Troubling signs:
On the aniconic, the asignifying,
and art in planetary times

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Abstract. I consider how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of signs, particularly their conception of the 'asignifying', can prompt new understandings of 'aniconic' art. Usually analysed within the context of religious imagery, 'aniconism' is a term traditionally used to refer to artefacts, objects and images that withdraw from the conventions of resemblance, including iconic similarity to a thing represented. Today, aniconism demands to be thought of as a transhistorical and transcultural category that can offer a compelling tool for the decolonized thought of art in planetary times. Reading aniconism alongside Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of the asignifying invites expanded ways of addressing pertinent questions of alterity and the non-representational at the intersections of contemporary art and material culture, world art history and the critical humanities, against a backdrop of intensifying interest in phenomena and objects that exceed or trouble anthropocentric coordinates of thought and perception.

Keywords: aniconic; asignifying; image; art; planetary

What is opened or freshly problematized in thinking about images and art when the concept of 'aniconism' is juxtaposed with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the 'asignifying'? Both concepts bring into play the excess of signs to representation. Both suggest that signs can do more, or other, than resemble and denote. Their interface has compelling potential to augment and expand ways of thinking about the semiotics of images, and the nature of contemporary art. This is of special interest in the context of the ever-intensifying impetus to decolonize and decentre art history's anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, and the non-anthropocentric, transcultural and inter-species dimensions of art in our planetary times.

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The enigma of aniconism

The concept of aniconism is shrouded in mystery. The word evokes ancient modes of sacred worship and ritual veneration, enigmatic objects of archaic cults, animistic beliefs and profound expressions of abstraction across distant times and lands. Derived from the Greek '*εικων*' ('*eikṓn*' – 'image, resemblance') with the negative prefix 'an-', aniconism literally means the absence of iconic representation within religious imagery.

However, this absence has received such diverse interpretations as to compound its obscurity. Some define aniconism as the absence of figural representation, whilst others define it as the absence of image. Some see it as absence of either anthropomorphic or theriomorphic (animal forms) figures, whilst others see it as the absence of any representation of the divine. Yet others see it as the lack of any divine image as the central cultic symbol. Some characterize aniconism as indifference towards images, whilst for others, it expresses a more active negation. The obscurity of the concept reflects the vast diversity of religious and sacred traditions within which it is found. Originally used to describe objects of worship of the early Greeks such as unwrought stones and poles (Fig. 1), 'aniconism' has come to be applied to phenomena as diverse as abstract symbols and geometrical ornamentation, empty spaces, and the presumed overall absence of images and visual arts in a given culture, particularly in Judaism and Islam.[2]

Figure 1. Conical unwrought stone which served as the cult idol in the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Palaepafos, Cyprus. Image courtesy of Wojciech Biegun. Wojciech Biegun, CC BY-SA.

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[2]   For useful overviews, see Gaifman 2024; Aktor, Gaifman 2017, 2020 and Aktor 2019. Lichtenstein (2011: 27) reminds us: "Image does not have the same meaning as *eikon* or *eidolon*. In the Greek there is no link between the problematic of the image and the one of imitation. Eikon and mimesis belong to two completely different fields. This is not the case in Latin, where this link did exist – imago, imitando." Marie-José Mondzain (2011: 28) tells us that in Greek '*eikon*' is a verb, not an object, and implies process, rather than something to see. See also Mondzain 2004.

Surprisingly, the literature on aniconism remains generally rarefied and special-ist, found mainly within the scholarship on the history of religions and religious art and archaeology. To my knowledge, there is to date not one overview of ani-conism, even across the world religions. Instead, the literature is split into specific traditions, which makes an appreciation of the pervasiveness, persistence, and complexity of aniconism challenging. It is particularly baffling how little attention aniconism has received within general contemporary art historical scholarship – even during or in light of the so-called pictorial and iconic turns, and the pre-occupation with semiotics within art history and visual culture through the 1990s. Whilst other semiotic categories, such as the icon, index, and symbol, have been analysed and used to the point of exhaustion, one wonders why aniconism has not generated more interest, especially given the aniconic dimensions of modern art in its rejection of imitative representation and figuration. Why has aniconism not been considered, as have these other types of signs, beyond its original de-signations and for its wider potentials as a transhistorical semiotic category and philosophical question concerning the nature of images and art?

Granted, there are a few writers who have made associations between ani-conism and the anti-representational and non-figurative elements of 20th-century abstraction (Gamboni 2002; Belting 2002). In his book *The Forbidden Image,* Alan Besançon (2008: 321) links the birth of abstract art to an iconoclastic impulse the aim of which was the "formation of signs instead of the repetition of nature". Laura Marks' book *Enfoldment and Infinity* (2010) explored the possibilities of a 'secular aniconism' by comparing Islamic and new media art. For her, art is aniconic when the image shows us that what we do not see is more significant than what we do see. In both Islamic art and new media art, the most important activity takes place prior to the perceptible image (Marks 2010).

However, despite these scattered projects, the analysis of aniconism remains almost exclusively restricted to religious art and imagery. Why? The foundational status of the Platonic theory of mimesis and the value of naturalism to art theory, the dissociation of aesthetics from the study of religion in the 19th century, and the general privileging within art history of Western art with its origins in the Greco-Roman world, all must surely play a part in this oversight.

Today, with the ever-intensifying impetus to decolonize and decentre art his-tory's anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, aniconism demands renewed and expanded critical attention. As an intercultural phenomenon that predates the emergence of Greek naturalistic and anthropocentric art, and exceeds the category of the image, it offers a compelling conceptual vector for new ways of thinking.

To mobilize aniconism from its territory of ancient art and religion and rethink it as transhistorical and transcultural, I will experiment with reading it alongside

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'asignifying', whose potential for thinking about the nature of art and images also remains underexplored.

We first need to wrest the aniconic from being defined as the negation of the icon, and from the assumption of the icon as the default *a priori*. This is not least because, despite its ubiquity, the concept of icon also remains highly challenging to define. If, following the Greek '*eikon*', 'icon' is synonymous with 'image', then 'aniconism' means 'imagelessness'. Yet 'icon' can also mean being representative, figurative and anthropomorphic – in which case 'aniconic' might be negating all or some of these qualities. An aniconic phenomenon may be non-figural, like a pillar or stone, or figural but non-anthropomorphic, like the Bodhi tree - which is a "representation" of Buddha in his absence (Fig. 2).
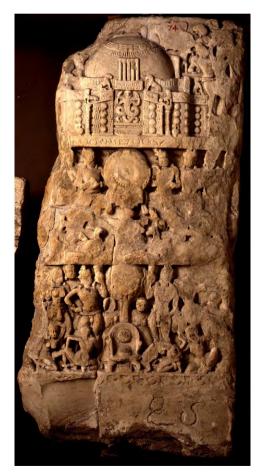

Figure 2. Drum slab carved with representations of the Three Great Miracles: the Enlightenment (the tree), the First Sermon (wheel of the law) and the Death of the Buddha (stupa). 2nd century CE. Amaravati, India. The British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Charles Sanders Peirce combined both representation and similarity in his defini-
tions of the icon, describing it as any sign that represents its object mainly through
similarity or resemblance, where this similarity does not need to be visual like-
ness but could be ideational (EP1: 226). Correspondingly, the aniconic would be
a sign that does not represent its object, and is dissimilar to it, either visually or
conceptually.

In short, as the concept of icon is itself so fluid, it is unhelpful to derive a mean-
ing of aniconism from it. The negative definition of aniconism sets up a binary
and oppositional relation that does not capture its intercultural and transhistori-
cal reach. Neither does it hold up when tested against actual cases. For instance,
Susan Huntington (1990: 401–408) argues that aniconic representations of the
Buddha cannot simply be understood as binary substitutes for anthropomorphic
depictions of the Buddha.

Grappling with this challenge of how to define aniconism beyond the icon,
scholars have introduced alternative typologies and taxonomies. In this way,
Tryggve Mettinger distinguishes between 'material aniconism' and 'empty space
aniconism'. Examples of material anicons include stone pillars, *Massebah* (cultic
or commemorative standing stones), *stellae* (carved or inscribed upright stones or
pillars), unworked stones and bits of wood. Examples of empty space aniconism
include the empty throne of the Buddha or the empty throne in the Assyrian relief
of the fire god Nusku (c. 1200 BCE) (Fig. 3), or the empty horse-drawn chariot in
Buddhist and in Achaemenian art (Mettinger 1995). In contrast, David Summers
(2003) proposes a tripartite categorization between unworked objects, such as
unworked stones; objects distinguished by origin, such as meteorites; and objects
distinguished by smoothing and ornamentation, but not by figuration, like the
Shiva Linga (Fig. 4).

Figure 3. Assyrian altar with Tukulti Ninurta
in adoration before the altar of Nusku. Ca
1240 BC. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vor-
derasiatisches Museum/Olaf M. Teßmer (CC
BY-SA 4.0).

Figure 4. Shiva linga. Parsurameswara temple, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India. 7AD. Image: author's own.

There are other important historical arguments for defining aniconism in terms other than the iconic. Aniconism pre-dates icons, with examples dating to the Stone Age. The worship of deities without figural representations has been attested for millennia across both polytheistic (Greco-Roman, Phoenician) and monotheistic traditions (Jewish, Islamic). In contrast, the category of icon (*eikon*) was first used to describe images and works of art only in the 1st century CE – with reference to the decoration of catacombs with paintings by early Christians, and the Fayum portraits of Roman Egypt. Themes from the Old Testament began to appear frequently by the 2nd century CE, in turn requiring iconography, the reading of icons.[3] The battle over the icon, between the iconoclasts and idolators, that was reinforced by the Iconoclast council of 754CE and the iconoclastic views of Emperor Constantine V, has been so foundational to the Western theorization of image that earlier prehistories of aniconism beyond Hellenistic Greece have been overlooked. Consequently, iconoclasm and aniconism are frequently confused. However, in fact they refer to different traditions and philosophical conceptions of images.

Archaic aniconic objects began not as images, but rather as bits of rock, meteoric iron and wood. They were not understood as images in the sense of iconic representation of a referent, but as vessels which the divinity could inhabit, animate, and through this offer a portal to humans. In this sense, they could be said

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[3]   Scholars generally agree that the early Christian church was dedicated to an "austere aniconism", and that Christian iconography emerged only in the 3rd century (Louth 2007).

to be more indexical than iconic, an embodiment of divine forces rather than any resemblance or representation. The social anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998: 26) characterizes the aniconic cult object as an "index of a divine presence", and even of divine origin (the rock falling from the heavens), as distinct from iconic representation based on resemblance between a form and what it depicts. The pre-historian and archaeologist Robert Bednarik (2020) argues that aniconism seems to have been "the more weighty, mature and sacred mode" of expression in pre-historic visual cultures. It offered a closer approximation of the all-encompassing, transcendent, undifferentiated nature of the divine. For instance, the ancient Egyptian *Djed* pillar (Fig. 5) beyond all specific form, represents "Osiris at large", and the *Linga* is an expression of the undifferentiated, Supreme form of Shiva (Sørensen 2020).

Figure 5. Djed Pillar Amulet. Third Intermediate Period – Period 1086–30 B.C. The Metropolitan gallery, New York. CC licence.

Aniconism also announced a distance from the human sphere. Mountains, rivers, trees, and stones are more direct indices of the sacred than figurative fabrications by humans. David Summers (2003) characterizes aniconic objects as conveying their referent through material substitution – the deceased, in the case of funerary art; a divinity, in the case of cultic status; sacrificial ritual, in the case of votives. Hans Belting likewise points out that aniconic substitution was important in Egyptian funerary cults, functioning as a "medium of embodiment" possessed of an invisible life force. In the earliest Greek images and monuments, he writes, "materiality was more important in ritual practice than iconicity", so that "it is doubtful that we should speak of images at all" (Belting 2011: 108).

In fact, the term 'aniconic' ('*anikonisch*') was only coined in the 19th century by the German archaeologist Johannes Adolph Overbeck (1826–1895). Overbeck

introduced the terms '*anikonisch*' and '*Anikonismus*' as synonyms of the German terms '*bildlos*' ('imageless') and '*Bildlosigkeit*' ('imagelessness'). Indeed, words like '*aneikon*' do not even occur in ancient Greek texts. Instead, we find terms such as '*baetyl*', or '*argoi lithoi*' for unwrought stones, '*baitulia*' for the meteorites seen as heavenly stones, and '*xoana*' ('carved thing') for the earliest known "images" of Gods in ancient Greece. Zeus, Herakles, Aphrodite, Cybele, Eros and Apollo were all worshipped in these forms, as evidenced by such examples as the mound-like stone of Omphalos of Delphi (Fig. 6), the double rock-cut seat of Zeus and Hekate at Chalke, the column of Apollo Agyieus, and the black conical stone worshipped as Aphrodite in Paphos. The earliest documented forerunner of '*anikonisch*' was the Greek word '*aneikoniston*', meaning 'not representable in an image'. This word first appears in the work of the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria (c150–215AD) in an argument on the essential impossibility of representing the divine.

Figure 6. The Omphalos of Delphi. Archaeological site of Delphi. Greek Ministry of Culture.

The application of the term 'aniconic' to archaic forms of worship is therefore a philological construct of scholarship. Betraying the anthropomorphic bias that had been established by Johann Joachim Winckelmann's account of the development of art, Overbeck characterized the imageless representation of invisible gods and divine powers that he noted in pillars, poles and unworked stones as a primitive, under-developed stage of Greek art. He even considered unworked stones to be of oriental origin, despite the term '*baetyl*' being traced to the Hebrew '*Beth-el*' ('house of God'), the term Jacob used for the stone placed to mark the site of his dream of a ladder to heaven.

Here we see embedded within the emergence of the term 'aniconic' an ideology based on the perceived superiority of naturalistic and anthropomorphic conception of the image. This outlook was already present in Greek thought; Herodotus, Plato and Pausanias thought that imageless worship was part of the "barbarian" cultures. So begins the familiar narrative of the classical ideal associated with the Greek representation of the human figure, before which everything was considered a primitive forerunner. Winckelmann, who famously opened his 1764 *History of Ancient Art* with Pausanias' statement that at a remote period, all the Greeks worshipped uncarved stones instead of images of the Gods – discusses non-anthropomorphic wood statues and unworked stones only as part of the origin of Greek art, and proof that art was indigenous to the Greeks. Even semi-anthropomorphic herms, which date to the 6th century BC (Fig. 7), were for him simply a transitional stage between simple rocks and figural images (Goldman 1942).

Figure 7. Bronze herm. Greek, Arcadian. Ca 490 BCE. (H. 9.2 cm.) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. CC licence.

In his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor further emphasized the move from aniconism to anthropomorphism as an evolutionary development from the primitive to civilized. He described aniconism, especially stone worship, as a type of fetishism (Tylor 2016). By the late 19th century then, aniconism was seen as symptomatic of "primitive cultures". Scholars sought explanations for aniconism in contemporary "primitive" societies of Australia and Africa, arguing that primitive men past and present saw nature as imbued with spirits and demons, and that the veneration of pillars and poles was the consequence of an under-developed ability or mental habit (Gaifman 2012: 23–24). This

inscription of aniconism as the primitive "Other" to the classical anthropomorphic ideal at the origins of art history cannot be coincidental when considering its absence within art historical discourse.

It is therefore evident that aniconic objects cannot simply be regarded as the primitive beginnings of the mimetic image. First, aniconism continued to coexist alongside iconism; the latter did not displace the former. Stones, pillars and trees continued to be worshipped not only in the archaic period but also parallel with the cult of anthropomorphic images during the classical period. Such coexistence is found across diverse traditions of worship, which has led scholars to reject the developmental-evolutionary account for a conception of these states as coexisting tendencies on a fluid spectrum (Uehlinger 2019: 99–123; Aktor 2019: 100–101). Second, there are many examples of hybridity, where aniconism and iconism coexist in the same object or space. These include, for instance, the *Lingodbhavamurti,* which combines the iconic and aniconic forms of Shiva, with his face emerging from the lingam (Vasudevan 2003) (Fig. 8), or the astonishing faceless female busts from the necropolis of Cyrene dating from the 4th century BC, where in place of the expected face we are met with a blank column – facelessness (*aprosopia*) here befitting the funerary context, for in Greek culture death was envisioned as loss of face.

Figure 8. Lingam with Face of Shiva (*Lingodbhavamurti*). India (Madhya Pradesh). First half of the 5th century. Sandstone (17.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. CC licence.

Third, as the art historian Zainab Bahrani (2014: 57–63) points out in her book *The Infinite Image*, this evolutionary account of aniconism developing into iconism is biased towards classical Greece, neglecting evidence from civilizations and traditions across ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley. Bahrani uses the

Akkadian term '*salmu*' ('image') that predates the Greek concept of mimesis, to bring new dimensions to image making and new ways of thinking about contemporary art.

The roots of aniconism far predate the early Greeks. Evidence of aniconism exists across early neolithic civilisations. In the Indus Valley, abstract aniconic symbols (*yantras*) adorned seals and artifacts. In neolithic India, aniconism also found expression in the form of sacrificial altars and fire rituals. The abstract concept of *Agni*, the god of fire, was worshipped through the sacred flame rather than anthropomorphic representations. Stones and trees were commonly worshipped and seen as animate. The best-known example is the *Shiva Lingam*, but other notable examples are the *Banalinga*, a stone found naturally shaped, and the *Saligrama,* a fossilized stone or ammonite collected from riverbeds or banks, considered to be the aniconic form of the god Vishnu. Like the Akkadian term '*salmu*', the Sanskrit terms '*Pratima*' ('likeness', 'image', 'effigy') and '*murti*' ('form', 'body', 'figure') indicate Vedic concepts of image not bound to mimesis (Seckel 2004: 11–13; Eck 1999).

Aniconic representations of the Buddha are prevalent in early Buddhism up till the 1st century CE. Buddha is evoked through signs and symbols including an empty throne, the Bodhi Tree, the Dharma wheel, and the riderless horse, understood as the *avyakta-murti*, a "non-perceptible image", or imperceptible form (Fig. 9). In ancient Egypt, symbolic representations and abstract motifs prevailed over anthropomorphic depictions. In Minoan Crete, archaeologists identified a *baetyl* as the focus of worship in the ruins of Gournia, a thousand years before the appearance of archaic Greek sculpture. In ancient Mesopotamia, cylindrical seals adorned with geometric patterns and divine symbols served as proxies for gods and goddesses in religious rituals. In fact, we find aniconism across the ancient Near East, across the bronze age cities of Northern Syria, ancient Palestine and the kingdom of Nabatea, from plain and eye idols to *baetyls* and *massebah* and empty space aniconism (Fig. 10). In the Indo-Iranian religions, including Zoroastrianism, aniconism was understood to have taken shape during millennia of nomadic wanderings on the Central Asian steppes, giving rise to cults that were materially very simple, without temples, altars or statues. Temples normally appear only in cultures which can establish themselves in ecological conditions appropriate to permanent settlement, and anthropomorphism is positively related to the high culture of settlements.

Figure 9. The Great Departure. Amaravati, India. 2nd century. Limestone (123 cm x 11 x 86.2 cm). The British Museum, London. (BY-NC-SA 4.0). CC licence.

Figure 10. Eye idol. Middle Uruk. Syria, Tell Brak. Ca. 3700–3500 BCE. Gypsum alabaster (5.6 × 3.3 × 0.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. CC licence.

In the culture of the Nabateans (400BC–400CE), aniconism was likewise seen to reflect their nomadic desert origins. Gods were represented aniconically, in the form of stele, *Massebah* and *baetyls* – perhaps the most famous being the representation of the supreme god, Dusares, as an unshapen and square black stone. Over 180 of these "representations" of gods can be found carved into the sandstone cliffs at the Nabatean centre of Petra, alongside another striking manifestation of aniconism – the so-called "eye idols", visible in tomb facades. The emergence of anthropomorphic and figurative tendencies in Nabatean art evidenced the impact of Hellenization accompanying a shift from nomadic to sedentary life (the Nabateans settled in the 1st century BC). Nevertheless, Nabatean aniconism persisted – another demonstration of how it cannot simply be understood as an undeveloped and "primitive" cultural form (Patrich 1990: 49).

The French historian and anthropologist Jean-Pierre Vernant argued that it was more appropriate to consider anicons as signs rather than images. Distinguishing

between aniconic signs and mimetic images, he reminds us that in the archaic period (700–480 BC), figural representations including *kourai*, unworked slabs of stone and planks of wood, were grouped as signs (*semata*) – things that could stand in for other things. Vernant used the word 'double' instead of 'image' for these early artefacts, to capture their quality of substitution over resemblance, their way of inscribing absence, emptiness, otherness, whilst invoking presence. It was in fact only in the 4th century BCE that the Greeks created the image as a mimetic work of art, and Plato could come to think of figural representations as distinct from signs, and in terms of *mimesis*, the imitation of visible appearances. This shift from abstraction to naturalism gave birth to the category of the image, "conceived as an imitative artifice reproducing in the form of a counterfeit the external appearance of real things" (Vernant 2006: 333ff; Neer 2010: 14–15). Yet the sign belongs to a more expansive register of thought and expression. In my view, the aniconic sign cannot be understood simply as a lack, an absence, a negation. Both anicons and iconic images offer an experience of absence – the referent is not present; it is invisible.[4] Is the difference that aniconism bases its absence in substitution rather than mimesis, that it is closer to indexicality than iconicity, that, rather than visuality as the core, it conveys through presence – the presencing of invisible forces, either as material presence or through the positive presentation of empty space?

Aniconism and abstraction

From this basis the potential of aniconism for a rethinking of modern abstraction is compelling. As art relinquishes or complicates the idea of representing a reality other than itself, reference, imitation, resemblance and iconicity are challenged, and presence is privileged. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of aniconic abstraction is Kasimir Malevich's 1913 *Black Square*. Described by the artist as "a naked, unframed icon of my time" and "the zero form" (Malevich, quoted in Rotzler 1989: 51), it announces aniconism at the emergence of "pure" abstraction. The aniconicity was emphasized by Malevich's presentation of the work, when it was first exhibited, high up in a corner, the same spot that a Russian orthodox icon would traditionally sit in a home.

Aniconism offers a compelling vector to reassess the preoccupations with mysticism, spiritualism and theosophy in early 20th-century abstraction, alongside

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[4]   As Jean-Luc Nancy (2005: 67–68) writes, absence is inscribed in the notion of image itself: "The word imago designated the effigy of the absent, the dead, and, more precisely, the ancestors [...] essentially, it presents absence."

the merging interest in prehistoric, archaic and primitive art. Material aniconism can be seen through the wide-ranging impact of Palaeolithic, ancient Greek, Egyptian and Cycladic forms on art practice. The many examples we could give include Constantin Brancusi's works of the 1910–1920s, such as *The Beginning of the World* (1924), a polished oval stone that could be a lingam (Fig.11), Alberto Giacommetti's sculptures of the late 1920s (such as *The Couple*, or *Woman*), and William Turnbull's monumental Idol sculptures and *Ancestral Figures*. We could also mention the Crosses paintings of Ad Reinhardt, who spoke of absorbing the "idea of imagelessness" from "Islamic art, Byzantine iconoclasm, and the Puritanism and the ancient Hebraic and Islamic distrust of images" (Philips 2019).[5]

Figure 11. Constantin Brancusi. *The Beginning of the World*, 1924. Bronze (16.5 x 28.5 x 15.5 cm). Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands, acquired with support from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Mondriaan Foundation and the Rembrandt Association, partly thanks to the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds. Photography by Cary Markerink.

Figure 12. Isamu Noguchi. *Grey Sun*, 1967. Arni marble (103.8 x 100.0 x 42.8 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the artist, 1969.158. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. CC licence.

Aniconism also has a place in the trajectory of diverse practices of land and earth art such as Isamu Noguchi's 1967 aniconic *Grey Sun*, which revealed the inter-sections of the archaic and the planetary in his thinking (Fig. 12) and Giuseppe Penone's lifelong work with stones and trees, creating fluid imprints of the cosmic forces of the natural world. It acquires contemporary resonance for artists such as Simone Fattall, who describes her archaic, elemental figures as expressions of the cyclical dynamics of permanence and transience, homeland and migration; Anish

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5   Philips, Harlan 2019. A conversation with Ad Reinhardt. *Geometricae*, 26 June, can be accessed at https://www.geometricae.com/2019/06/26/a-conversation-with-ad-reinhardt/.

Kapoor, who creates aniconic intensifications of the void in sculpture; Lee Bae, whose aniconism is expressed through ritualistic performance and in charcoal's connecting of ancestral rites and cyclical cosmologies; and more recently, Huma Bhabha's reinventions of the totemic. These practitioners of the aniconic are all connected by an investment in abstraction at the intersections of the archaic, and the capture of elemental forces, natural, technological and cosmic.

Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the asignifying

The concept of the 'asignifying' ('*a-signifiant*') that runs through Deleuze and Guattari's work is inextricable from their rethinking of signs. In fact, it is fundamental to it, because they think of signs as doing more than bearing meaning. Signs are not simply referential, reproductive or representational. They are not simply vectors of interpretation or communication. Rather, they are operations that intervene in reality and generate new thought and new subjectivities. Porous bearers of sense, they are inextricable from the realm of sensation in its heterogeneity, plenitude and multiplicity – and asignification designates these zones of material excess and plurality.

In early texts like *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and *Proust and Signs* (1964), Deleuze explores how signs liberate thought from the images that bind and determine it as a form of representation. Signs enable an apprenticeship of thought. Through Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Deleuze experiments with building a taxonomy of signs to which he would return in his work on cinema.

On a parallel trajectory, Guattari develops the concept of asignification in his early work at La Borde psychiatric clinic from the 1950s. Here – as demonstrated in the writings collected in *Psychoanalysis and Transversality 1957–1972* and the *Anti-Oedipus Papers 1969–1973* – he articulates an approach to analysis that could capture the "mobility of affect" within the group dynamics of the institution. The aim of what Guattari came to call 'schizoanalysis' was to reconnect the individual with the social and political milieu via "semiotic discordances" and asignifying fluxes. In a therapeutic context, affirming the polyvocality of signs, their multiplicity of expression, is a vital alternative to the psychoanalytic preoccupation with codification, signification, and interpretation. Polyvocality affirms the connection to and intervention in the real and enables the construction of new heterogeneous subjectivities. Guattari explicitly associates the icon with representation, referring to Freud. In his view, Freudian psychoanalysis stabilizes deterritorialized and asignifying semiotic flows as icons and codes, undermining the creative potential of the unconscious (Guattari 2006: 70–74).

In the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* the concept of asignifying is deepened as the connection between semiotics and art becomes more pronounced. Asignifying flows of deterritorialized signs offer escapes from the chronic signification of alienated subjects within modern capitalist societies. Artistic practices work like little machines, dissembling and breaking through societal codes and mechanisms. Works of art invest the finitude of their sensible material to put asignifying traits into new relations, producing sensations that forge new lifelines.

Peirce is of particular importance to Deleuze and Guattari's eccentric conception of signs, first because he does not conceive of signs as linguistic, and second because he approaches signs from the point of view of their genesis (Deleuze 2005: 71). However, for Peirce, the sign is representational, whereas for the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus*, signs do not refer to anything but mark passages of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 148).

Outside the specialist literature, references to Peirce's semiotics have tended to focus on his famous tripartite classification of signs into icons (likenesses that represent their objects through resemblance), indices (signs that represent objects by virtue of real connections) and symbols (signs that depend on conventions) (Elkins 2003: 5–22). Deleuze and Guattari, however, want to remove Peirce's semiotic from any association with signifier–signified relations. This leads them to explore a constellation of unusual concepts beyond the icon, index and symbol – such as zeroness, firstness, the hypoicon, the pure icon, and the diagram.

Peirce defined firstness as the pure material quality of feeling that does not refer to anything else (in contrast to secondness, equating with reference, and thirdness, equating with interpretation). He defined the *hypoicon* as an icon whose iconicity lies in its materiality rather than its relation to its object – giving the example of painting, where hypoiconism is produced through the material properties of colours, tones and lines. And he defined the diagram as an icon of relations, one subcategory of the icon, alongside images and metaphors; while images present simple qualities, diagrams represent the relations of the parts of its object. They invite us to experiment imaginatively, and Peirce compares this to how artists see objects (CP 5.42). Deleuze and Guattari, however, want to free the diagrammatic sign from the icon, and its referential vestiges. With a "distinct role, irreducible to either the icon or the symbol", they characterize it as a generative sign that maps what is blocked or over-coded in a regime of signs and forges original interactions (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 531, n41). Unlike the iconic sign, the diagram has no substance or form of its own: it is a "pure matter-function", a sign operating directly in matter.

The distinction between asignifying diagrams and icons is more clearly drawn in Deleuze's 1981 book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Deleuze characterizes images and icons as subordinated to a formal resemblance. In contrast, diagrams produce resemblance through "non-resembling means" – their modulation of painting's matter creates sensual, sensible or aesthetic resemblance. A relation is born that is not one of visual resemblance, but of a felt intensity. Whereas icons designate a state where resemblance is the producer, and the relations between the elements of one thing pass directly into the elements of another thing, which then becomes the image of the first, diagrams announce a condition where any resemblance is the result of relations that are different from those it is supposed to reproduce. Francis Bacon's diagrams "map" painting's material, bringing into new relations painting's asignifying traits [*traits asignifiants*] of colour and line – traits that are nonrepresentative, non-illustrative and nonnarrative. These traits of sensation "introduce another world into the visual world of figuration" (Deleuze 2003[1981]: 101, 115).

What matters for our purposes is Deleuze's comparison of the diagram to what Peirce had called a 'pure icon' – an icon that extends beyond similitude/resemblance (Deleuze 2003[1981]: 116). For Peirce, the pure icon was an extreme state of the icon, an icon of pure firstness, freed from interpretation. Since all three levels – firstness, secondness and thirdness – are conventionally required for signs to function as signs, a pure icon was therefore to him only "a fragment of a more complete sign". Non-communicative, lacking purpose and unable to convey any factual information, the pure icon exists only as a hypothetical possibility, an idea, and is a case of semiotic degeneracy (CP 4.442–447; 2.276).

Nevertheless, it is possible, Peirce writes, to *experience* a pure icon. For instance, in contemplating a painting, "there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream – not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment, we are contemplating an *icon*" (EP1: 226). In the throes of experience, the referential character of the sign is obscured. Painting can give rise to this experience of the semiotically indiscernible.

For Deleuze, however, this material and sensual facticity of the pure icon has value, and it is art that can capture this state – whether the painted figures that emerge through Francis Bacon's diagrams, or the "material signs" of the madeleine, cobblestones, and the noise of a spoon, in Proust's *Recherche*, or the movement-images of cinema. In his Cinema books, Deleuze (2005: 29) admires how Peirce "begins with the image, from the phenomenon or from what appears". Image is here reconceived by Deleuze in terms of sensible quality, movement and material, the modulation of forces – sensory, kinetic, affective, tonal, verbal. He

proposes, "there will be a 'zeroness' before Peirce's firstness" (Deleuze 2005: 30). By relating firstness, sensible quality, to material genesis (zeroness), he introduces a genetic conception of the sign. If firstness is pure quality, with no reference to anything else, then zeroness is intensity, the modulating, differential and genetic field of forces within quality. Far from emptiness or nothingness, zeroness is plenitude, a "nascent state", as Guattari (1995: 94) proposes in *Chaosmosis*. In my view, the pure icon, the sign of zeroness, must be understood as aniconic.

Art as asignifying

Deleuze and Guattari are not the only thinkers to make a connection between these lesser-known dimensions of Peirce's semiotics and the asignifying aspects of art and images. Proposing a three-tiered system of the pre-iconographic, the iconographic, and the iconological, the art historian Erwin Panofsky – who had discovered Peirce's work after settling in the United States – had described the pre-iconographic as pertaining to description of sensible qualities of the artwork/image, a register of the pictorial sign beyond textual referent seeming to correspond to what Peirce called the 'pure icon'. Iconographic and iconological analyses correspond loosely to Peirce's iconicity and symbol, respectively; iconography attends to secondary or "conventional" meanings that enable us to "read" narratives and themes, and iconology investigates meaning as reflective of cultural context (Panofsky 1993).

Building on Meyer Schapiro's 1972 study of "the non-mimetic elements of the image-sign" – by which Schapiro meant, as he put it, the "sign-bearing matter, the image-substance of inked or painted lines and spots" (Schapiro 1972–1973) – Hubert Damisch, in his 1975 text "Semiotics and iconography" pointed to the value of this pre-iconographic register for an expansion of iconography beyond the logic and authority of the text, and a restoration of semiotics' connection to phenomenology that could affirm the "sensible body of the image" (Damisch 2009: 236–242). Damisch here refers to Peirce's category of the hypoicon as a sign function by which one can speak of the "coloured articulation" in painting as a material quality "irreducible to the norms of communication". He asks whether the images of art could primarily be hypoicons,

> [...] an idea which is hard to grasp, just as it is hard to see not only the visual products of alien cultures, but also those of the very few artists of our time who, from Cezanne to Mondrian, from Matisse to Rothko, seem to carry out their work on the *near side* of the figure if not against, *on the near side* of the sign, if not against it. (Damisch 2009: 241)

Being on the near side of the figure, of the sign, suggests an experience of alterity, of unrecognizability, which Damisch proposes could be the basis of a comparative world study of art that can displace the logocentrism of Western, humanist iconography.

Reflecting on his decades-long work on images, and his role in the "pictorial turn" in a 2009 conversation with Gottfried Boehm, W. J. T. Mitchell has also cited his attraction to Peirce's firstness for offering a way of thinking about signs beyond logocentrism and in terms of its "inherent sensuous qualities" (Boehm, Mitchell 2009). Boehm himself, who with a landmark collection of essays in 1994 had announced an "iconic turn", proposes a phenomenological approach to images that acknowledges the independence of the visual and the "iconic difference" between the sensual surface of an icon and its representational meaning. For Boehm (2011: 16), "the phenomenology of experiencing images provides us with many hints that it is 'presence' that opens up the experience and not the mere decision of the person who absolutely wants to see"; he describes the religious image as an enhanced or intensified presence (*Gegenwart*), more than the physical being-at-hand of something: "Re-presenting is not about presenting something again. It is less and more at once [...]. Thus, the prefix 're-' in 're-presentation' means intensification. This intensification adds a surplus to the existence of the depicted." In this trajectory, we might, lastly, make note of Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of the '*pan*', as the "non-iconic index of an act of paint", irreducible to the logic of resemblance (Didi-Huberman 2004: 270).

Yet whilst all these thinkers certainly gesture to an asignifying dimension of image-signs, only Deleuze makes the explicit move to the genetic dimension of zeroness, to what I take to be the aniconic realm proper, as a differential and intensive realm of forces. The asignifying takes us beyond iconicity, beyond images, and indeed beyond the hegemony of the visual, to a state of presencing, of sensation beyond visuality, and even beyond sensible qualities.

Deleuze and Guattari's own characterization of modern art as no longer concerning the relations between form and matter but the relations of forces and intensities, recalibrates the concept of abstraction.

Aniconism in Deleuze and Guattari's work

Oblique references to aniconism appear in Deleuze and Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?*: Chinese hexagrams, Hindu mandalas, Jewish sephiroth, Islamic "imaginals", and Christian icons are described as examples of "thinking through figures". Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 89) add that some of these figures, such as mandalas,

are not defined by external resemblance, which is prohibited, but rather by an internal tension that relates them to the transcendent on the plane of immanence. This cosmic abstraction returns in modern art's embrace of its material as an infinite plane of forces. In painting, whether the monochrome "void" of Matisse's colour field paintings or Francis Bacon's asignifying diagrams, colour is not simply a pictorial trait, but the expression of cosmic sensibility in the absence of the human.

Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 181) somewhat cryptically write that painting "wants to start again at zero, by constructing the percept as a minimum before the void". To me, this invokes aniconism (and Malevich's notion of the zero form) – for aniconism presents us with the minimum intervention to establish contact with the invisible.

Deleuze and Guattari are not only interested in the material asignification inscribed within Western art's evolution from representation to abstraction. They take a transcultural and transhistorical perspective that encompasses archaic and primitive societies of the world from Japan to Ethiopia to Mali, shamans and tribal clans, neolithic tools, nomadic peoples of the steppes and deserts, practices from embroidery to fetish worship to tattooing to metallurgy to painting. They see 20th-century Western art as part of this expanded field where aesthetics is imbricated within the polyvalence of the social and where categories like 'abstraction' and 'figuration' are hardly relevant.

Guattari develops the conjunction archaic-modern in his later works including his 1992 book, *Chaosmosis*. Long before art could be considered a separate and distinct institution and the privileged activity of artists, socio-aesthetic practices of archaic societies, ancestral cults, animism, rituals expressed a multivalence of alterity and the inextricability of the aesthetic and the social. Within collective, polyvocal assemblages, these practices articulated relationships to the Other where "the image is carried by a becoming other, ramified in becoming animal, becoming plant, becoming machine and, on occasion, becoming human" (Guattari 1995: 95). This becoming is not a question of resemblance. In place of mimesis, art imposes zones of material indetermination where animal, vegetal, mineral and human merge in a primitive, primordial aniconism. Within this proto-aesthetic regime of archaic, pre-modern and non-Western societies, art is intimately connected with ritual and religion, and the human subject is splintered through nonhuman assemblages. Guattari articulated this regime as a paradigm against the homogenizing effects of capitalism, a new "machinic" animism.

Another fascinating invocation of aniconism is found in the chapter on faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Here, Deleuze and Guattari compare signification to the face, which they in turn relate to the Byzantine icon and Christian imperialism:

the face is White Man himself; *the face is Christ* (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 178). Asignification designates the realm of facelessness, encountered in the art of nomadic peoples of the deserts and the steppes, and amongst archaic and primitive societies, where the head is part of a polyvocal corporeal body. Indeed, "if human beings have a destiny," they write, "it is to escape the face" through "spiritual and special becoming-animals" that make faciality traits elude the organization of the face and set up paths of asignification (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 171). We see this in the "limit-faces" of Ethiopian magic scrolls and Francis Bacon's bestial heads. We could add to Deleuze and Guattari's examples those extraordinary faceless busts of Cyrene where the column in place of the face is indubitably corporeal, or the eye idols of the nomadic Nabateans (and we recall that aniconism was a feature of the materially simple cultic practices compatible with the nomadic way of life). Aniconic facelessness exposes the inhumanities within the human – primitive inhumanity, pre-facial inhumanity, engaged in forming strange new becomings, "for the wonder of a nonhuman life to be created"; from this perspective, the artist is simply the first "to set out a boundary stone, or to make a mark", that is, to delimit a territory (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 190–191, 316).

In this, Deleuze and Guattari are influenced by Mircea Eliade's analysis of the relation between art, religion and territory-forming as founding a world, and of the "primary intuition of the earth as a religious form", of the forces that pass through mountains, rivers, trees as comprising religion common to human beings and animals (Deleuze, Guattari 2003: 548). One of Eliade's examples is the nomadic Australian Achilpa tribe, who created an aniconic sacred pole as a "cosmic axis" that they would carry around with them (Eliade 1987: 31). Indeed, art, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, does not wait for human beings to begin; art begins with the animal, in the postures, colours, songs and cries that mark out a territory. The emergence of pure sensory qualities is already art, such as when a bird in the Australian rainforest who cuts leaves, and once on the ground, turns them to their paler side to contrast with the earth. These moments show the intertwining of species' territories, and "interspecies junction points" (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 185) as well as hinting at the flows of vital and energetic forces that pulse through matter, possessing the rocks and trees that furnish the cosmic artisan with their material.

Aniconism and the planetary

Human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies.
(Bennett 2009: 108)

Humans are part of a very deep history that is older than the existence of the human race. This history of entanglement with multiple other species requires that the reality of objects be rethought beyond human meanings and uses, in their "thingness" and in their "animate materiality". (Mbembe 2021: 19)

Aniconism acquires a compelling potency in the context of recent and intensifying interest, in our planetary times, in phenomena and objects that trouble and exceed human and anthropocentric coordinates of thought and perception. The notion, explored by scholars in the 1990s, that images and things have agency, that they "look back" at or "ask things" of us (Mitchell 2005) has to be thought anew in terms of the challenge to human exceptionalism, and the demands on thought posed by what Quentin Meillassoux (2009: 100) calls the 'ancestral', a reality anterior to the emergence of the human species. For instance, the age of the planet would be 4.5 billion years even if there were no human beings to say that – something about this fact is beyond my human subjectivity, and my capacity to say it.

Questions of the nonhuman agencies of things extend well beyond images. We have long moved beyond the visual, iconic, and pictorial turns of the 1990s. The preoccupations with language and the semiotics of human culture and society have been augmented by theories of new materialisms, objective oriented ontologies, speculative realisms and posthumanisms. These newer and emerging philosophies invite alternative address of the visual and the material, the aesthetic and art, in their more-than-human, relational and processual dimensions. They accompany a drive to de-colonize discourses and their methods and terminologies and to "world" our thinking. In this context, theorists are also acknowledging the wisdom of ancient and indigenous cosmologies and animisms, and other modes of inter-species relations.[6]

Planetary concerns have propelled the contemporary artworld to embrace diverse material and visual cultures of the world past and present, as was evident in the 2024 Venice Biennale where indigenous practices from beyond the Euro-American nexus took centre stage. Never has the inadequacy of Western aesthetic theory, and its foundational concepts – which have included such concepts as icon, mimesis and image – been so palpable. Keenly aware of this urgency to think

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[6]   Cf. work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Tim Ingold, Timothy Morton, Deborah Danowski and Eduardo de Castros, Achille Mbembe, Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Isabelle Stengers, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Anna Tsing, T. J. Demos.

the planetary together with decolonization, art historical and critical discourse seeks concepts and terms that can be adequate to the interdisciplinary, transhistorical, and intercultural scope of its emergent object and problematic field. An archaeological and geological consciousness is permeating its thinking and practice, and into this horizon, we invite the concept of aniconism.

A truly cross-cultural phenomenon that splinters and displaces the vocabulary and concepts inherited from the presumed Greco-Roman origins of art, the aniconic speaks to this condition, at once emergent and ancient, beyond image, and the hegemony of the visual, of a presencing of sensations at the limits of what can be figured, and at the limits of the thinkable.

The planetary propels us to a radical plane of abstraction, an experience of strangeness and the unthinkable that cannot be brought back to familiarity or recognition. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2023: 70) writes, "to encounter the planet in thought is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet remains profoundly indifferent to that existence". We can say that we have moved from the 'world' – a location, a background against which our human actions become significant – to a planetary 'mesh', to use Timothy Morton's (2018: 8, 14) term, an immeasurably vast complex of relations in which a person is decentred and entangled.

Thought on a planetary scale troubles human measures of time and space with nonhuman scales – deep, geological timescales marking the overlapping existences and presences of minerals, microbes, plants, nonhuman animals, technologies and humans; the time of extinction and global warming; space conceived in terms of the geology of the earth and its strata, inter-planetary and cosmic dimensions. Phenomenological approaches grounded in the centrality of human subjectivity are necessarily insufficient here. Deleuze and Guattari's critique of phenomenology's restoration of a transcendental and ideal primordial register, together with their cosmic and geological materialism, their conceptualizing of a nature-thought without image, where non-anthropocentric becomings are the material of art, is prescient. It is made even more so through Guattari's radical articulations of the 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' as an 'ecosophic' consciousness. A visionary, he was able to ask the question, 30 years ago –

> how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity – if it ever had it – a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of cosmos? (Guattari 1995: 119–120)

From the perspective of the planetary, the old question of art beyond representation is radicalized and extremized. Artists are increasingly taking up the challenge of capturing or evoking forces beyond human referent and agencies beyond human control. Some are even attempting to express what Morton has called 'hyperobjects', phenomena like black holes or the Solar system that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans, whose presence can only be inferred, and that compel non-anthropomorphic thinking. We might think here of Julian Charrière's 2016 photo series *First Light*, which gives visual presence to invisible radioactive decay, bringing this nonhuman force into the co-production of the work and affirming its troubling agency, or Pierre Huyghe's visionary entanglements of human and nonhuman worlds, his activation of multispecies agency within multi-sensory, porous environments, where images and objects appear as transient captures of forces that exceed them. Or the video projects of Ursula Biemann, made collaboratively with indigenous communities, that affirm imaging as intensifying vital sensations beyond the visual, creating new signs by which we do not recognize but are forced to think about ecocide and climate justice.

Such practices, challenging anthropocentrism and affirming inhuman forces, dimensions, scales and perspectives at the fringes of what an image can contain, testify to an aniconic current that runs through artmaking across cultures and through epochs, from ancient aniconic meteorites and poles to Navajo sand paintings, from Buddhist mandalas to the Nazca lines, to practices past and present shaped by indigenous cosmogonies, world nature-philosophies, animisms, and current and emerging theories.

In this paper I have explored some potentials of the concept of aniconism as a transhistorical semiotic category that attests to dimensions of the sign beyond representation. Irreducible to structures of resemblance, functioning as presencing and intensification of forces, the aniconic invites us to rethink fundamental art historical concepts. A brief overview of its history as a concept and its manifestations in ancient and early civilizations and archaic cultures revealed that aniconism complicates and exceeds the familiar Western narrative of art history that privileges iconicity, naturalism, anthropocentrism and the mimetic image – with Greece as the idealized groundwork and horizon. An expression of signs before the realm of images, aniconism offers a way of provincializing and worlding art history, and a way of thinking about questions of art, image and aesthetic in our planetary age.

By reading aniconism alongside Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the asignifying, I have experimented with a reciprocal illumination of concepts. Orbiting around their concept of asignification is a cluster of concepts – diagram, hypoicon, pure icon and zeroness – that Deleuze and Guattari put to work in developing a

material, relational and genetic conception of signs. This goes hand in hand with a conception of art as a monument of sensations that is not the preserve of humans. The concept of aniconicity therefore illuminates the radical and untimely reaches of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, including their interest in archaic, ancient and non-Western cultures, and the proto-aesthetic regime of pre-modern societies as an ethico-aesthetic paradigm. In turn, the concept of the asignifying helps propel aniconism beyond its territorialization in ancient religions and into our contemporary moment, as a powerful vector for thinking the emergent objects of planetary thought.

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Signes troublants. Sur l'aniconique, l'asignifiant et l'art à l'ère planétaire

J'examine la théorie des signes de Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, en particulier leur conception de l'« asignifiant », et la manière dont elle peut guider de nouvelles perspectives sur l'art « aniconique ». Généralement étudié dans le contexte de l'imagerie religieuse, l'aniconisme est un terme traditionnellement utilisé pour désigner des artefacts, objets et images qui se soustraient aux conventions de la ressemblance, y compris à toute similarité iconique avec une chose représentée. Aujourd'hui, l'aniconisme doit être pensé comme une catégorie transhistorique et transculturelle, susceptible d'offrir un outil fécond pour une réflexion décolonisée sur l'art à l'ère planétaire. Lire l'aniconisme en parallèle à la théorisation deleuzo-guattarienne de l'asignifiant ouvre des perspectives élargies pour aborder les questions cruciales de l'altérité et du non-représentationnel, à l'intersection entre l'art contemporain et la culture matérielle, l'histoire mondiale de l'art et les humanités critiques, dans un contexte où l'intérêt pour les phénomènes et objets qui excèdent ou troublent les coordonnées anthropocentriques de la pensée et de la perception s'intensifie.

Häirivad märgid: mitteikoonilisus, mittetähistavus ja kunst planetaarsetel aegadel

Käsitlen seda, kuidas Gilles Deleuze'i ja Félix Guattari märkide teooria ning nende mõiste „mittetähistavus" võimaldavad uut moodi mõista 'mitteikoonilist' kunsti. Traditsiooniliselt analüüsitakse „mitteikoonilisust" religioossete kujutiste kontekstis, kus see tavaliselt viitab neile artefaktidele, objektidele ja kujutistele, mis kaugenevad sarnasuse konventsioonidest, sh ikoonilisest sarnasusest representeeritava objektiga. Tänapäeval tuleb mitteikoonilisust mõista ajaloo- ja kultuuriülese kategooriana, mida saab kasutada võimsa tööriistana mõtlemise dekoloniseerimiseks planetaarsetel aegadel. Mitteikoonilisuse käsitlemine kõrvuti Deleuze'i ja Guattari arusaamaga mittetähistavusest laiendab küsimuste esitamise viise teisesuse ja mitterepresentatsioonilise kohta materiaalse kultuuri, maailmakunsti ajaloo ning kriitiliste humanitaarteaduste ristumispunktis. Selle taustaks on aina süvenev huvi nähtuste ja objektide vastu, mis ületavad või häirivad mõtlemise ja taju antropotsentrilisi koordinaate.