



## Image Acts

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## Image Acts

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OVER 80 YEARS AGO, while waiting out World War I, Bronisław Malinowski sat on a Pacific island documenting the verbal magic of gardeners as they tilled, sowed, cultivated, and harvested their crops. *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1965) remains today one of the most impressive examples of what would become a body of literature on language and its activities. More than 40 years after Malinowski completed his fieldwork among the Trobrianders, J. L. Austin gave a series of lectures at Harvard University. He centered his lectures around the simple idea that the words of language, rather than being simply descriptive, were best thought to be equally engaged in the production of actions, indeed, to be actions themselves. To say "I do" at the altar or to declare "I hereby name thee the Queen Elizabeth" at the ship's bow "is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (Austin 1962:6). Not long afterward this idea was given a name: speech acts.

In this essay I will extend the work of Malinowski and Austin by making an observation about images similar to that which the two of them separately made for speech. Images, rather than re-present reality and therefore be largely descriptive, are more accurately categorized as actions. Here I understand images to mean humanmade images, and I use the term without prejudice: from body gestures to "great works of art" and everything in between.

If images have more to their mission than the description of an alleged authenticity that is external to them but are themselves veritable actions, then it stands that not only the spoken (or signed) word but the presented image is, at least in part, its own referent. Thus it is an authentic, original document, a presentation rather than a re-presentation. Also, if images are actions, a theory of images ought to form part of a theory of action, much as a theory of speech devolves from a theory of action (Searle 1969:17). Furthermore, a theory of speech, together with a theory of images, must also compose a significant part of a theory of human communication: communication as action. Finally, if we use the phrase *speech acts* for referring to the activities of speech utterances, it would be useful to coin a phrase that might do the same for the activities of image instances. I would like to propose the term *image acts*.

### Introducing Image Acts

I began to think about image acts over a decade ago while writing a thesis on Pueblo ritual and tourist attire (Bakewell 1983). A few years later, while writing a book concerning the works of Frida Kahlo, I returned to image acts (Bakewell 1993, 1995, n.d.). In both studies I was impressed by the central role the visual world played in the two cultures. To watch the designs of Pueblo rain sashes take shape as Tewa women embroidered them in their adobe homes strung along the Rio Grande; to see them swing in unison from the hips of dancers against the parched soil of

the desert floor on a hot July afternoon; to discover that the patterns were configured similarly to the structures of the universe; and to sense from the rhythms of the dance the reverence bestowed upon a divine order assisted me in understanding why the thunder sounded and the heavens opened by the end of the week. In the case of Frida Kahlo, it was witnessing the posthumous rise of a star—through the shrines erected in her memory among Chicanas in the United States; the annual Frida-look-alike fashion show in Sidney, Australia; the songs, posters, books, plays, and exhibits produced in her honor by artists and intellectuals around the world—that I advanced my understanding of how the face of a woman can contribute to the shape of contemporary gender politics.

The notion of images as actions came to haunt me again while writing a book on a single word, *madre*, and while simultaneously developing a CD-ROM-Internet hybrid on the origins of communication.<sup>1</sup> As diverse as these projects are, they share something crucial: they are studies of language, yet neither is able to develop with a focus on language alone. In each case there is a visual dimension that provides not only an essential setting (in an ethnography-of-speaking sense) but constitutes a large portion of the communicative reality under investigation (in an ethnography-of-vision-and-gesture sense). Indeed, the visual dimension provides the most significant portion and almost always a consequential one.<sup>2</sup>

Take *madre* as an example. To write about *madre* is to write about the life history of a word. It is to note that it is gendered feminine, constituted within a grammar, spun into a rich lexicon, scripted into lengthy narratives, and woven into social fabrics activated by social discourse. In short, it is to focus on the forms and structures of language, to write about phonological rewards and syntactical banishment, mixed metaphors and semantic inconsistencies. It is about how, as one ascends the linguistic totem pole (from sounds to grammatical structures on to semantic meaning, cultural contexts, and social uses) Mexican Spanish consistently confers *padres* and fatherhood with high status and ambivalently evaluates *madres* and motherhood, as well as females and femininity. To write about *madre*, then, is both to reveal language as a structured phenomenon and to showcase language as equally a malleable and efficacious political tool (see Figure 1). It is, in sum, to write about the many dimensions of a speech act.

But to fully understand the speech act *madre*, one also needs to consider the visual landscape with which the grammars and meanings, narratives, and actions of the word unfold. From the gestures that accompany her utterance to the published pictures of women, the rich repertoire of images that daily surround urban

Mexicans and constitute much of their social environments reinforce *madre*'s linguistic networks of meaning and action (see Figures 2–4). These images are as much engaged in the politics of persuasion as words; as much involved in visual celebrations as in voyeuristic objectification; as much a part of mixed metaphors as visual inconsistencies; as much actions as the verbal utterances of *madre*. To write about *madre*, then, is to combine the news of her linguistic doings with a report on multitude visual doings. In short, it is to bridge the study of speech acts and the study of image acts.

## Revisiting Speech Acts

In *Talking Power*, Robin Lakoff (1990:11–23) noted inconsistencies in the everyday perception of what language does. Many people consider language as powerless, to have little impact outside itself; hence the aphorism “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Others claim that language is distinct from action; hence the expression “a little less talk and a little more action.” Language is not a tool with which to accomplish a task; rather, it is an expression of thought and ideas. If language and action are not each other's opposite but are related—that is, if language is action—then it follows that language must have an effect on people as other actions do. Austin referred to this effect as the “perlocutionary act” of language. Just exactly how much language is equivalent to using sticks and stones is not clear, but it has certainly occupied many a sociolinguist, as well as parents, lawyers, jurists, university administrators, and victims.

According to a handbook of spoken Spanish, *madre* “should need no entry but Mexican usage makes one essential; insults connected with mothers are so common . . . and so offensive that in Mexico [Mexicans] have steered off the word altogether when it is a matter of referring to immediate relatives” (Gerrard 1972:99). It is better to ask friends about the health of their *mamás* than it is to ask about their *madres*, the handbook warns (see Figure 5). If you randomly mention to residents of Mexico City you are researching the word *madre*, an intense discussion is almost certain to follow. Especially if those present are men. As one man put it, “It can be very dangerous in Mexico to say anything against someone else's mother.” In much of urban Mexico and among all classes, “*madre*” is the ultimate speech act. If and when you utter it, be prepared for things to happen.<sup>3</sup>

Words are hardly unobtrusive or harmless. On the contrary, words can accuse, denounce, and actually harm people. They can also flatter, promote, and benefit

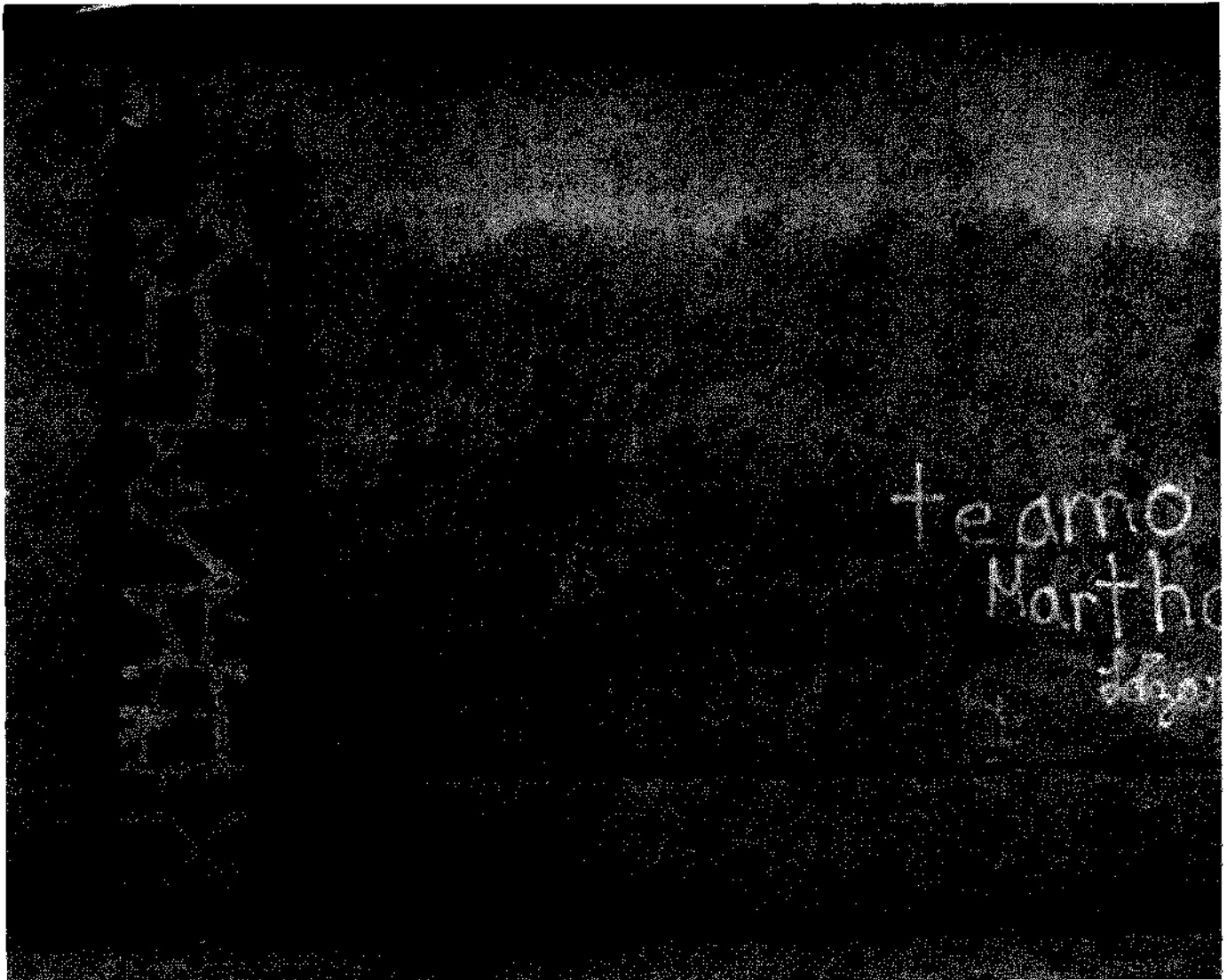


Figure 1

*Madre graffiti, Mexico City. Photo by Liza Bakewell, 1996.*

those same people. We employ them regularly to make promises, issue commands, or just simply state something. We use them to establish group solidarity, to give voice to our opinions, and to create boundaries around ourselves and others. We use them in ways that reveal much about who we are: our class, sex, gender, culture, age, personality, mood, and morals.

Language does not have to be employed for dramatic purposes to be effective. Even in its most prosaic form it is a powerful political tool. As Lakoff put it, "We don't realize that we are playing for high stakes even in the smallest of small talk. . . . [W]e are always involved in persuasion, in trying to get another person to see the world or some piece of it our way, and therefore to act as we would like them to act"

(1990:17–18). When philosophers and sociolinguists maintain that language does things, they mean that from its simplest utterances to its most complex commands, spoken language is meant to have an effect on us. And we ourselves speak in order to have an effect on others.

### **The Perception of Images as Actions**

What of images? Are they, as language is, structured on the one hand and malleable on the other? Is their political economy anything like that of speech? Are they as peripheral to our politics as so many assume? Or are images key players, pitching and batting alongside language in our everyday interactions, our



Figure 2

Kiosk, street corner, Mexico City. Photo by Liza Bakewell, 1996.

societies, cultures, nations, and states? Are images, in other words, as much actions as utterances are?

The amounts of money and energy nations and states disburse annually to the art world can be seen in the museums they erect and support within their borders, the exhibits of their national treasures they send around the world, the tourist art productions they advertise and subsidize, and the artists they glorify as their own. This suggests that some images, at least, occupy a central place in the domestic and international politics of nations and states. Visualizing the demolition of Lenin's statues in Russia by government workers and grassroots constituencies, the burning in effigy of Uncle Sam and Carlos Salinas in public plazas in Mexico City, and the public and private outcry in the United States over Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic portraits offers further evidence that the presence of images in the political arena is something other than epiphenomenal, particularly during times of political unrest and insecurity.

Take Mexico as an example. "All women, except my mother and my sister," is an expression in many parts of urban Mexico: "Todas. Menos mi mamá y mi hermana." All women are whores, that is. I once saw this expression written around a large poster of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mother of God, whose face, enshrined by her traditional celestial gown, had been replaced with that of Marilyn Monroe. An artist had created it for a juried exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. This piece, along with a series of others, aimed to present the ironies of religious devotion and daily practice in Mexico, to bring them out into the open for public viewing. It was 1988, a presidential election year. Opposition to the exhibit mounted. Bomb threats caused an evacuation of the building. The museum director was asked by the Secretary of Public Education to resign. The show was closed (see Figure 6).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the high public drama that surrounds some image acts, the perception of what images do, if they are perceived to do anything of import at all, is varied. For advertisers and their clients images are powerful tools, capable of persuading you to buy something, go somewhere, and be someone (else). But those who study advertising get mixed results, leading one to believe that advertising can sometimes have as small an impact on human behavior as it can a striking one (e.g., Schudson 1984). To parents and schoolteachers in the United States, not to mention Congress and the White House, it is not a question of whether images do things. That is assumed. The question is whether the deeds of images are good or bad, harmful or not. What of television sitcoms, sexually explicit MTV videos, Calvin Klein advertisements, the violence of Hollywood, the misogyny of pornography, youth-targeted cigarette billboards, in short, the metastasis of visual misconduct? Are these images harmful?

In the academy a different situation prevails. Within art history, studio art, film, dance, and theater departments the question is not whether images are good or bad but whether the doings of images are "artistic." Outside these departments and the humanities, the question is also not whether images are good or bad but whether they further science. Within the social and life sciences, illusionistic images (especially photographs and paintings) are construed all too often as artifice rather than artifact, as something apart from larger questions of truth or meaning.<sup>5</sup> Nonillusionistic images, such as graphs, charts, and photographs aided by telescopes, microscopes, and satellites, are different. These images are celebrated by the life and physical sciences, as well as by archaeology. The notion that these are superior images, that they arrive at the truth by revealing the underlying structure of visual matter, along with a preference for verbal communication, is



Figure 3

Close-up of kiosk. Photo by Liza Bakewell, 1996.

coupled with distrust for the unaided human eye and the dexterous hand.<sup>6</sup> It has led to fissures between the arts and sciences, not only across campus but within the discipline of anthropology. And finally, it has influenced us to overlook much about the unique and crucial role images play in human cognition and social (inter)action.

Ever since Franz Boas, the visual aspect of a culture plays a role in any good ethnography, but visual anthropologists (those dedicated to the study and making of images) are marginalized not only on campus but within their own discipline. Many scholars who have strayed into the visual arena from an otherwise verbal one have found their videos, movies, and museum exhibits treated as inconsequential in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions. Until recently, in most of the social sciences and humanities, images were kept to a minimum in scholarly publications, including ethnographies, because they were considered superficial and interfered with good (verbal) scholar-

ship. There have been deep-seated prejudices in the academy against handmade images, a kind of academic iconoclasm. Such images are too intertwined not only with notions of illusion but with frivolity.<sup>7</sup> A book with too many pictures is a picture book. A classroom with too many images, entertainment. A world with too many images, popular and lowbrow.

The privileging of verbal over visual communication explains why the study of sign languages has been either kept out of most linguistic departments or marginalized within them, and why scholars of the evolution of human communication have focused on the development of the supralaryngeal tract and the expansion of the brain at the expense of hands, arms, and faces. It also explains why political scientists consider a discussion of contemporary Mexican painting to be about art and not politics and why undergraduates strong in visual skills but weak in verbal ones are labeled *learning disabled*.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 4

Neighborhood shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mother of God, Mexico City. Photo by Liza Bakewell, December 12, 1988.

During the past ten years, however, these prejudices have been challenged by those inside disciplines that are notable for their attention to language: linguistics, literature, and law (see Heller 1996). By a different route, they have been challenged in anthropology. In linguistics, the study of gesture and gestural languages is slowly gaining ground. Thirty years after William Stokoe revealed to the world of linguistics that American Sign Language (ASL) was in fact a bona fide language, despite its visual medium, a new journal on the evolution of language was introduced, which featured in its first volume a theme issue on gesture.<sup>9</sup> At the 1995 Linguistics Institute of the Linguistic Society of America, gestural languages had an equal presence to spoken ones. At the 1996 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, scholars who work with sign and gesture were invited to participate in a series of sessions on anthropological linguistics.

Numerous literary scholars have helped to move the study of "art" out of art history departments and make it a concern of all the humanities by shifting the

definition of art to the problematic of visual regimes within culture at large. While it is true that images are more often than not treated as "text," which keeps most literary scholars from imagining them as acts, what remains significant about this shift is the greater respect images receive from scholars in the humanities. Further, some of these scholars have questioned text orientation. What W. J. T. Mitchell terms "the pictorial turn," is

a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship . . . may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading . . . and that visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. [1994:16]

The study of image acts, while it would articulate with the pictorial turn in the humanities, would not be rooted in a model of textuality. Its starting point would be far more basic. It would begin not with texts or objects (the image/text, the picture, the sculpture, the

**TU REGALO PUEDE HACER QUE MAMA CAMBIE...**

¡El regalo perfecto para mamá! El regalo que ella siempre quiso. El regalo que le hará cambiar de opinión. El regalo que le hará cambiar de parecer. El regalo que le hará cambiar de idea. El regalo que le hará cambiar de actitud. El regalo que le hará cambiar de opinión. El regalo que le hará cambiar de parecer. El regalo que le hará cambiar de idea. El regalo que le hará cambiar de actitud.

¡El regalo perfecto para mamá! El regalo que ella siempre quiso. El regalo que le hará cambiar de opinión. El regalo que le hará cambiar de parecer. El regalo que le hará cambiar de idea. El regalo que le hará cambiar de actitud.

¡El regalo perfecto para mamá! El regalo que ella siempre quiso. El regalo que le hará cambiar de opinión. El regalo que le hará cambiar de parecer. El regalo que le hará cambiar de idea. El regalo que le hará cambiar de actitud.

**LO ÚLTIMO, LO DIFERENTE**

*El Palacio de Hierro*

Figure 5

"Your present should change mama." Advertisement, *El Reforma*, Mother's Day, May 1, 1995.

movie, the slide) but with the human body. Its data would derive not from two separate populations, one of producers and another of consumers, or one of objects and another of spectators, but with our dual selves as the producer and consumer. *Image acts* refer to all humanmade images, including body gestures. They call as much for an interest in the virtue of images as for a critique of them.

**¡SACRILEGIO!**

**LA VIRGEN CON LA CARA DE MARILYN**

**Y CRISTO CON LA DE PEDRO INFANTE**

**ESO NO PUEDE SER ARTE**

**¡PELIGRO!**

Director General CARLOS SAMAYOA LIZARRAGA

\$800.00

NUM. 79

Figure 6

Tabloid, Mexico City, February 1988.

While the literature and linguistic scholars are moving toward a review of images as actions, progressive constitutional law scholars are already there. In a series of lectures on images and actions, Catharine MacKinnon (1993) argues that pornographic pictures are not merely words but can also be acts, rather than simply images, of violence. Yet, as she points out, the Supreme Court has consistently protected the production of visually explicit violence (although it regulates distribution) by invoking the First Amendment, even while it condemns the same violence against actual children and places some speech outside the amendment's protection. Hate words are deemed actions and are not protected by the courts. "I am going to kill you" is not protected. But *hate images* (another term I would like to propose) have never been judged actionable by the courts.<sup>10</sup>

What is it that comes between "I am going to kill you" and a picture of yourself being killed that results in the prosecution of one and the protection of the other? Might it be a basic misunderstanding of the doings of visual culture, of the role images play in human communication, cognition, and social interaction? The First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law ...



abridging the freedom of speech") says nothing of images. Yet it is the First Amendment that is invoked to protect images. The courts interpret images in the context of speech (or rather, as speech) and more generally as the expression of ideas. But if the courts have a category set aside for speech-based exceptions (as in the case of hate words), then why do they not recognize the possibility of image-based exceptions (as in the case of hate images)? The questions, if not the answers, are central to exploring the actions of images in our daily lives.

In anthropology, as in literature and linguistics, there has been a pictorial turn. There are more and more images in our scholarly publications. The "thick description" of our ethnographies increasingly attends to visual matters.<sup>11</sup> Questions concerning the representation and display of our subjects and objects of study preoccupy the thinking of not only our filmmakers and museum directors but the rest of us who recontextualize cultural phenomena within our articles and books. Visual anthropologists, including museum anthropologists, are coming to occupy a more central role within the discipline. "The visual is such an important component of human cultural, cognitive and perceptual processes that it can be relevant to all areas of anthropology" (Banks and Morphy 1997:3). Visual anthropology, Ira Jacknis emphasizes, includes more than film. Taking his cue from Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942), he places within its embrace not only all material culture, including art, but gestures, including facial and spatial expressions (Jacknis 1989, 1994). Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy note that "visual systems are implicated in most if not all areas of human activity through active engagement, not passive contemplation" (1997:23). Images are finally taking their place alongside the other actions we study.

But can linguistics play a role in the rethinking of the practice of visual anthropology? Banks and Morphy write about cross-fertilization with other disciplines. They note that Adam Kendon's (1988) research on Warlpiri sign language "is equally relevant to linguistic anthropology. . . . Yet, although every work on sign language is going to have some relevance to visual anthropology, not every work on sign language is going to be readily accepted as visual anthropology" (Banks and Morphy 1997:3). I would argue that such work should be accepted, especially if it tells us something about images in action.

### The (In)dependence of Speech

The image-creating impulse is universal, as are imagistic creations. Yet despite the numerous theories

of artistic creativity and characterizations of its forms, the scientific paradigms modeling its shape and the thick descriptions interpreting its contexts, the understanding of what (and how) our contemporary images mean and *do* continues to elude us. One reason is that much of the recent scholarship on images overlooks an essential difference between language and art. Verbal and visual performances emphasize two different signifying modes: one is predominately symbolic, the other iconic. To note that images communicate iconically is to observe, following Charles Sanders Peirce (1991), that images are not as arbitrarily related to their referents as symbols are to theirs. Language, since it is primarily a symbolic sign system, contrasts with iconically based sign systems. Linguistic signs must be highly conventionalized if they are to have a broad-based and relatively unambiguous communicative value. Icons, on the other hand, may deviate significantly from conventions without losing their communicative value (Bouissac et al. 1986). Rather than emphasize the similarities between verbal and visual forms of communication, a better approach would be to give equal attention to their differences. Among other things, this would broaden both the theoretical and empirical base of language studies.

Images are perhaps as important to the evolution of language as the development of the supralaryngeal tract. They play a major role in child language acquisition. Their production and reception is neurologically distinct from that of linguistic features. They are closely related to the visualizing effects of metaphor, and they challenge the primacy of linguistic theory in the study of visual phenomena. With the focus on images, especially at the level of the human body, one can begin to see just how active a role visual communication plays in language. The notion that art, gestures, and other forms of visual communication are weaker communicators, less rational and less clear than language, has not only hampered our understanding of how images communicate but also eclipsed any systematic investigation of the complementarity that exists between symbols and icons, language and gesture. Indeed, there are cases in which icons substitute for verbal expressions precisely because of their iconicity. Robert Farris Thompson (1983), for example, found that among the Mande the irregularities of their designs in their crafts encoded visual analogues to danger that were considered too serious to impart verbally. Likewise, the pounding of a shoe on a tabletop at a public meeting may sometimes be the only way to capture the world's attention, a certain face the only way to launch a thousand ships, a picture the only way to say something with fewer than a thousand words.

## Conclusion

Images, much like words, are hardly marginal and superfluous to human communication. On the contrary, they can flatter, promote, benefit, and better people, just as words can. They can also fight, accuse, denounce, and harm those same people. Far from being ineffective and inert, images are powerful tools. We employ them regularly to do many things: to make promises, issue commands, or simply state. We use them to establish group solidarity, give visibility to our opinions, and create boundaries around ourselves and others. We use them in ways that reveal much about who we are: our class, gender, culture, age, personality, temperament, mood, and morals. In short, we use them in different ways and for different reasons to do many of the same things for which we use words. We also use them when words fail.

If images are actions, it follows that images must have an effect on us. From the simplest gesture to the most complex artistic and engineering feat, images do things, and they do these things to us, to our interlocutors, and to our passersby. Just how much images can alter human experience, or motivate an individual to commit an act he or she normally might otherwise not do, is not clear. But it is a question that has occupied artists and critics for millennia, and (more recently) cognitive scientists, not to mention parents, child psychologists, jurists, and victims of imaged discriminations: image acts of a certain type. Speech acts and image acts do things to people. Real, live people. While Austin and later John Searle spoke of the perlocutionary act of speech utterances, might we speak of the *pergesticulatory* act of images?

Images do not have to be dramatic to create change, to get another person to see the world in our way, and therefore to act as we would like them to act. A smile, a wink, a wave, a flower arrangement, a table setting, a shelf of books, a pile of articles: even in their more prosaic form, images are powerful political tools. To recall Lakoff, we all manipulate our visual worlds, and we do it all the time to satisfy our needs and to achieve our goals; we do not realize that we are playing for high stakes even in the smallest of gestures. "The question of agency and power [is] central to the way images work" (Mitchell 1994:6). One need not run for office to exploit the opportunity to strike a pose, extend a handshake, make eye contact, or don a red necktie or a broad-brimmed red hat.

For centuries language has been the central focus for the study of human communication. But peoples and cultures hardly work solely with the symbols and syntax, or even the actions, of language to choreograph their personal lives and social interactions. Images play a crucial role, as well, in the movement and

tapestries of human behavior. Gold bands, passionate kisses, bouquets of flowers, white lace, and black ties attend the words "I do," much as bottles of champagne, large boats, and a gala guest list accompany the words "I hereby name thee the Queen Elizabeth" (Farnell 1996).

In sum, image acts are like speech acts, but visible. When exhibited or exposed, things happen. What, how, and why? Many scholars are turning to these questions, for image acts do something, with force and for a reason, so much so that an analysis of any one speech act would suffer without serious attention to its imaged correlatives and visual context. Therefore, a proper theory of speech acts should incorporate images, in the same way that a proper theory of image acts should incorporate language. These two systems of communication, as different as they are in practice, as separate and apart they often seem, are, in fact, in cahoots.

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## Notes

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1. See <http://www.brown.edu/Research/ProLarti/>.
2. See the rebuttals to Robbins Burling's *Current Anthropology* article, especially those by Armstrong, Stokoe, and Wilcox (Burling 1993).
3. *Madre* is an urban, mestizo phenomenon, limited neither to age or class. In Mexico City I have talked about *madre* and relevant images with taxi drivers and street vendors, university students and intellectuals, men and women, old and young, and I have not once been met with a blank face or with silence.
4. The artist paraphrased the piece this way: "Todas. Ni mi mamá, ni mi hermana." While *madre* derives much of its power by sliding back and forth over the borders drawn among virgin, nonvirgin, and whore, so too with the display

of public images of women in Mexico. The artist drew upon this power.

5. Such images are treated "as pariahs to be banished . . . by a clearheaded iconoclastic critique" (Mitchell 1994:420). This is a critique that has brewed since the Enlightenment (Stafford 1994) and even since the aniconic traditions of the church—"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:4)—out of which the university grew.

6. Some of this is fostered by the important discussion of how misleading images can be. See, for example, Brandes 1997, Bright and Bakewell 1995, Clifford and Marcus 1986, and Lutz and Collins 1993.

7. Compare Saussure's published lectures (Saussure 1983) with the more recent *Saussure for Beginners* (Gordon 1996).

8. The label *learning disability* is slowly shifting to *learning diversity*, signaling a change in perspective.

9. *Evolution of Communication*, published by John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

10. For a different position, but one that draws heavily upon Austin, see Butler 1997.

11. Anthropology has a history distinct from other disciplines. See Banks and Morphy 1997:2, Edwards 1992, MacDougall 1997, and Marcus and Myers 1995. For a comparison with the life sciences, see Stafford 1994.

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## Women's Voices and Experiences of the Hill-Thomas Hearings

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UNLIKE CAREFULLY PLANNED RESEARCH, motivated by theoretical questions and characterized by rigorous methodological design, this study sprang from anger and frustration. The anger was engendered by events of the final week of hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, and the frustration from the way the powerful public response to these hearings had been reduced to opinion polls. Not only was Anita Hill, who accused Thomas of sexual harassment, not heard, but the response of the general public and women's responses in particular were simplified or silenced.

The day after Thomas was confirmed for the Supreme Court, we initiated a study of women's voices and experiences of the Hill-Thomas hearings. But research that had been triggered by anger and frustration at national politics and media portrayal rapidly became transformed as we and our volunteer research assistants sought to hear and understand women's experiences of the hearings. Within three weeks of the end of the hearings, we had conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 100 Detroit-area women, aged 19 to 76, over a third of whom were African American.

Our research was difficult to characterize because it had features of several research genres and, yet, did not fit easily into any one genre. It was not a fully developed qualitative study or an ethnography, but at the same time it was clearly far from surveys whose popular cousin, the polls, provided negative inspiration. Activist in tone, it differed from much applied research in that its express purpose was not to effect change or public policy.<sup>1</sup> Still, it shared the traditional

anthropological challenge to provide a nuanced description of a complex situation.

The organizing principle of our research was to allow the diversity of women's voices and experiences of the Hill-Thomas hearings to be heard. And while the research was affected by the urgency with which it was conducted, its timeliness was also a primary virtue. No comparable data set of women's responses to the Hill-Thomas hearings exists.

After the hearings in October 1991, there followed scholarly conferences, editorials, general articles, and television programs and other media coverage devoted to the hearings.<sup>2</sup> Many books were written as well: early Washington "insider" accounts (Phelps and Winternitz 1992; Simon 1992), intellectuals' commentaries (Chrisman and Allen 1992; Morrison 1992), and somewhat later, allegedly "tell-all" versions (Brock 1993) and responses to these (Meyer and Abramson 1994).<sup>3</sup> While these books differ widely in alignment and conclusion, they all share a focus on the figures of the hearings themselves, or on a single individual's response to the hearings. But it is our assessment that the lasting import of the hearings rests less with the actions and machinations of the central figures than with the response of the public, particularly women's responses.<sup>4</sup> Whatever accounts and analyses of the Hill-Thomas hearings finally emerge, let the voices of the women from our study inform that record:

I felt disgust with the senators, anger that she put herself in the position to tell the truth and she was humiliated, and relief that awareness was raised.

[51-year-old white homemaker]

I was enraged that the system felt it was okay to confirm such a man for the highest seat in the land, that says it's not that bad, that all he did was harass a black woman.

[43-year-old African American police officer]