

Image Protocol – A Tool for the Philosophy of Art

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An investigation into illustrations of philosophical texts conducted by artist Barbara Ellmerer and graphic designer Vera Kaspar, two artists who documented their enquiries with ‘image protocols’. These protocols, in turn, led to a re-evaluation of the materials and means used in the process of artistic perception and production. This process remains structurally resistant to verbalisation but relies on individual calibrations between the perception of a given image and the means and materialities at the artist’s disposal (colours, brushes, paper, but also photography, scanning, printing).

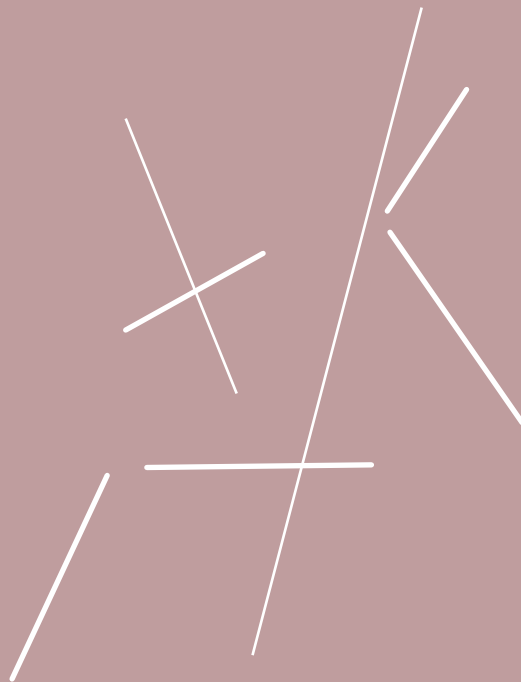
#iconography of philosophy

#diagrammatic reasoning

#materialities in art

#charles sanders peirce

#susanne k. langer



“In the first place philosophy of art should, I believe, begin in the studio.”

Susanne K. Langer (1953, ix)

With this premise Susanne K. Langer opens *A Theory of Art* (Langer 1953, IX), thereby marking a conflict between the individual process of art production and the discourse on art. In Langer’s philosophy critics facilitate communication between artworks as singular expressions and concepts which allow general reasoning. The *Image Protocol* is a tool in this framework. It documents the process that leads to a final artwork (target image) in the following way - given a historical image, artists will document how a) they perceive the historic image; b) which aspects capture their attention; c) how this attention shifts; d) how they arrive at their target image.

Using Dieter Mersch’s reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2015, 134f) the image protocol is conscious of the difference between *saying* and *showing* (pointing), which can be clarified as a difference between the discursive and the individual production of knowledge. The protocol avoids verbal interpretation. Verbal notes in the protocol merely serve as contact points with the discourses concerning historical images and the relevant text reference. A ‘formular’ contains basic information concerning the historical images according to scientific standards. Regarding the *Iconography of the Consolatio*, it is a text of late antique philosopher Boethius which was frequently copied and illustrated between the tenth and sixteenth centuries as documented by Pierre Courcelle’s (1964, 1967) seminal monographs¹. The illustrations show a female figure which represents ‘Lady Philosophy’ and a male figure representing the author Boethius.

A research grant by the Swiss National Science Foundation for the project *Iconography of the Consolatio* allowed for the development of the protocol, which was used as a tool and employed

in two settings. Firstly, graphic designer Vera Kaspar employed the *Image Protocol* as a device for documenting a process of understanding the historic image by concentrating on the composition, especially the ways in which artefacts in the historic image guide the viewing process. This led Kaspar to produce a series of abstract images. Secondly, artist Barbara Ellmerer concentrated on the material features and the appearance of colours in the historic images. This led to a discontinuous process of synthesising today’s means of image making with the appearance of the historic image.

Eighteen *Image Protocols* are the result of the grant. They are documented in digital form (www.iconographyofphilosophy.ch/bildprotokolle/).

For the philosophy of art, the *Image Protocol* gives evidence of a clash between a process that is driven by abstraction from the materialities of given images – using Frederik Stjernfelt’s (2007) reading of Peirce, this is a process which could be referred to as ‘diagrammatic reasoning’ – and other processes that are orientated more towards the materialities which make an image appear (in Peirce’s terminology: an orientation on token). These processes remain structurally resistant to verbalisation but rely on individual negotiations between the perception of a given image and the means and materialities at the artist’s disposition (colours, brushes, paper, but also photography, scanning, printing). The observations from the *image protocols* therefore lead to the thesis that one aspect of artistic work is communication between distinct materialities. Discussing this question will contribute to a re-evaluation of the notion of feeling, which Langer’s philosophy of art emphasises. This understanding draws attention to the way the means of perception (like cameras and scanners) structure perception and production in the arts.

Over the sixteen months of the research project the image protocol changed in nature. At the beginning

it was a tool that structured the research. Later, during conferences and workshops with experts in the relevant discourses it became an interface, which prepared and enabled understanding between artistic practice and scholarly argumentation. Now, reviewing the image protocols for this submission, they reverse my understanding of

historical distances. I regard them as recipes for traveling into the future of historic artefacts. In this future, the illustrations of the *Consolatio* are not only documents of the past but could also be understood as invitations to denaturalise established forms of image-making today.



Figure 1: Anonymous, 11th/12th century. Madrid, B.N. 10109, fol. 2 r, Courcelle 1967, pl. 28. *Source: Nils Röller.*



Figure 2: Vera Kaspar, 2018. Image Finding, VK IP1: Underlining shows corresponding angles. *Source: Nils Röller.*

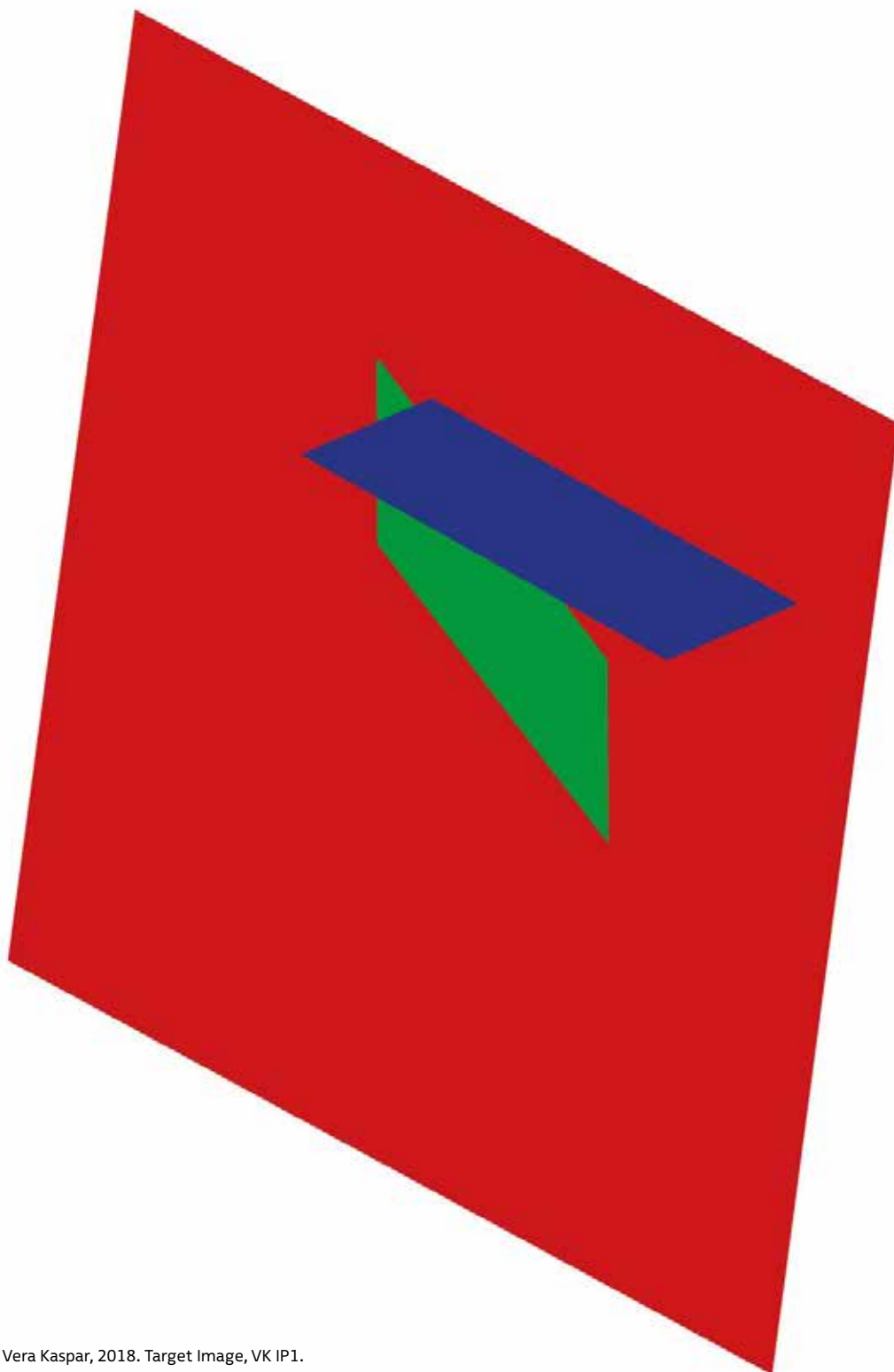


Figure 3: Vera Kaspar, 2018. Target Image, VK IP1.

Source: Nils Rölller.



Figures 4–8: Barbara Ellmerer, 2018. Image Finding, BE IP1. Source: Nils Röllner.



Figure 9: Barbara Ellmerer, 2018. Target Image, BE IP1.

Source: Nils Rölller.

Notes

1. Publications on philosophy and visual arts like Rölller 2021, Mantoan/Perissinotto 2019, Berger 2018, Merjian 2014 document a revisitation of the field "Iconography of philosophy" to which Courcelle in the 1960s, Brandt (2000), and Braun (2010 (c. 1994–1996) have contributed seminal works.

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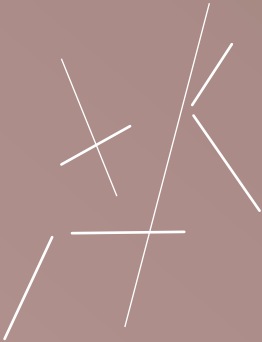
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Bio

Dr. Nils Rölller is a professor at the Zurich University of the Arts. His research focuses on the relation between text, image and philosophy (Iconography of Philosophy). Recent publications are: "Hermes", in *Beat Streuli – Fabric of Reality* (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2019), "Oswald's Hubble", in *Critical Interface Studies 002* (2019), also in Geissler, Beate/ Sann, Oliver (Hg.), *Oswald Wiener – The Bio-Adapter* (Berlin: Kadmos); "Organon", in Berardi, Donatella (Hg.), *Art, Self & System* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019).

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