Christopher S. Wood: Your dissertation, published in 1975, focused on historical actors—Early Christian and Byzantine theologians, the Hussite rebels of late medieval Bohemia—who mistrusted and even destroyed cult images. And yet you began that book with an analysis of a journalistic photograph of a Cambodian soldier in a foxhole, cleaning his weapon, with an image of the Buddha at his side (Fig. 1). The photograph is “fascinated,” in your reading, by an earlier kind of image, a pretechnical image, that had real power—a power that we might be in a position to recover today, perhaps. Your recent book *Theorie des Bildakts* (Theory of the Picture Act) makes the case that images do not merely reproduce a prior reality but rather actively create our reality. The power of images is ours to harness, you argue. Today you seem to have little patience for iconophobes who worry that we might be deceived by pictures. I hope we will be able to discuss these paradoxes. Let me begin by asking you how iconoclasm became a topic of art historical research for you and your generation.

Horst Bredekamp: The importance of iconoclasm as a historical topic became clear to us toward the end of the 1960s when the “young rebels” in art history from the Ulmer Verein and the so-called KSK, the Kunsthistorische Studentenkonferenz and others, were attacked as iconoclasts, and worse. I will never forget the scene at the art historical congress—in fact, there were two famous art historical congresses, one in Cologne in 1970 and then in Constance in 1972. We wanted to open art history, to reshape it as a social history of struggles. We were first called “terrorists” and then “iconoclasts.” At the conference a distinguished figure from the museum world opened a newspaper showing a headline about the German ambassador, Karl von Spreti, who had been killed by left-wing terrorists in Guatemala, and he shouted loudly, “These are you!” And the second accusation was that we were no different from the Chinese Cultural Revolutionists, in that we aimed to destroy the best tradition of Western thinking about art history as well as the arts themselves.

Wood: I am going to ask you more about the intellectual sources of your early writings, and about these intergenerational conflicts. But let’s pause for a moment on the personal level. How did you, as a young man, come to art history as a discipline?

Bredekamp: My father was a navy captain, my mother was a librarian. Both lived in West and East Prussia, now Poland. My mother was able to get over the river Oder on the very last day before it was taken by the Red Army. Not having been able to save anything, my parents became extremely poor, like millions of others. I was born in Kiel after the war. At that time my father commanded the same ships, which were now under British control, as a prisoner of war. So I grew up more or less with my mother. She had a very good eye for art. And both my mother and my father were sort of thirsty for a culture that had been forbidden under the Nazis, and for international contemporary films. They went very early after the war to the so-called film clubs, which were a kind of—nobody realized this at the time—antifascist aesthetic education. As members of the Filmclub in Kiel they took me to a matinée when I was seven, to Henri-Georges Clouzot’s film on Picasso, where the artist draws behind a sheet of glass. That impressed me deeply.
Wood: You wouldn’t have seen much art in postwar Kiel. Just books.

Bredekamp: Just books. Kiel’s houses were more than 80 percent bombed, so I grew up among ruins. That meant a lot of free spaces that adults could not get to, so that my generation paradoxically had a rather free, almost wild childhood.

Then in 1966 I joined the navy, and there my worldview changed. Afterward, I began to study medicine. I did all the initial exams, but I didn’t like the other students. They were very money-oriented, I thought. So I studied various subjects, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, and sociology, for two years. And then by chance I went to a lecture by Wolfgang Müller in Kiel on the history of St. Peter’s, and I thought: that’s it. After this decision, my parents gave me the liberty to study what I wanted to. I will never forget that! Still today I find these years of disorientation a precious element in my education.

Wood: So this is 1968?

Bredekamp: This is 1967 to 1969.

Wood: Was there a political turn when you suddenly understood what kind of art history you wanted to do?

Bredekamp: I joined the navy in 1966 in the era of Konrad Adenauer, a very traditional and even reactionary postwar culture. And when I came back, after one and a half years, the world had turned upside down. I will never forget: I came from the railway station and a boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old, was stopping a streetcar, walking very slowly in front of it, thus limiting its speed. That was the moment of strikes because the prices of the buses and streetcars had been raised. The whole town was in an unimaginable uproar because of this. Kiel has always thought of itself as the revolutionary town because the German revolution after World War I started with the sailors in Kiel, so there was a certain attitude. And I studied art history right in the midst of all this.

Wood: Who were the teachers, among the older generation, who encouraged and sponsored the new developments in German art history?

Bredekamp: Wolfgang Müller, a specialist in Dutch art, was very open-minded. But then I went to Munich, and we had terrible quarrels, very antagonistic, even battles . . .

Wood: Hans Sedlmaier was no longer there, right? He had gone to Salzburg.

Bredekamp: I saw him once giving a lecture in Munich; a great event. He was not sympathetic to my mind and I disliked the pompous atmosphere that was created by his appearance. Intellectually the most forceful professor was Friedrich Piel, with whom I think you studied, too.

Wood: That’s correct.

Bredekamp: Piel pushed you to think. There was no way out. With Wolfgang Braunfels, who was the head of the art history department, we had quarrels. But he was liberal. In the end he accepted that the system of study had to be restructured.

Wood: Who were your friends, your colleagues, in this period?

Bredekamp: The most important was Franz-Joachim Verspohl. He later became a close friend of Frank Stella, and this is why in the town of Jena, where Verspohl became a professor after 1989, there are more sculptures by Stella than in any other town. Stella even asked him to edit his collected writings. In Munich Verspohl and I, together with others like Margaretha Huber, headed the so-called Basis group, which was so radical that in the end, like many others, it fell to pieces. Then I decided to go to Berlin, perhaps the most exciting city at that time. I went to the Free University, where I met Tilmann Buddensieg for the first time. Then I went to the Technical University because I wanted to strengthen my
knowledge of art history as well as of engineering and science. Detlef Heikamp taught arts and crafts, among other things, and we made an amazing excursion to “swinging” London. But I felt that after the profound conflicts at the art historical congresses in Cologne and Constance, it would be difficult to find a person with whom I could write a dissertation. Then Martin Warnke became a professor in Marburg and told Verspohl and me that he would take us on as students there if we wanted to come. So Verspohl, who had been thrown out of the department in Cologne by Heinz Ladendorf, went to Marburg, and I followed one year later. That was, I think, in 1972. The next year, together with Hans-Joachim Kunst we founded Kritische Berichte, which was a source of rebellion, fantasy, and even craziness. That is the whole story.

Wood: For me as a student in the early 1980s you and Warnke together already represented something like an established German counterpart to the Anglo-American social history of art. But only ten years earlier you had been stigmatized as dangerous iconoclasts.

Bredekamp: Yes, what brought us all together was this accusation. After the congress in Cologne, in 1970, where Martin Warnke led a famous section called “Kunstgeschichte zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung,” which attacked traditional art history as we saw it, there was a huge campaign against him to ensure that he would never get a professorship. He was an assistant at that time, in Münster. He had also started a career as a journalist, and in fact he had reported on the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1964 for the Stuttgarter Zeitung. He was ready to leave academic life on account of these attacks and get back to the world of newspapers. After all, an iconoclast cannot become a professor. But in Marburg there was the art historian Herman Usener who— and nobody knew this— had been a member of an antifascist group under the Nazis, and the Marxist economist Wolfgang Abendroth, who had deserted from the German occupying troops to the Greek resistance and fought against Nazi Germany. (By the way, it was Abendroth in Marburg who accepted Jürgen Habermas’s Habilitation.) The sociologist Heinz Maus, like Abendroth an antifascist, also played an important role, and he had a certain contact with art history: he knew Hanna Reinhard, who had immigrated to Brazil and then became professor of art history at Queens College in New York; she visited Marburg and later wrote a highly important review of Warnke’s Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung for the Art Bulletin. Usener, Abendroth, and Maus said we had one chance: Warnke must get through. And they brought him through. Because of this, Warnke was able to accept Verspohl and me as his first students (Fig. 2). When he edited the volume Bildersturm, I contributed an article on Girolamo Savonarola. He himself wrote a marvelous introduction, which is exemplary and paradigmatic for the whole situation. We compiled this book in order to reflect on the accusation that those who have a critical attitude toward art history and the arts are called “iconoclasts.” We wanted to know what the term meant. So this was the framework within which I wrote my dissertation.

Wood: And what was your next step?

Bredekamp: I was fortunate that Herbert Beck, who was only thirty at the time, a couple of years older than me, had become director of the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt, and he asked me to come and set up an exhibition about art in the Middle Rhine area of about 1400. So five days after the defense of my dissertation, I started at the Liebieghaus (Fig. 3).
Liebieghaus exhibition that you curated, you wanted to explore the paradox that an iconoclast could also in fact be someone who could reveal to us something about the artwork that we didn’t know before. I’ll quote from the end of your dissertation: “The work of art absorbed impulses from outside its medium and then relayed them outward again . . . . We have tried to show that an art history so conceived does not cancel the specificity of the work of art, but rather for the first time taps into it. The fascination of the work of art begins precisely where an idealist art history marks its limits.” And that’s the program for your whole career, right?

Bredekamp: The iconoclasts are the real iconophiles. They believe in the social, the religious, the psychological power of images. So through a negative dialectics you can detect the hidden powers of a work of art much more clearly than through an affirmative approach. That was the idea.

Wood: It makes perfect sense. But what are the intellectual roots of this? You have explained how it came about in the context of the student movement and so forth. But within the discipline, or even beyond the discipline, who were you reading? Aby Warburg is not in the picture yet, at this point.

Bredekamp: Warburg came soon afterward. But the beginning was an attempt to construct liberal Marxism. Of course, Marxism was a means to break up the frozen postwar culture. On the other hand, there was the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which was not seen as a Marxist ideal: quite the contrary, as something that had to be avoided. So we tried to establish an art historical Marxism without falling into the trap of becoming bourgeois Stalinists. Stalinist Marxist theory was developed in order to save the bourgeois heritage, for the workers. This we thought to be worse than the culture that we were against. So for us a paradigmatic discussion involved Frederick Antal’s social history of Renaissance painting. That was an illumination. We saw the hidden determinism in this kind of Marxism, and saw it critically. Instead, we looked to Millard Meiss, Painting in Florence and Sienna after the Black Death, as a way of not giving up the social history of art in Marxist terms and yet avoiding any mechanistic affiliation between style and social groups and classes.

Wood: I want to make sure I ask you about the contemporary art of that time, the late 1960s and 1970s. How was your group engaged with contemporary art and art criticism?

Bredekamp: We were curious about all the developments, swallowing them up without hesitation. Already when I was a child, you can hardly imagine the debates that went on in Kiel when the first abstract sculpture—by Bernhard Heiliger, quite a good artist—was exhibited in the center of the town.

Wood: So in the 1950s?

Bredekamp: That was at the end of the 1950s. And it shocked us in a positive way.

Wood: But ten years later, a sculptor like Heiliger is already an old master. By that time there is Pop, Minimalism . . .

Bredekamp: Yes, and we were going to Cologne to the Museum Ludwig and to Kassel’s documenta, pilgrimages, as it were. Especially important was Fluxus, which interested me greatly, and also Vienna Actionism. One of the most compelling moments in my life was when I took part, by chance, in one of the most destructive actions of Joseph Beuys, at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in February 1969. It started at eleven o’clock in the evening and ended at six in the morning. And during that time, eight hundred people engaged in
a futuristic free-for-all in which many were wounded, and the instruments, much of the furniture, and so forth, broken into pieces . . . (Fig. 4).

Wood: And you were there?

Bredekamp: I still have two piano keys from the destroyed piano. Richard Nixon had left Berlin that very day. Thousands of students had been cooped up in the Free University and were not allowed to move. And many hundreds of these students went to this concert to protest against bourgeois art. This was, in effect, the iconoclastic wing of the ’68ers, which I had no interest in. But that night, it happened.

Wood: Let me ask you about Anglo-American social art history. Was there any awareness then of a parallel project?

Bredekamp: We were extremely aware of what was going on in the United States, which was a point of orientation in a Janus-faced way. In spite of Vietnam, American culture was appreciated. My family was poor, we had almost nothing to wear, we were freezing in winter, even into the 1950s. We got care packages. And American culture had an incredible propaganda effect in the best sense. It was a de-Nazification of the minds through Eddy Cochrane and Elvis Presley. It is too banal to say so, but I was the generation in which it worked, definitely. My time at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton with Irving and Marilyn Lavin and my ten years as member of two boards of the Getty Center are among my most esteemed experiences, intellectually and personally.

Wood: T. J. Clark’s important first two books were published in 1973. He’s a little older than you, I think four years older. How aware were Germans of his project?

Bredekamp: I met him for the first time at Harvard at the Kingsley Porter memorial conference in 1983, and of course we had corresponded before. We all thought that the most important methodological circuit in art history in the twentieth century was the intertwining of German and American art history, because of the émigrés. Erwin Panofsky had gone to the United States already in the early 1930s, as did others, like Adolph Goldschmidt.

Wood: So you see a continuity between the immigration and the more recent social history of art?

Bredekamp: Yes, a continuity. And that is why we looked with open eyes at what was going on in the United States and the whole of English-speaking culture. That’s why Millard Meiss, Michael Baxandall, and others became important for us.

Wood: Is it possible that Marxism stayed a little longer in the bloodstream in the United States and in Britain than in Germany? Because in the United States and Britain we still worry about what happened to the project of social art history. What’s happened to Marxist art history in Germany?

Bredekamp: In a sense, it has become mainstream, completely internalized, but without naming Marx. Social art history has become a regular methodological tool.

Wood: But you’re aware of Karl Werckmeister’s critique. I heard it as a lecture, but it was also published. He claims that you and Warnke, in switching your loyalties to Warburg, betrayed the Marxist tradition.

Bredekamp: I can hardly forgive him this paper. What is hard to take in Werckmeister’s article is a false alternative between Warburg and critical art history. The concept of political iconography, developed by Warnke in Marburg and Hamburg together with Verspohl, Michael Diers, me, and others, could
not have been thought of without this conjunction. I would not say that my position toward Marx has not changed, that would be ridiculous. I once had some illusions. But I lost them when I went to the Humboldt University.

Wood: I want to ask you about that. In 1993 you went to the Humboldt from Hamburg. Could you talk a little bit about your career in the context of the reunification of Germany?

Bredekamp: Yes, I decided to go to the east, because that was the historical moment to do so. And I learned a lot. After one month, I became the dean of the newly established Philosophical Faculty. I went through the papers and files of the university archive, and from that moment on, I came to understand how dictatorships work. I didn’t know that before in such concreteness. I tried to work together with everybody I got to know; there were fantastic characters, with whom I am still close friends, but also false ones.

Wood: So this was a political education.

Bredekamp: Yes. The confrontation of the anarchist stance of the 1970s with the true anarchy of the post-GDR moment provoked me to write my book on Thomas Hobbes. Experiencing real post-state anarchy forced me to think about state theory. Because what I was doing in a microcosm, together with many others, was building up the state as a university, building up a completely new, very complex institution.

Wood: The university as microcosm of the state?

Bredekamp: Yes, and that’s why I started to reflect on somebody whom I had always dismissed for his authoritarian concept of the state. In that moment I also started my studies on Carl Schmitt, a most problematic person, but in a sense the Hobbes of the twentieth century, and on Walter Benjamin’s appreciation of Schmitt.

Wood: This is maybe the moment to switch topics, to the larger questions of philosophy of history, periodization, and so forth. It’s striking to me that most of the important conceptual categories in the Bildakt project, in fact, in all of your projects—the period terms denoting the power of images: vis, virtus, enargeia, imagines agentes, or the psychological powers that the Protestant iconophobes attributed to the image—come out of the Renaissance.

Bredekamp: Yes and no: the lines I try to follow start in the so-called Middle Ages . . .

Wood: In projects that are sometimes compared to yours, and I’m thinking of Hans Belting and David Freedberg, the image had its real power in the Middle Ages, or anywhere other than the European Renaissance. For them, the Renaissance image falls from grace into mere art, a modern institution. That’s not the case for you. For you, I think, as for Warburg, art comes into its own in the Renaissance. Is that true?

Bredekamp: I would oppose making too sharp a distinction between medieval and Renaissance art. For me, the Renais-

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Bredekamp: I would oppose making too sharp a distinction between medieval and Renaissance art. For me, the Renais-
sance is full of these forces that you just mentioned. But so is the Middle Ages, in a different but no less dynamic way. There is a shift of form, but not a shift of energy. The study of artists’ signatures has detected that no epoch was more eager to demonstrate individuality than the Romanesque, and when self-portraiture came up with Leon Battista Alberti, it signaled not the birth of the individual, but the beginning of reflection on its problematics.

Wood: So the “epochal threshold” of 1500, for you, is not a catastrophe.

Bredekamp: No, there is no fall at all. And that’s why I contested Michel Foucault’s Les mots et les choses, which I admire—who would not admire this book? But my book The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine is from the first to the last sentence against it, arguing that the desemanticization of things and objects is followed by a hidden resemantication.

Wood: To take the example of religion: art was always religious, and always already alienated from religion?

Bredekamp: Yes.

Wood: Is that why you never really write on religious art as such?

Bredekamp: It is religious and not religious, it is just not a major question for me. That may be the deepest distinction between my work and Belting’s great book. My next book will be on seventeenth-century Spanish sculpture, which in my view is the most modern and avant-garde of all post-antique epochs: it is great art at a time when, according to the religious-frame thesis, art did not yet exist.

Wood: Will this be your Meyer Schapiro moment?

Bredekamp: Yes, exactly. The Meyer Schapiro who is writing on Silos is the same one who writes on Picasso. For him there was no distinction, and it is the same for me.

Wood: So for you, as for Schapiro, there is no pathos of loss, no nostalgia. No lost homeland of art.

Bredekamp: I have continuously written against narratives of “the end.” The pronouncements of the end of history, the end of subjectivity, the end of the author, the end of art, the end of modernity, the end of the avant-garde: these are metaphors that turn the god of construction into the dark god of destruction. The one who makes these pronouncements receives all the rewards in the academic world, as the prophet of loss; he is the sublime critic. For me, this is critical kitsch. That’s why I’ve always tried to argue against the Hegelian “end of . . .” narrative. And, by the way, Hegel never used the phrase “end of art,” only the “end of art in its highest vocation [Bestimmung],” which is a totally different thing.

Wood: Do you agree that art in its “highest vocation” is a thing of the past?
Bredekamp: No, I think it is upgraded and downgraded but it always comes back. Today, when everybody says that commerce, “event culture,” and the race for money have ruined the essence of art, art is in fact more than ever accorded great dignity and value; think of Iran, Egypt, China.

Wood: Yes, and mostly inside the sphere of art. But you write generally about the power of the image, and that brings in the culture of spectacle, political propaganda, mass media, advertising, and so forth. That’s really not the highest vocation of art.

Bredekamp: That has always been the case: the Renaissance painters used to paint banners for tournaments and advertisement shields for shops. Critical inquiry and the development of the intrinsic powers of art are always in conflict with the use of art as an instrument of commerce and authority. Take Benvenuto Cellini’s statue of Perseus: it is a celebration of absolutism, and yet Cellini turns the whole argument on its head. That is what the greatest art does, and I do not see how this capacity could be undermined.

Wood: It’s interesting that you’ve often written about art that is close to courts and sovereigns, and about the artist as a kind of doppelgänger of the prince. This predates your experience at the Humboldt University.

Bredekamp: It is the moment where art reaches its most intense definition. Art can fall into the hell of kitsch and affirmative power. Or it can use power to take the argument and turn it around, or install a countermovement within the work of art, a Warburgian inversion. It is close intimacy with authority that creates the possibility of defining the work of art in the most sophisticated way.

Wood: Okay, I’m sympathetic to all that, but one could argue that one of the main projects of a Bildwissenschaft, or “study of the image,” today is a critique of the mass media and of the society of the spectacle, where it is not so easy any longer to locate authority. I would then ask you about the relation of your project to Guy Debord’s, because you are not really talking about a ubiquitous image that is hard to grasp, or an unmanageable flood of images. It seems to me that your image is still anthropomorphic, it’s human-sized, we can deal with it.

Bredekamp: I take the metaphor of the flood of images to be a hidden religious metaphor. When you talk about the flood of images you are placing yourself in a position of helplessness. The pictures become a kind of god. This is anti-intellectual and unenlightened. And in this sense Debord, well, I would say he didn’t get the point. He didn’t see that there is a hidden dialectics continuously at work.

Wood: You are obviously a disillusioned modern person. But perhaps you risk not taking seriously enough the tendency of the mind to gravitate toward the gods.

Bredekamp: My book Theorie des Bildakts has actually been attacked by some German reviewers as the forerunner of a new mysticism, because I believe there is more to an artifact than my constructing mind can project into it. In this I see a general turn in philosophy. After its great successes, analytic philosophy became very dry. Today analytic philosophy is turning back to metaphysics and to Continental philosophy. This is not by definition a gravitation toward gods, but a new path toward overcoming the dualistic structure of both the Platonic and the Cartesian word.

Wood: Who you are thinking of?

Bredekamp: The forerunner was Wolfram Hogrebe on Schelling and in his recent book Risikante Lebensnähe; today I think of such different approaches as that of Jane Bennett in Vibrant Matter, and the authors writing in the radically antidualistic fields of embodiment and extended mind, such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Alva Noe, Evan Thompson, and others.

Wood: So you are interested in embodied knowledge, the inescapability of the haptic and the sensual. How is this compatible with your original “enlightened” project?

Bredekamp: In one sense, the Enlightenment developed this idea powerfully, between the extremes of Condillac, La Mettrie, and Sade. But the debates about incorporation became arid, too logocentric, and that is why in my view the true age of enlightenment is the seventeenth century, when metaphysics and materiality were closely connected and not divided into different camps, which would then accuse each other of being unenlightened.

Wood: Well, this is Deleuze’s point. I wonder whether you see parallels there.

Bredekamp: Deleuze’s book on Leibniz is, on the one hand, a wonderful example of what you describe, but on the other hand, tragic, because he turns a central point that would favor his argumentation into the opposite. In order to bring Leibniz into accord with Freudian psychoanalysis and to save the bottom-up and top-down system, of which he even makes a drawing, he misses the fact that it is not an internal process of unconsciousness and consciousness, the whole Freudian mechanics, but something that comes from outside, “par dehors.”

Wood: But he is a monist and I think you are, too: there is only one substance.

Bredekamp: I am an anti-Platonic antidualist.

Wood: We do need to talk about modernity and modernism. You harbor no nostalgia for a mythical past when images had “real” power. Has modernism therefore for you been a success? I am talking now about modernism as a cultural project that responds to modernity.

Bredekamp: Modernism has of course won. Even the farewell parties for modernism are modernist, because its central aim,
the will to start again and again on a tabula rasa, needs this kind of neglect, logically and paradoxically. The problem is not that modernism is over but that its continuous victories tend to swallow up all spheres that go beyond point zero. The world becomes the object of a chain of constructive egos that are frozen in the presence of actuality, and fail. That is what the economic crisis is all about. Because of this I am with Alois Riegl, who argued that the fixed eye of modernist space—the ego constructing the world through central perspective—is a limited and limiting strategy of modernism. We have to create a more open, a more reflective and elastic modernism, where the artifact plays the role of an alter ego and brings forth in me an empathy worthy of the name.

Wood: That’s an interesting point, I wasn’t expecting that answer. But may I ask you again about modernism in relation to modernity? It seems there are two ways of thinking about it: on the one hand, modernism as a protest against the way we live now, and on the other hand, modernism simply as a period style and a reflection of modern reality.

Bredekamp: True modernism in Riegl’s sense is the second alternative. I see the danger of a homogeneous, technically constructed world that tries to cut off extremes of behavior and thinking. We are living in a world that is thin like a sheet of paper. Imagine the dimensions of liberty without the terror of mobile phones. When I went to Italy for the first time the public telephones didn’t work. There was almost no way of communicating except by letter. Think of a young American who goes to Italy now. The moment he puts his foot on Italian soil he will phone his parents and friends. And in the hotel he will report on what he is doing by email. The strangulation of unexpected movements is one of the worst effects of the globalization of communication. It kills the sense of insecurity and thereby also imagination and the will to orient oneself in strange and even hostile situations. The loss of dimensionality, if one may say so, is enormous.

Wood: That is what Warburg predicted.

Bredekamp: Yes, he predicted the destruction of Denkraum, space for thought.

Wood: That is the first note of pessimism that you have struck.

Bredekamp: I do see a basically negative situation, but I take it as a necessary development in a time of transition. I believe that new spaces will be established: symbolic spheres of anti-presentism.

Wood: But you are not asking for contemporary art to return to craft and artisanship. Art has to engage with the technical.

Bredekamp: I do not see a contradiction here. I was engaged in the adoption of new technical media in an art historical framework, and German art history did this on a general level; think of Heinrich Klotz’s Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, which has no parallel. That’s why I wrote an article in Critical Inquiry almost ten years ago pointing to a potentially disastrous split, in the English-speaking world, between visual culture or visual studies and art history.9

Wood: Bildwissenschaft avoided that split?

Bredekamp: I use the term in the sense of historische Bildwissenschaft (historical study of the image), and that is in the Semper-Riegl-Warburg tradition, which defines the alternative. And that’s why, for example, the first art historical works on video (Edith Decker), interactive art (Sylvie Dinkela), and virtual spaces (Oliver Grau) were dissertations written in German.

Wood: But you are unwilling to embrace a dematerialization of art.

Bredekamp: The great dictum at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was the end of the material world. At the Ars Electronica in Linz in 1989 I discussed this ferociously with Marvin Minsky from MIT, who argued that by 2010 we would all be beamed up into computers and we would have gotten rid of our helpless flesh. When I called him a digital Platonist of the worst kind we ironically almost got into a fistfight. It was said that art is over, materiality is over, and one of the greatest utopian texts of the last decades, the Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age, 1994, started with the sound of a drum: “The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter.” But it’s a terrible misunderstanding to claim that the digital is “virtual” and that the Internet is not deeply connected to the world of the senses. In addition, against all predictions, the Leipzig school came out of the blue, painting came back, portraiture came back, the sensibility for simple objects came back, and the sense for materiality: what the British Sensationalists were predominantly doing. Monika Wagner with her Materialikonologie project responded from the side of art history, not to mention Charlotte Klonk’s Spaces.

Wood: This is perhaps the moment to talk about the interplay between academic institutions and artistic institutions, and how the German and American scenes differ in this respect. So many German projects in the humanities are dependent on money from the state. Is there a danger that a Bildwissenschaft focusing on Das technische Bild (The Technical Image), as one of your research projects does, becomes something like a servant to technocracy?

Bredekamp: Our perspective on this is the opposite. We believe that only public money allows maximum freedom of thought, and that private money potentially strangles liberty. Until the 1980s, I thought it was important as a scholar not to accept money from foundations or other sources. But when I became a member of the board of the Getty grants, I saw the validity of this kind of support. Then coming to East Berlin, I changed my attitude toward institutions. I learned that my first, highly critical approach was wrong. If institutions organize themselves, they are able to develop and push ideas. Das technische Bild was firstly financed by the Getty, later by the
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, that is, the German government, and we had full liberty to develop what we thought to be relevant. The same is true of other major enterprises like *Requiem* and, recently, *Bildakt und Verkörperung* (Picture-Act and Embodiment).  

**Wood:** But isn’t there pressure, when it’s government and corporate money, to choose topics that seem relevant and timely? Certain kinds of topics tend to be favored. So technology, questions of the boundary between living creatures and machines, anything to do with biology, biopolitics, all of these topics have come into their own in art history, precisely when outside funding has become a major phenomenon.

**Bredekamp:** I thought it a duty of our discipline to engage in fields in which artifacts and pictures play a decisive role. The digital age has transformed the sciences into picture disciplines. It would be absurd if the very discipline that knows how to analyze a picture were not engaged here. So I thought of it as an enlightened step toward the scientists.

**Wood:** I have found that scientists aren’t really interested in illusions or fictions.

**Bredekamp:** This would be in contrast to their own practice; they produce them each day.

**Wood:** But those illusions are instrumental, in the sense that they are designed to solve problems, and then once the problem is solved, the illusion can be discarded. Whereas a work of art is an illusion that we keep. We are trying to convince scientists that they need us. We may need them in order to get the funding. But do they need us?

**Bredekamp:** They need us. Those scientists who reflect on their research and their work as breaking down the border between nature and picture, as in nanotechnology or cosmology, are thirsty for tools of analysis such as those that art history can offer. It is not art history that is in danger. Science has gained new spheres of complexity by using pictures, not as illustrations, but as tools of research (Fig. 5). Before the 1960s you would find fewer pictures in the sciences than formulas and texts. In the last fifty years scientific journals, such as *Nature*, for example, have become art journals. They use the same colors, the same dramatization, the same aesthetics, an overstressing of things (Fig. 6).

**Wood:** In effect, you want to help scientists stabilize their use of pictures so that they can be applied productively in science. Isn’t that the opposite of what a work of art does? A work of art destabilizes.

**Bredekamp:** One could argue that as pictures in the sciences construct a reality, they destabilize what they show. This is an extremely complex process that goes to the heart of Maneri- st art theory.

**Wood:** You want to teach them all the strange things that images can do so that they learn how to filter them out and not be deceived by them.

**Bredekamp:** This is what visual enlightenment is all about, of course. We want a Nobel Prize for that.

**Wood:** Do art historians know enough to interpret technical images? For example, a radiologist is a physician who reads X-rays. It is one of the most difficult medical specialties. How can we possibly contribute to this? It takes years of study to learn how to read an X-ray. The same must be true for images in other scientific fields.

**Bredekamp:** Yes, it takes time, but not years. Those people who are doing it definitely have to go into the material in depth. Stefan Ditzen has written a dissertation on the history of microscopy. He trained for months in the laboratory at the Free University.

**Wood:** Most of my students go into art history because they love art and their imaginations are liberated by art. They don’t go into it because they want to learn microscopy. Maybe you are talking about identifying a new population of students.

**Bredekamp:** My further goal is to break down the arrogance of science, just as we need to resist the escapism of students of art history. I’m not proud of many more things than the journal *Bildwelten des Wissens*, which we founded as a medium...
of Das technische Bild. Only half of the authors are art historians; another third of them are from the sciences, reporting on the latest developments and criticizing them.

Wood: You know that in the United States nothing like this happens because most art history is practiced behind the walls of universities and colleges and is not expected to engage with research in the sciences. Either it means that American art historians are living in Plato’s cave and are not paying attention to what is happening in society, or it means that we have the freedom to develop a concept of art.

Bredekamp: Why entertain this contradiction? In my view, I work within the same framework established by Warburg, who studied Sandro Botticelli, visual propaganda in the religious battles of the sixteenth century, the elliptical diagrams of Johannes Kepler, visual military tools of World War I, stamps of the twentieth century, and the visual totems of the Hopi Indians alike, to name just a few of his fields. But I also work within the framework of Panofsky, who developed film studies; it was his invention. Also his work on the front of the Rolls-Royce as a drive of associations; his piece on the mathematics of the Renaissance is impressive, and his work on Galileo is standard in the history of mentalities.

Wood: Panofsky aspired to be a polymath who could understand modern science. But even in his time the mathematics was too difficult.

Bredekamp: That is why the invasion of pictures in the sciences is so significant. The mere quantity of data can be understood only through the coup d’oeil of pictures. This brings art history and science together in a way that Panofsky did not imagine. Ironically, it was Nobel Prize–winner Wolfgang Pauli, one of the geniuses of quantum mechanics, who, in his correspondence with Panofsky, argued in favor of visual symbols as necessary tools of intuition.

Wood: Let’s talk about your recent book, Theorie des Bildakts. How does the efficacy of images as you describe it differ from a rhetorical theory of art, art as a contagion of affects emanating from the image, such as we find in the Baroque period?

Bredekamp: Yes, I would argue, following Valeska von Rosen, that the rhetorical concept of enargeia is acting in my theory of Bildakt.

Wood: So it’s not so different, really.

Bredekamp: No. The provocation lies in the fact that premodern concepts define the very essence of the image.

Wood: Is Bild, image, the most useful category for thinking about such effects and agencies? “Image” is a category well-matched to our bodies, but so much that happens is happening at a different scale and a different speed.

Bredekamp: This is true, but as a scholar I need the objectivity of the materialized, shaped form.

Wood: But soon there will be machines that can read images. The images will not need to be materialized anymore.

Bredekamp: No, it’s impossible for machines. Specialists said recently that even in a thousand years a computer will not be
able to recognize the chair painted by Vincent van Gogh as a chair. Computers would need bodies, as the discussion on Körperschema has shown. That is one of the consequences of embodiment philosophy, as John M. Krois has defined it.

**Wood:** The stable, materialized image, the Bild, could be seen as a futile attempt to render the internal image: the dream, the memory, the fluid, fugitive images that are inside our bodies. One might argue that now we have other ways of capturing those experiences. That’s really what Deleuze said in his cinema book: there is no art after cinema.

**Bredekamp:** Panofsky’s piece on movies and his correspondence, namely with Siegfried Kracauer, show that he had a similar approach. But Freud gave a different answer when he was asked if there could be a film on psychoanalysis. He said no, film is much too stable. A film is static because you are trapped in a chair, the image oppresses you, you have no liberty at all. The film is the opposite of what psychoanalysis can do. And for him the Moses of Michelangelo was the absolute film, because it continuously showed him new pictures, as the person reflecting on the sculpture is able to move.

**Wood:** Increasingly, contemporary art is hard to grasp, it’s relational, participational, discursive. Art frames itself in documentation, and so forth. It would seem that “art” has become a more stable category than “the image.”

**Bredekamp:** I see this as a concept of the 1990s, ultimately deriving from groups like Art and Language. But it is over now. The events of 9/11 play a role here, a new desire for concreteness, for politics, has overcome these very playful, marvelous, discursive concepts. In the last years what predominates is the wish to cut through the fluidity of what is around us.

**Wood:** We haven’t really talked about Aby Warburg, even though you have written so much about him. You praise Warburg for opening up the discipline to the image and prophesying a Bildwissenschaft. But since Warburg, so many art historians have been drawn back to art, starting with Riegl’s disciples in Vienna, and formalism in general, such as Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried, and many other important modernists working in the United States over the last thirty years, T. J. Clark, Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois. There is a constant pull away from visual culture, away from the image, away from spectacle, and instead toward a strong concept of art. How do you account for that?

**Bredekamp:** My whole emotional and intellectual existence depends on the dignity of the shapes of art. But I cannot see why I should not work on, for example, models of nanotechnology as well. The two fields do not work against each other; on the contrary, the perspective on each of them becomes sharper when one does not draw a line between them. I once had a discussion with Buchloh, who would not accept that students of mine were dealing with art combined with technical tools and even video art, if I understood him correctly.

**Wood:** Video art is art. But the “technical image,” what does he think about that?

**Bredekamp:** My impression was that he has a stricter definition of what art history has to deal with. My picture of art history is rather different, close to Anglo-American art historians like David Freedberg or Neil McGregor, to name only two. Art history as historische Bildwissenschaft takes art in the sense of the Greek techné and Latin ars, and I do not see why art history should limit its goals to high arts. Its object is Bild in the broadest sense. When I talked about the concept of Bildwissenschaft with Irving Lavin, he told me that Horst Woldemar Janson taught his students to describe and examine shapes of traffic signs, hydrants, and other forms of the Gestaltung of daily life—years before Robert Venturi wrote Learning from Las Vegas. Barbara Stafford came from this tradition.

**Wood:** Could you give an example of how you proceed?

**Bredekamp:** Look, Leibniz was not able to draw. But my Leibniz book starts with his drawing of a tiny little knot in his garter (Fig. 7). When I realized that this scribble represents the very core of his philosophy up to the sublime concept of petites perceptions, this excited me as much as the highest work of art. It knocked my socks off. And I can’t understand why it shouldn’t. Or think of Charles Darwin, who was always disappointed by the fact that he could not draw. But he makes a diagram that is not really a tree diagram but more like a coral (Fig. 8). And this ambiguity between tree and coral changes the whole model of evolutionary biology. I take every solution as seriously as Raphael’s. A drawing by Galileo, Leibniz, or Darwin can be as important for the history of models as a Raphael for the arts. Both depend on the autonomy of the visual, which is our field. Where is the problem?

**Wood:** Some modern and even older conceptions of art involve negativity or failure, whereas you are interested in showing how images act effectively in the world. There is a criterion of success in the end. I’m asking whether there are some aspects of art that a Bildwissenschaft will be blind or indifferent to.

**Bredekamp:** The goal of Bildwissenschaft is not to be blind to anything shaped and to take it seriously in its shaped peculiarity. Herein lies the profound difference between traditional philosophy and art history. Art history deals with the shape, with the exceptional and the individual, even in sequences, series, and reproductions. Because of this, what I call the “intrinsic” picture act, where form plays its irresistible, autonomous game with us, is the most important concept of my theory.

**Wood:** But doesn’t a theory whose crowning element is a picture act whose power is formal simply reproduce an image of art history resting on the bed of visual culture? It re-creates a hierarchy between the two projects.

**Bredekamp:** Since 1842, the time of Franz Kugler’s Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte, which is a history of world art from Stone-
henge to his days, art history was defined as *historische Bildwissenschaft*. I’m not inventing anything; I’m strengthening the best traditions of this discipline. No hierarchy in relation to fields, but the highest esteem for the intrinsic climax of the Bildakt, where form as form acts in an unexpected, but also in a critical, sometimes inversive, and even dangerous way, on each field of Gestaltung, as, for example, in the drawings and etchings of Galileo.

**Wood:** What do you really mean in this book by a “picture act”? The concept of an “agency of images” has a lot of currency today, but it has different meanings for different thinkers. For Bruno Latour, agency is something produced by a system. For Alfred Gell, it is something that happens within a transaction between people and things. Is the picture act just a metaphor, just a way of talking? Do you literally assign agency and responsibility to inanimate objects?

**Bredekamp:** Yes, I do. The active object is the ultimate means of anarchy, in that it forces me to realize that the world is more than my egomaniacal modern conception of it. Radical constructivism has no chance. Pictures are independent of us.

**Wood:** What about the reality behind the image? One of the aims of *Theorie des Bildakts* is to get away from talking about images as representations or illustrations. Yet the quote from Leonardo da Vinci that is the motto of your book involves a portrait of a woman inscribed: “Non scoprire se libertà ti è cara. Che il volto mio e carcere d’amore”: Don’t look, if you value your liberty, for my face is a prison of love. Isn’t he basically saying that the painting has a chance to succeed as a work of art if it succeeds in harnessing the beauty that’s in the world? Because, after all, it’s the face of the woman that is beautiful, and the artist simply channels that beauty. And that’s the real source of the image’s power.

**Bredekamp:** That’s a wonderful idea, that would greatly diminish the distinction between the body or natural object and the artist’s investment: each picture in this sense would be a living picture.
Wood: The woman who sat for Leonardo’s portrait was a coproducer of the image.

Bredekamp: But the problem is that Leonardo’s painting talks in the first-person singular, and not as a medium of the person portrayed. It has become autonomous, independent from the person and mighty enough to put the viewer in chains.

Wood: We’ll close with one final question: Is the theory of the Bildakt complete, or will it grow, or are you starting in a new direction?

Bredekamp: The Bildakt has been in my thinking from the beginning to the end, as you quoted rightly from my dissertation from 1974. You could have also quoted from the first two pages, the point about the Cambodian soldier with a gun in one hand and an icon in the other. That was for me symbolic of the fact that pictures have the same quality, in the sense of energy, as guns. This has to be considered whenever we are confronted with pictures or are producing pictures. And once you accept this, then you see how it is true for graffiti at a railway station as much as it is for a painting by Gerhard Richter. Art history has continually re-created that broader framework that Kugler, Gottfried Semper, Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Warburg, Meyer Schapiro, and many others endowed it with. One has to take that broader framework seriously, in the name of the surplus of the visual.

Wood: That is a nice phrase to end with, thank you.

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Notes

10. Das Technische Bild, http://www.kulturtechnik.hu-berlin.de/content/dtb, is a research project established by Bredekamp in 2000 at the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrums für Kulturtechnik at the Humboldt University in Berlin.