

## Sigrid Schade

### «Bildwissenschaft» – a new «discipline» and the absence of women <sup>1</sup>

The aims and perspectives of gender studies and its theoretical debates have contributed extensively to a shift in academic disciplines for at least the last twenty five years. In the German-speaking academic community, art history has been one of the most resistant disciplines towards challenges raised by gender studies and other cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> Some of the questions raised by gender studies concerning visual culture(s) – «artwork» just being one of these – are now also being raised in art history and other disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary discourses that deal with the cultural meaning and power of images in the age of globalisation and digital image circulation, such as visual studies, film studies, media studies, image or imaging sciences.

Within, and extending, art history a discourse has emerged over the last five to ten years that German academia usually refers to as «Bildwissenschaft». While no comparable term yet exists in English, the representatives of «picture or image theory» are sometimes also subsumed under «Bildwissenschaft» by German colleagues, whereas in the Anglo-American academic community they might come under the notion of visual culture studies or visual studies if they claim to transgress traditional art history and deal not only with art but also with popular and mass media.<sup>3</sup>

«Bildwissenschaft» raises interesting questions. These deal with the relation between word and image, image and gaze, and the interrelations of image(s), bodies, subjectivities and culture(s), and, last but not least, with the methodological relations

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a slightly altered version of a section in my article «What do 'Bildwissenschaften' Want? In the Vicious Circle of Iconic and Pictorial Turns» in: *Inscriptions/ Transgressions. Kunstgeschichte und Gender Studies*, eds. Kornelia Imesch, Jennifer John, Daniela Mondini, Sigrid Schade, Nicole Schweizer, Reihe *Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart*, Emsdetten/ Berlin, 2008, pp. 31-51. (ICS in cooperation with the SIK Zürich and the VKKS).

<sup>2</sup> The introduction to the above volume considers the differences in the institutionalisation of gender studies in art history at Austrian, German, and Swiss universities.

<sup>3</sup> Visual studies or studies in visual culture are terms used mainly in Anglo-American academia. W.T.J. Mitchell, who is often quoted as a representative of visual studies, distances himself from them, for example in «Showing Seeing. A Critique of Visual Culture»: in *What Do Pictures Want? The Loves and Lives of Images*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 336-365.

A very interesting summary of methodological approaches can be found in Silke Wenk with Rebecca Krebs, *Analysing the migration of people and images: Perspectives and methods in the field of visual culture*, University of Oldenburg, Germany, 2007, especially the introduction and the chapter «Positionings» pp. 3-13, see URL: [www.york.ac.uk/res/researchintegration/Integrative\\_Research\\_Methods.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/researchintegration/Integrative_Research_Methods.htm).

between literature, or language studies (to which the linguistic turn is ascribed), and the legacies of art history and aesthetics. These themes are especially interesting for gender studies, since precisely these issues have been, and remain, at the centre of attention in gender studies, as they are crucial to constructing and repeating a gendered world, but also have the potential to change it.<sup>4</sup>

The question is whether discussing what «Bildwissenschaft» and its theoretical and methodological proposals serves to acknowledge and integrate the research undertaken by gender studies – or whether it merely constitutes a new means of exclusion. I argue that it effectively (re)produces exclusions anew.

The so-called iconic or pictorial turns associated with the new paradigm of «Bildwissenschaft» are debated controversially by many scholars not necessarily familiar with, or sympathetic to, gender studies, and even by the protagonists themselves. Nevertheless, «Bildwissenschaft» is in the process of becoming a dominant discourse, even a new discipline, which is partly due to the internationalisation of the debate<sup>5</sup> and partly to the extraordinary success in obtaining enormous amounts of institutional funding – which has a monopolising effect and, in turn, would not have been possible without international support.

The term «Bildwissenschaft» – or the plural «Bildwissenschaften»<sup>6</sup> – has become a dominant and powerful element of a discourse through which a group of male academics in art history and other disciplines, and their (male and female) students in the German-speaking academic community are trying to gain or regain terrain in a field dealing with the *analyses, histories, and theories of the arts and/or visual culture*.<sup>7</sup> I mention the leading protagonists representatively. As regards art history,

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of gender studies in art history, see Sigrid Schade/Silke Wenk, «Inszenierungen des Sehens: Kunst, Geschichte und Geschlechterdifferenz», in: *Genus. Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in den Kulturwissenschaften*, eds. Hadumod Bussmann/Renate Hof, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1995, pp. 340–407; see further the extended and revised version: «Strategien des <Zu-Sehen-Gebens>: Geschlechterpositionen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte», in: *Genus. Geschlechterforschung und Gender Studies in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* eds. by Hadumod Bussmann/Renate Hof, Stuttgart: Kröner, 2005, pp. 144–184.

<sup>5</sup> There is a need to interrelate different intellectual traditions. In July 2007, the terms «Bildwissenschaft», Iconic or Pictorial Turn in the English Wikipedia are absent existing in its German counterpart. The English Wikipedia mentions some of the protagonists under the heading of visual culture studies, for example W.J.T. Mitchell – and some of the main protagonists mentioned there are women, such as Laura Mulvey.

<sup>6</sup> One part of the problem is that the plural of the first part of the term «Bild», «Bilder» (images, pictures) has not been used so far. See Sigrid Schade, «Scheinalternative Kunst- oder Bildwissenschaft. Ein kulturwissenschaftlicher Kommentar» in: *Visions of a Future. Art and Art History in Changing Contexts*, ed. by Hans-Jörg Heusser/Kornalia Imesch, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich, 2004, pp. 87–100, here p. 89 f.

<sup>7</sup> I quote the terms used in constituting the AHRC CentreCath (Cultural Analysis, Theory and History), founded by Griselda Pollock at the School of Fine Art, University of Leeds, in 2000.

these are Gottfried Boehm<sup>8</sup> and Hans Belting,<sup>9</sup> who consider «Bildwissenschaft» a critical potential for overcoming traditional art history. While the former argues from a specific philosophical background, the latter does so from the perspective of anthropology. Horst Bredekamp, by contrast, appears to be rather ambivalent towards the notion and sees «Bildwissenschaft» as the critical potential of art history itself.<sup>10</sup> Internationally, these protagonists attempt to forge links with other leading figures of image or picture science, such as W.T.J. Mitchell<sup>11</sup> and Georges Didi-Huberman<sup>12</sup>. Other advocates are connected with information and imaging sciences, as for example Klaus Sachs-Hombach<sup>13</sup>, or brain specialists such as W. Singer, and others. The debate on the pictures or images that the natural sciences are producing in the present age of digital imaging and neurological research, as well as the question of evidence, also play a major role in the arguments of art historians where they are the subject of historical research.<sup>14</sup> I will neglect the positions of those who argue for «Bildwissenschaft», in the sense of an imaging science, as a new biological essentialism – something gender studies have battled against from the start. Instead, I will concentrate on those who stay within the field of cultural studies and the humanities.

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<sup>8</sup> Professor at the University of Basel; his *Was ist ein Bild?* (München: Fink 1994) was the first to claim the notion of «Bildwissenschaft» (p. 9). Since 2006, and together with eight colleagues, he directs one of twenty Swiss National Centres of Competence in Research, entitled *Iconic Criticism. The Power and Meaning of Images* (*Bildkritik. Macht und Bedeutung der Bilder* in German, – see URL: [www.eikones.ch](http://www.eikones.ch)); the Centre is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation with CHF 7,1 million, a further CHF 5,3 Million come from the University of Basel, and CHF 5,2 million from participating institutions for the first four years. Its programme is based on rather traditional concepts of art history.

<sup>9</sup> Prof. Emeritus of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe; he was head of a PhD-programme *Bild-Körper-Medium* established in 2000, funded by the DFG, the German Research Foundation. From 2003 to 2007, he was director of the International Research Centre of Cultural Studies, IFK in Vienna. His publications include *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München: Fink, 2001, *Bilderfragen. Die Bildwissenschaften im Aufbruch*, München: Fink, 2007; the latter includes texts written among others by Gottfried Boehm and W.T.J. Mitchell (twenty contributions by men, four by women).

<sup>10</sup> Professor of Art History at the Humboldt University Berlin. For Bredekamp, «Bildwissenschaft» necessarily includes art history, archaeology, and their approaches. He even states that after ten years of experiments «Bildwissenschaft» has failed; see «Im Königsbett der Kunstgeschichte», an interview by Jens Jessen and Petra Kipphoff, *Die Zeit*, 15, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Gaylord Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. See William T.J. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, 1987; *ibid. Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1994 and: *What do Pictures Want? The Loves and Lives of Image* (see footnote 3); mostly quoted in German contexts: «Der Pictorial Turn », in: *Privileg Blick. Kritik der visuellen Kultur*, ed. by Christian Kravagna, Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1997, pp. 15–40, originally published in *Artforum*, March 1992. In Kravagna's collection, Mitchell is one of the rare male authors among a majority of female and feminist authors from the fields of film and media theory and art history, including Kaja Silverman, Linda Williams, Teresa de Lauretis, Beatriz Colomina, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and so forth.

<sup>12</sup> Didi-Huberman teaches at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales EHESS, Paris.

<sup>13</sup> Sachs-Hombach founded a website called Virtuelles Institut für Bildwissenschaft, URL: [www.bildwissenschaft.org/](http://www.bildwissenschaft.org/).

<sup>14</sup> See *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, eds. Horst Bredekamp and Gabriele Werner (since 2003).

«Bildwissenschaft» also tries to challenge media theory or media studies, which have conducted very effective analyses on new phenomena and mediality in the history of technological inventions, including photography, film, video, television and digital imaging, not only as a technical means but as instruments that are changing the ways of perception and notions of cultural meaning and subjectivity in the tradition of theorists like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer or Roland Barthes – phenomena about which art history has had said precious little.<sup>15</sup> Gender studies and media studies have a lot in common and, based on the heritage of cultural studies, they have addressed the relations between high and low culture, art and mass media, among others, as legitimate research fields.

Even a cursory, superficial, and statistical glance provides sufficient evidence for the absence of women from all disciplines in general, and from art history in particular. This absence becomes apparent in the names appearing in symposia, lectures, meetings, publications, curricula, and research programmes that have been organised and established in this field.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the relevant statistics reveal quite plainly that women invited to such fora, and who actually participated, are notorious exceptions. Compared to the present average percentage of approximately 13.5 percent of female professors at German universities, which is by no means high,<sup>17</sup> the number of women in the world of «Bildwissenschaft» ranges from zero to five percent. It is surprising that nobody seems to be astonished that in an interdisciplinary field, where women are otherwise represented above average in contrast to disciplinary contexts, female researchers should have nothing to say.<sup>18</sup> While it is no real intellectual challenge to simply compile and compute facts and

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<sup>15</sup> Sigrid Schade, «Zur verdrängten Medialität der modernen und zeitgenössischen Kunst», in Sigrid Schade, Georg Christoph Tholen (ed.), *Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien*, Munich: Fink, 1999, pp. 269-291.

<sup>16</sup> Besides the already mentioned publications, see also the lecture series *Iconic Turn – Das neue Bild der Welt*, funded by the Burda-Stiftung (a major German publishing house) and held for four semesters at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich (from 2002–2005), URL: [www.iconicturn.de](http://www.iconicturn.de). Of a total number of thirty-six lectures, only two were given by women (Annemarie Schimmel, Professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Bonn, and Barbara Maria Stafford, Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago).

<sup>17</sup> This figure dates from 2004. The percentage of women holding C3/W3-professorships – the highest possible hierarchical level in Germany – still only amounts to 9, 2 %. See the report and the evaluation «Empfehlungen zur Chancengleichheit von Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern» of the Deutscher Wissenschaftsrat, URL: [www.wissenschaftsrat.de/texte/8036-07.pdf](http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/texte/8036-07.pdf), July 2007, pp. 9-19, here p. 12. This report summarises comparative data from Germany, Europe, and the USA, all concerning the effects of the gender bias in academia; it offers rather radical advice to stop so-called «homosocial cooptation» pp. 23-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Was ist ein Bild?* includes nineteen contributions by seventeen men – none by women, see Boehm 1994 (see footnote 8). Almost as exclusive are the symposia and lecture series organised since last year by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research *Iconic Criticism*. Its supervisory board comprises eight men and one woman..

figures, there would be no reason to do so if it were not for the fact that the scandalous evidence on hand does not seem to disturb anyone.<sup>19</sup>

Swiss and German journals and newspapers recurrently emphasise that participation of women, or even gender equality, has become a reality in politics and other areas of society.<sup>20</sup> The funding criteria of the Swiss National Science Foundation include «training and the promotion of women researchers»<sup>21</sup> (Homepage 2007). I consider this problematic in itself, since it suggests that female researchers still only qualify as (PhD-)students who need training and promotion. Actually, the criteria should include women researchers who are already successful on an international level or even hold chairs at a Swiss university. Do research applications really fit the above criteria? And who, moreover, checks the facts?

In view of this evidence, it comes as no surprise that not only are women considered to have nothing to say in «Bildwissenschaft», but also that gender studies approaches as such – irrespective of the gender of the researchers – stand no chance.<sup>22</sup>

From the above, I would conclude that the notion of «Bildwissenschaft» serves a dominant faction of the academic community to try to establish a new transdisciplinary «discipline» – offering possibilities to include theoretical and methodological approaches that other disciplines have developed and which art history has – so it seems – failed to include. This new «discipline» excludes more or less systematically women and the approaches developed by gender and queer studies.<sup>23</sup> This is true even for the debate on, and the critique of the concepts, of «Bildwissenschaft» published to date, for example by representatives of gender

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<sup>19</sup> Some women – as we all know – still enjoy being the exception, guaranteeing them exclusiveness.

<sup>20</sup> See the title story «Die Alpha-Mädchen. Wie eine neue Generation von Frauen die Männer überholt», in: *Der Spiegel*, No. 24, 11 June 2007, pp. 56–7, and Philipp Gut and Daniela Niederberger, «Der Angriff der Frauen. Wie sie die Schweizer Politik umgekrempelt haben: Eine Bilanz », in: *Die Weltwoche* No. 30, 26 July 2007, pp. 26 f.

<sup>21</sup> See URL: [www.snf.ch/E/targetedresearch/centres/Seiten/default.aspx](http://www.snf.ch/E/targetedresearch/centres/Seiten/default.aspx). Since 2008 the SNF Homepage refers to equal opportunities for both sexes. While the above-mentioned PhD programmes accept female doctoral candidates, there is no tangible evidence that gender studies approaches or themes are.

<sup>22</sup> This is also true for queer studies, and holds true for the research themes students were allowed to work on or were accepted. Compare, for example, the list of dissertations published within the DFG-funded PhD programme *Bild-Körper-Medium* (see footnote 9), and the list of modules and projects in the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research *Iconic Criticism* (see footnote 8).

<sup>23</sup> As a very interesting example, I quote here the correspondence between Gottfried Boehm «Iconic Turn» and W.J.T. Mitchell «Pictorial Turn», published in Belting's *Bilderfragen* (see footnote 9). Both scholars focus almost exclusively on their intellectual biographies (pp.27–46). In both genealogies, not one single female art historian, philosopher, or theorist is quoted – thus suggesting an absolutely closed male universe. Comparing Mitchell's quotations with some of his other texts (for example «Pictorial Turn», see footnote 11) shows that he has purged women from his intellectual biography, notably in a volume promoting «Bildwissenschaft» as a new paradigm.

studies in art history, to which the advocates of «Bildwissenschaft» have responded in recent publications, without, however, quoting the authors.

Feminist critique has voiced three main points in this respect. The first concerns the problematic anthropological discourse that Hans Belting introduced as constituting the new «Bildwissenschaft».<sup>24</sup> He promoted a non-reflexive, de-historising and de-socialising anthropology, repeating undifferentiated, essentialist, universal, and ontological categories of the body, man (mankind, human being), and the image, especially its ontological, mostly magical, function within the history of human civilization, thus once again mystifying art and the connoisseur and, where anthropology is concerned, falling back behind the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> For gender studies and its tradition of over twenty five years of analysing bodies and the gaze as historical, social, gendered, and cultural concepts in which processes of perception, subjectivation, and identification continually reorganise themselves, this obviously represents an intellectual offence. Linked to this discussion is the critique that states that it is mistaken to talk about the «Bild» in the singular form. Elsewhere, I have discussed the spurious alternatives of art history and «Bildwissenschaft», suggesting that most protagonists admit that it is impossible to analyse the singular «Bild» and its functions, and that it would be more appropriate to talk about «Bilder» and their functions.<sup>26</sup>

The second point refers to the contradictions brought about by the attempt to retain control over the subjects of a discipline, which, however, are no longer controllable in the way they used to be, as described by Foucault.<sup>27</sup> Concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity in the humanities or cultural studies (and German «Kulturwissenschaften») have produced a discursive space in which non-unifying arguments and processes have to be handled in new ways, requiring comparative, translating, and transferring qualifications: quarreling becomes the norm, unifying agreement the exception.<sup>28</sup> The reactions of art historians to such a development have been either to claim that art history itself has interdisciplinary origins (which is

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<sup>24</sup> Belting 2001 (see footnote 9).

<sup>25</sup> See Schade 2004 (see footnote 6) and furthermore Hanne Loreck, «Bild-Andropologie. Kritik einer Theorie des Visuellen» in: *Medien der Kunst. Geschlecht, Metapher, Code*, eds. Susanne von Falkenhausen et al. , Marburg: Jonas, 2004, pp.12–26.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Boehm and some of his fellow contributors in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed Boehm 1994 (see footnote 8); see my article, Schade 2004 (see footnote 6).

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969 and *L'ordre du discours. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970*, Paris : Gallimard, 1971.

<sup>28</sup> Introduction in: Hartmut Böhme/Klaus R. Scherpe (Ed.), *Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften. Positionen, Theorien, Modelle*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlts Enzyklopädie 575, 1996, pp. 7–24.

true, but applies to all disciplines in the humanities),<sup>29</sup> to return to the safe traditions of the discipline itself,<sup>30</sup> or to claim to have the best theories or methodologies for researching how pictures or images make sense in competition with other disciplines. The energy spent on these reactions proves once more that the academic field is a battlefield in which curiosity and the quest for knowledge are closely linked to bids for power and the battle for resources.<sup>31</sup>

The third point of critique is a very troubling discussion on the iconic and pictorial turns as counter-concepts to a linguistic turn suspected of universal success as the dominant paradigm of theories and methodologies in the humanities and cultural or visual culture studies. This discussion is paradigmatic for a misunderstanding of semiology, and leads to a (re)construction of a substantial opposition of word and image.<sup>32</sup>

In conclusion, I cite further evidence for my argument that even in the debate over the various concepts of «Bildwissenschaft», in which those advocating gender studies have pointed out critical positions as quoted above, references have been made without acknowledgement. For example, Hans Belting's new compilation «Bilderfragen» refers quite obviously to such critique. His strategy is to declare the arguments to be his own. In his introduction,<sup>33</sup> he rejects the notion of «das Bild» in the singular (as well as of the text), and instead uses the term «Bildpraktiken» (image practices). This leads him to the questions and answers of «Bildwissenschaften» as a «Kulturwissenschaft» aimed at an interdisciplinary analysis of images/pictures, to which the former disciplines in the humanities and sciences are able to contribute<sup>34</sup> (media studies are once more not clearly defined and excluded). He admits that speaking of the body is only possible in relation to society (which implies history etc.) – as if this had been his position from the beginning. And yet he returns to ontological concepts of the gaze, perception, image, and the body, once again negating the

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<sup>29</sup> Horst Bredekamp, «Einbildungen», in: *kritische berichte*, 28 (2000), No. 1, pp. 31–37.

<sup>30</sup> «Deskilling» was a term used against cultural and gender studies by Rosalind Krauss in her «Welcome to the cultural revolution », in: *October* 77, 1996, pp.83–96, and «Der Tod der Fachkenntnisse und Kunstfertigkeiten», in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 20,1995, pp.61–67. See Sabeth Buchmann «The Prison-House of Kunstgeschichte», in: *Texte zur Kunst*, 28, Nov. (1997), pp. 58–62.

<sup>31</sup> For a summary of these discussions, see my article, Schade 2004 (see footnote 6), pp. 90–92.

<sup>32</sup> See Sigrid Schade, «Vom Wunsch der Kunstgeschichte, Leitwissenschaft zu sein. Pirouetten im sogenannten «pictorial turn»», in: *horizonte. Beiträge zu Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft, 50 Jahre Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft*, eds. by Juerg Albrecht/Kornelia Imesch, Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2001, pp. 369–378 (with an English summary).

<sup>33</sup> Hans Belting, «Die Herausforderung der Bilder. Ein Plädoyer und eine Einführung», in: Belting 2007 (see footnote 9), pp.11 f.

<sup>34</sup> He only cites Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns, Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a. M.: Rowohlt's Enzyklopädie, 2006, pp. 329–375.

entire tradition of female theorists who have written extensively on these subjects, such as Mieke Bal, Michael Ann Holly, Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Jacqueline Rose, Kaja Silverman, and Lisa Tickner, to mention some of the female colleagues in the Anglo-American community; the list could easily be complemented by German female and male colleagues.<sup>35</sup>

In *Bilderfragen*, Hans Belting deals with theoretical and methodological questions that gender studies have been discussing for at least the last twenty-five years, while pretending that there were no predecessors in this field.<sup>36</sup> While admitting that the singular «Bild» is problematic and the invention of a new discipline from a cultural studies point of view unnecessary, he nevertheless subtitles his book: *Die Bildwissenschaften im Aufbruch*.

The evidence gathered here suggests that constructing «Bildwissenschaft» as a new discipline consciously or unconsciously serves as a means to exclude (once again) both female scholars and gender studies from the production of knowledge and undertaking research within the visual culture studies they originally helped initiate.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>For example, Linda Hentschel's doctoral study, *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachters. Raumwahrnehmung und Geschlechterordnung in visuellen Apparaten der Moderne*, Marburg: Jonas 2001.

<sup>36</sup>In his view, predecessors include Greenberg, Danto and Mitchell; authors who were invited to the symposium and/or whom he includes in his discussions include Bredekamp, Boehm, Didi-Huberman, Tisseron, Nancy, Virilio, Sartre, and Vernant.

<sup>37</sup>I would like to mention the series "Studien zur visuellen Kultur" Silke Wenk and I have been editing for nearly ten years (Jonas publishes, since 2000; transcript, since 2006) (eight volumes by the end of 2007).