 2017 combines Roy Lichtenstein's iconic brushstrokes with the saturated paint texture of James Rosenquist. Lichtenstein's grooved brushstrokes outlined in black on a gridded background in the 1960s combine the painterly signs of abstraction with the visual conventions of printed mass media. They give ironic commentary on the primacy of the spontaneously expressive style of painter-heroes like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, artists who had long dominated art discourse. Rosenquist's trompe-l'oeil-like citations from illustrated magazines emphasize the manual work involved in painting. The brushstroke as a material trace of the artist's hand on the support was renegotiated over and over, as painting reassured itself of its technique and its legitimacy in the expanded field of artistic practices and the world of visual mass media. Painting's privileged status in art history and criticism and on the art market were challenged by the dissolution of the limits of genres with an expanded concept of sculpture, the triumph of large-format photography, and modes of expression that use performance and installation. The postmodern practice of running through diverse styles and

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the post-1945 period, see the exhibition catalogue *Rasterfahndung: Das Raster in der Kunst nach 1945*, ed. Ulrike Groos and Simone Schimpf (Cologne: Wienand, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 51–66.

idioms, the expansion of painting's field of activity (Rosenquist had already designed spatial installations of paintings), or the discovery of "slowness" as a driving force of production aesthetics<sup>5</sup> refer to several of the techniques that painters developed starting in the 1970s to examine the tradition-bound medium for new possibilities of expression and statement. In *Memo*, the brown pigment, which is thickly applied on a white surface and held by an oversized paper clip, becomes a mere visual symbol, an image within the image, thus additionally emphasizing the referential character of the painterly gesture. In this way the picture formulates a gesture of presentation—that of painting itself—that becomes the actual subject as a technical process and a cultural act.

Neukamp's paintings are characterized by their strong reduction of motifs: they seem to want to say only the bare minimum. But what absolute minimum, what urgent issue do these works—almost all of which are vertical in format<sup>6</sup>—articulate? Despite their figurative Minimalism, the works make reference to a number of painterly conventions and iconographies. In their differentiated textures (that can only be reliably evaluated by viewing the works in person), these conventions and iconographies are also treated on the material plane by playing out different degrees of realism, illusionism, and abstraction against one another. The formal reduction of motifs and the surface make it clear that in spite of the apparent simplicity of the paintings there is an element of the unforeseen and the incalculable that emerges from the illusionism that resists all spatial logic and from the collision of divergent visual worlds. The pictures take as their subject their aesthetic and communicative function equally, and the strikingly frequent use of typographical symbols points the way for this reading.

### **Living Signs and the Flatness of the Image**

In the large-format works *Mark* and *Swerve* (both from 2013) and *Rumor* from 2017 punctuation marks fill the entire picture plane. The transparent, colored fluid that seems randomly distributed over the surface in splotch- or smear-shaped forms cannot deny them the dominant position. At the time of their creation, *Mark* and *Swerve* were flanked by paintings in which pictograms and logos from the world of commodities provided similarly dominant motifs. In *Untitled*, for example, a metallicly gleaming signet gets entangled with the soft outlines of a red and blue logo. The form is reminiscent of a racetrack with a sharp turn, while the colors recall athletic gear. In the lower right corner the two are linked to form a closed and yet dynamic shape. Two signets also overlap in *Curl*; despite elements that jut

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see the exhibition catalogue *Slow Paintings*, ed. Markus Heinzelmann, Museum Morsbroich Leverkusen (Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Just recently, she created horizontal-format works like the large painting *Bienvenue*, 2018.

out or recede in space, the almost complete circle here takes on a stability that is hardly disturbed by the movements of rotation alluded to. Untitled varies the form of the circle once again: here, fragmented logos combine to form an impossible object in the spirit of M. C. Escher that threatens to fall apart in the very next moment. Rarely are the signets and logos in her paintings as recognizable as the euro symbol here: Anne Neukamp is not interested in the identification of the models. Instead, she performs one of the conceivably simplest compositional exercises, the representation of a circle on a surface in a notable variety of spatial relationships, contrasts, and dynamizations. She thus not only refers to the elementary foundations of her discipline, but also develops an astonishing visual and pictorial semantic wealth that is apparent in the interplay of forms and contours, parts and the whole, superimpositions and rhythmifications. The titles assigned to the paintings occasionally underscore the dynamics of colors and shapes without directing us all too clearly through the dense thicket of possible visual interpretations. Instead, they subtly accentuate the communicative achievement of the respective formal elements at play in the works discussed so far, as in *Twirl* from 2015, including the graphic character of the character and the legibility of the image. Although the written logo of the communication giant Twitter has now given way to the iconic tweet bird, the written logo, the first initial of which is presented in *Twirl* as a somewhat faded outline, remains in our memory. A metallically shiny, angular snake form meanders through the open body of the initial, which seems to be derived from an animated font from the early days of computers. *Twirl* takes us back into the history of typography by recalling the majuscules in medieval illuminated manuscripts that lavishly embellished the literal meaning of the letters with a visual statement: the rationality of reading was combined with the visibility of viewing.<sup>7</sup> With the advent of book printing, typefaces were rationalized, but diversity returned with the rise of advertising typography. Typography became a visual event that competes for our attention.<sup>8</sup> Willi Willrab's 1920s poster design for the Berlin cigarette company *Problem*, in which the letters of the brand name proudly project from the pictorial space, clearly plays with this expectation. The sculptural red O surrounds the glowing cigarette like an abstracted mouth. Although the company name might seem a bit odd in the age of smoking bans (as does the reduced anthropomorphism of the design idea), Willrab's innovative font design, which seeks to translate the dynamism of the metropolis into images, refers to the continuation of a repeatedly repressed, animistic-typographic tradition (still) in the spirit of the New Objectivity, to the extent that the "two-dimensional technical code of writing . . . is given back a three-dimensional quality and

7 See Annette Geiger, "Körper, Bild, Buchstabe. Zur Sinnlichkeit der Typografie," in *Typografie als künstlerisches Ereignis*, ed. Michael Glasmeier and Tania Prill (Hamburg: Textem, 2016), 143-60.

8 See Robert Massin, *La lettre et l'image: La figuration dans l'alphabet latin du VIIIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993; originally published in 1970).

physical life is breathed into it again.”<sup>9</sup> The interest in typography was revived once again in Pop Art, especially by the California-based artist Ed Ruscha, who designed sans-serif fonts for his pictures and artist books. Their geometric structure is based on the famous Hollywood sign over his adopted hometown of Los Angeles, which he often painted and drew. In addition, his Liquid Word Paintings, which he began producing in the late 1960s using painting and various printing techniques, featured usually monosyllabic words formed using a fluid rendered in an almost perfect illusionism. The letters, often on the verge of becoming illegible, float against backdrops that are undefined and animated by gradually altering shades of color. Sometimes the everyday words pearl off their background, as in *Lisp* (1968), where small splashes of paint short-circuit the materiality of the written word with the vocal sound of the spoken concept. The sound of language plays a role in such works, even if Ruscha is not primarily interested in finding visual equivalents. Instead, through the constant threat of the entropic<sup>10</sup> dissolution of the legible writing, the Liquid Word Paintings liberated language itself from the functionalism of Conceptual art while with their perfect finish they ran counter to the practices and theories of Abstract Expressionist painting. The long-dominant conviction of leading art critics, according to whom American postwar painting was the culmination of artistic modernism, was based in the presumed removal of all illusionistic elements from the canvas. In their view, it was only when the canvas is taken seriously in its flatness and no objective spatiality or other mimetic-illusionistic effects are sought that the actual nature, the “essence” of the painted image, came to the forefront.<sup>11</sup> The light reflections and shadows of the fluid letters in Ed Ruscha negated such a view, as did the shimmering backgrounds that the art historian Yve-Alain Bois characterized as “an abstract stage, an eerie gravitationless field.”<sup>12</sup>

When we encounter illusionistically painted fluids in Neukamp's painting today, such conflicts from the recent history of painting continue to reverberate, even if these backgrounds are charged with meaning in a less “eerie” way. In *Mark*, *Swerve*, and *Rumor* the illusionism of the fluid is muted, the viscous splatters and smears are less vividly depicted, and their character as *trompe l'oeil* is more reticent. All forms have taken on a life of their own and no longer rely on the communication of the letter. Doing without shadow effects, the flowing shapes seem rather two-dimensional:

9 Annette Geiger, “Körper, Bild, Buchstabe,” 146-47.

10 See Yve-Alain Bois, “Thermometers Should Last Forever,” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 60-80 (originally published in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969*, exh. cat. Gagosian Gallery (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

11 Clement Greenberg was the leading American critic taking such a position. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (New York: Beacon Press, 1971).

12 Yve-Alain Bois, “Thermometers Should Last Forever,” 68.

their impact is ultimately like a drawing, an illusionism of the second degree that emphasizes the flatness of the painted canvas. The transparent fluids do not form letters, do not demand a legible meaning, instead interacting with the typographic character beneath. These symbols—a percentage sign, a double slash, a double quotation mark—do not have a linguistic context, but are mere allusions to the realm of language that penetrated the pictorial realm so powerfully in Conceptual art. They all emphasize the verticality of the canvas. *Swerve*, the largest among them, confronts the beholder with two-meter-long beams that lead the gaze dynamically upward. A pink-shaped smear challenges their dominance; it undertakes an expansive contrary gesture of crossing out before culminating at the lower margin of the painting in a biomorphic blob. The blotches in the other two paintings are also biomorphic: the larger than life-size brown octopus shape in *Mark* that stretches toward the end of the percent sign, and the sedate, gray-pink shimmering drop in *Rumor*, whose inner energy is not enough to spread. As symbol-like animate substances, they “contact” the characters beneath and thus reveal the transformed interest of this painting that no longer primarily refers to language as a coherent system of understanding and thus to non-pictorial contexts of meaning. Instead, in Neukamp’s paintings symbols from disparate contexts take up contact with one another as fragmented systems of communication, thus emphasizing the function of the picture as the support for a conversation that plays out on the canvas and through many repetitions of motifs, even between images. The renunciation of pictorial illusionism that makes the things in the pictures overly haptic is also fitting: the rhetoric of the real is repeatedly broken by traces of material abrasion, minor mistakes, and omissions. The painterly constructedness of the objects always prevails, and the sophisticated painting technique brings them back to the surface.

### **Pictorial Puzzles**

The paintings are created in a complex technique in which oils, tempera, and acrylic paint are applied in several layers. On closer inspection elements now on the top layer are revealed to be exposed areas of layers that have been painted over. The linear temporality that is otherwise inscribed in painting in successive applications of layers of paint is broken by revealing deeper layers of pigment. Rubbings and slight blurs run contrary to the illusionistic effect and to the digital, or at least mass-mediated, visuality of the motifs. Each of these paintings shows that painting is a craft with a long history. Every individual painting also shows how it is able to hold its own despite the omnipresence of media and functional images. Many contemporary painters accept the challenge posed by digital, printed, transmitted, graphic, photographic, and virtual iconographies from the news, advertising, and social media by taking up their material and

visual traces and reflecting on the logic of their use in their own works. Wade Guyton, for example, uses inkjet printing to transfer screenshots from his computer, pages from art catalogues, and personal photographs to the canvas; in his installations that oscillate between disciplines, Seth Price emphasizes not only the aspect of reproduction but also the distribution, or rather, the dispersion of the images that reach us each day; Avery Singer transfers 3-D graphics into complex figural and spatial scenes that recur as disturbingly abstract airbrush grisailles of motifs and techniques of art history. The painterly process is brushed against the grain in a deconstructive spirit; the resulting works are usually exhibited in combinations that form an installation display. Anne Neukamp's works, in contrast, clearly rely on the power of the individual paintings. The motifs are on the one hand tapped from the visual world of the computer, the "immaterial space" where data can be generated in a potentially endless series of surfaces and volumes of the most varied shapes. On the other hand, there are diverse references to the history of the genre of painting: from the aforementioned banderole in Torsion to heraldry in general, which already served the purpose of social communication in medieval coats of arms and today lives on in the logos of corporate design, to a play with visible sides and views, as in the large format work Condition (2013). The four rings in the corners of the painting are also impossible objects, the openings of which point to the cardinal directions. They imply an orientation toward the four visible sides, while the cropped green pictograms floating across the canvas suggest a view from above. The unusual perspective is less familiar in vertical-format canvases. It derives from the lost tradition of painted tabletops: wooden panels decorated with banderoles, friezes, medallions, and coats of arms were long a part of a social table culture, serving as game boards or narrating tales with a moral to them: in terms of artistic quality, they were by no means inferior to the panel painting that was in the process of emergence at the time.

It is revealing that Neukamp's subtle references to genre history also apply to images whose original value lay in the combination of artistic quality and communicative function. Questions of function, of the effect or impact of images, are the motivation of her painting.<sup>13</sup> Already mentioned works such as Juggler and Routine also play with the motif of reversible pictures that literally turn perception upside down. In addition, the doll-like hands, in one painting juggling rods (or slashes) and in the other discs (or periods), depict a gesture of performance and keeping in play; by short-circuiting the media character of the image as a mode of presentation

13 "The Efficient Image" was a lecture Anne Neukamp held on October 30, 2014, as part of the conference The Making of Painting at Collège de France in Paris.



with the motif of the hand as "tool of all tools,"<sup>14</sup> as a (still) privileged instrument of drawing and painting, they emphasize the character of painting as a basic cultural technique of rendering things visible. The painters of Surrealism treated this function of (painted) images in an impressive fashion, especially in terms of the images' relation to visible reality. While deviating from the laws of (pictorial) logic and casting things that were otherwise familiar and everyday into a strange light, they retained a precise technique and an objective painterly style. Neukamp's work is also characterized by a clear sobriety that allows the fragmented visual symbols and schematic objects to hover against the foundation of painting that has become placeless and virtual. The inconspicuous ordinariness of the paintings takes on a magical, puzzling quality that recalls the "mystery" of painting, which in the words of René Magritte "paint the kind of pictures that do not look familiar and correspond to ideas, whether naïve or scholarly."<sup>15</sup> Magritte's painting of "familiar objects" to which Neukamp repeatedly refers to in the titles of her works and exhibitions<sup>16</sup> emerged as a reaction to nineteenth-century Positivism; its continuing relevance is due to an unfailing insistence in painting on the potential of the imagination that is also shown by the paintings presented here. Anthropomorphisms are occasionally used, such as in *Dans l'angle*, which already takes up the perspective angle in the title and can be read as an abstract composition with a pizza box and electrical socket openings or as a cartoon-like face with ambiguated visual layers. The "pizza box" returns as a basic form in *Leverage*, where it not only performs in the manner of Eadweard Muybridge the act of leverage referred to in the title, but also demonstrates the formal analogy to foldable mirrors or, more obviously, laptops. This oscillation between possible meanings is (also) due to digital habits of vision. Digital visual techniques have not only blurred the line separating painting and photography, as W. J. T. Mitchell already noted in the 1990s,<sup>17</sup> they also prove themselves incomplete in terms of media and material, thus allowing a potentially infinite number of semantic interpretations: "the algorithmic code can always be altered."<sup>18</sup>

In his brief but pivotal work *Into the Universe of Technical Images from 1985*, philosopher Vilém Flusser described the increasingly visible products

14 See Bernd Evers, *Sprechende Hände*, exh. cat. (Berlin: SMB Kunstbibliothek, 2006), 10.

15 "Magritte Interviewed by Jean Stévo (II)," René Magritte: *Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Rooney and Eric Plattner, trans. Jo Levy (London: Alma Books, 2016), 188.

16 In addition, two exhibitions in 2017 were held with the title *The Familiar Object*, one at Marlborough Contemporary, New York, and *L'objet familier* at Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels.

17 See W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 7: "The digital image blurs the customary distinctions between painting and photography and between mechanical and handmade pictures."

18 Beat Wyss, "Die Wende zum Bild. Diskurs und Kritik," in *Bild: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Stephan Günzel and Dieter Mersch (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2014), 9.

of photography, television, video, and the already emerging digital world as "hallucinatory," because they are depictions that are conditioned by apparatuses and programmed.<sup>19</sup> Resulting from computations and calculation processes, these technical images that "surface" from an increasingly unanchored and ungrounded society<sup>20</sup> are fundamentally different from traditional images that rely on the act of observation. In Flusser's view, these "mosaics assembled from particles"<sup>21</sup> virtually demand a superficial, distanced examination; their meaning does not precede them, they do not bear their meaning in themselves, but produce it in the mode of being examined. By divorcing themselves from the act of observation, they enable not a reading of the world, not an understanding of the world, but are programmed and for their part "messages" that program the beholder(s).<sup>22</sup> Neukamp takes up similar notions of functional, programmed, and dimensionless technical images in her painting when she refers in her choice of motifs to logos, signets, and graphic abbreviations that obey the laws of communicative economy. On the other hand, she cites the visual codes and effects that shape the everyday varieties of visual communication using digital drawing programs, from the staggering of individual paint layers, an almost unnoticeable application of paint, a play with cast shadows, or the suggestion of three-dimensional corporality. Against the often "graphic-gray" and at the same time explicitly painterly backgrounds of her canvases, puzzling interactions result between forms and colors, untenable spatial logics and insoluble motivic semantics. The motifs that hover without anchor and hold refer to the virtuality of the digital, while the haptic quality of the paint applied keeps us aware of the reality of the canvas, transferring the technical images to the realm of a self-confident and "self-conscious" painting, where they live on in dialogue with history in an unforeseen fashion.

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<sup>19</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*.

<sup>21</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 49.