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## More than one picture: an art history of the hyperimage

by Felix Thürlemann, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, 2019, xi + 220 pp., US\$55 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60606-625-6

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## BOOK REVIEW

**More than one picture: an art history of the hyperimage**, by Felix Thürlemann, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, 2019, xi + 220 pp., US\$55 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-60606-625-6

In the English edition of his monograph published in 2013 (*Mehr al sein Bild. Für eine Kunstgeschichte des hyperimage*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 2013), Felix Thürlemann proposes to focus on a specific practice of the display of images, which he terms 'hyperimage'. Inspired by the concept of hypertext used in literary theory, 'Hyperimage' designates that a calculated grouping of selected image objects – paintings, drawings, photographs, and sculptures – forms a new, overarching unit' (p. 1). As a counterpart to an art history traditionally conceived as the study of influences, where images are consequently gathered from a diachronic perspective, the approach of the hyperimage aims at investigating the synchronic display of images in a given space at a given time in history.

The hyperimage, that is, the arrangement of a group of images, contributes to giving new meaning to each single object that composes the whole and must be considered as a new level of analysis. Thürlemann identifies this phenomenon as 'characteristic of Western image culture' (p. 2) and, although it has a prehistory in Ancient and Medieval times, starting from the seventeenth century with the beginning of art collecting. Noteworthy is the intention that presides over the grouping of images and that justifies the division of the book in three distinct parts, according to the three types of actors involved: the collectors; the art historians; and the artists themselves. This grouping leads to the choice of starting each case study with a portrait in order to draw attention to the creator of the hyperimage. This phenomenon is surveyed in an effective way through nine short case studies, which allow for an evaluation from a chronological point of view while underlining at the same time the diverse configurations of the grouping of images, according to specific intentions and specific contexts. In this respect, the illustration of the book with colour plates at the end of the introduction and black-and-white figures inserted next to the text that comments on them greatly facilitates the reader's understanding of Thürlemann's argumentation.

Most case studies are convincing, insofar as they are based on relevant documentary material and the concept of hyperimage fits the example in an adequate manner. For instance, the didactic intentions at the source of Denon's hangings of Renaissance paintings in the Grande Galerie du Louvre compared to those of his predecessor are clarified by using original contemporary sources, such as etchings of the hangings and published notes. Perhaps less original but still convincing is the chapter dedicated to art historians' practices of grouping images. By situating art historians' practices with respect to private collections and the classical museum, Thürlemann asks an essential and reflexive question, namely the ways in which the art historian's gaze and analysis depend on the historically defined material conditions of the display of artworks.

Although the author is right in highlighting the impact of photographic reproduction on art historical practice at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, it leads him to dismiss the even greater importance of the original artworks kept in museums. The last case study, dedicated to the contemporary photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, is characterized by an open ending, in chronological terms since the long history of the hyperimage echoes contemporary artistic practices, but also in terms of content, with the possibility that the

hyperimage is not always an act of clarification of a work by another one or of an ensemble of works, but a manner of complicating the interpretation even further (p. 182). The deliberate absence of a conclusion to the book seems therefore consonant with the choice of the last case study.

Nevertheless, some case studies fail to convince, and it is due either to a lack of documentary material or to an inappropriate use of the concept of hyperimage. For instance, the first case study, based on a painting by Frans Francken the Younger, does not fit the analysis of the pendant hanging in an early modern collection of paintings, since (and Thürlemann acknowledges it several times) the painting is not the depiction of Abraham Ortelius' collection, but a programmatic work aimed at showing the superiority of painting. It is regrettable that the author does not elaborate on the use of such paintings as sources beyond stating their 'idealizing character' (p. 51) and that he does not make use of contemporary written sources for the pendant hanging ('largely a theoryless practice', he writes on p. 55), such as texts about the appreciation of paintings or the furnishing of elite homes. Furthermore, in the case of Bonnard, it is difficult to speak of hyperimage and the concept seems to be forced, since here the gathering of visual materials and painting tools has a private character and is meant to be used by the artist only, who moreover is not the author of the photograph. In contrast, essential to the notion of hyperimage is that of display. While Thürlemann is aware of the limits inherent to his approach, which focuses on images (sometimes called 'image objects') mostly understood as paintings at the expense of other media such as sculpture (p. 17), his reasons for leaving aside the internet (pp. 17–18) because a comprehensive analysis would not be possible and because the relationship to images 'can no longer be adequately grasped with the term *hyperimage*' (p. 18), calls into question the relevance of the very concept for art historical practice today.

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