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Husserl's Theory of the Image Applied to Conceptual Art

Abstract

Edmund Husserl has famously declared that “Without an image, there is no fine art.” The aim of the article is to find out whether conceptual art can be experienced as image as well. It will be shown that Joseph Kosuth's conceptual artwork *One and Three Chairs* (1965) perfectly illustrates Husserl's theory of image consciousness and the concept of “image.” Thus, Husserl's theory makes a valuable contribution in understanding conceptual (and contemporary) art.

Keywords

image object, image word, perceptual figment, Husserl, conceptual art

Introduction

Edmund Husserl explains the theory of image consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*) in his lecture course from 1904/05.¹ Among other things, he states that “Without an image, there is no fine art” (*Ohne Bild keine bildende Kunst*) (Husserl 2005, 44). In his later manuscripts he specifies the statement by saying that the image does not need to be depictive: “Earlier I believed that it belonged to the essence of fine art to present in an image, and I understood

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¹ “Phantasy and Image Consciousness,” the third principal part of the lectures from the Winter Semester 1904/05 on “Principal Parts of the Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge,” published in *Husserliana* XXIII.

this presenting to be depicting (*als Abbilden*). Looked at more closely, however, this is not correct" (Husserl 2005, 616). Nevertheless, he does not abandon the idea that works of fine art appear to us as images. He even tries to apply this idea to all artworks, including literature and music.² Thus, it is worth examining whether Husserl's theory has some valuable contribution in understanding contemporary art as well. For this, I have chosen a well-known conceptual artwork *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth (see Figure 1).

Before I come to the analysis of Kosuth's artwork, I would like to make some further introductory notes. It should be noted that Husserl does not want to say that all artworks must be images in the sense of pictures, like paintings, photographs, etc. The image is something that appears; also, it does not exist, it is unreal and conflicts with the actual reality (Husserl 2005, 51). As Husserl writes, "the image must be clearly set apart from reality" (Husserl 2005, 44). However, as it will be shown in the course of the article, the image should not be equated with pure appearance either. The image is always about something, either depicting, referring, or presenting in some other ways. We can even say that we have special attitude towards the object when we see it as an image. In other words, we must have image consciousness. This unreal, appearing image is called by different names by Husserl. In this article, I will focus on three of them: the image object (*Bildobjekt*), image word (*Bildwort*) and perceptual figment (*perzeptives Fiktum*). I will also refer to Husserl's concept of memory sign (*Erinnerungszeichen*), and the distinction between the image (*Bild*) and the depictive image (*Abbild*).

In this article I will not examine aesthetic experience of artworks. Mainly because it played no importance for (early) conceptual artists. Joseph Kosuth specifically emphasizes that he makes "the separation between aesthetics and art" (Kosuth 1993, 842). I would only like to point out that for Husserl a work of art is always experienced aesthetically, and that the concept of image plays an important part in his theory of aesthetic experience as well. When we comport ourselves aesthetically in the fine arts, then "we contemplate aesthetically the objectivities exhibiting themselves in an image" (Husserl 2005, 459).

² In Appendix IX, in *Husserliana XXIII*, he claims that any kind of reproduction or interpretation of Beethoven's sonata by the piano player would be an image which is distinguished from the original sonata "just as Beethoven meant it" (Husserl 2005, 189).

I would also like to answer to a possible objection to my article. Joseph Kosuth clearly demanded that art (and art theory) should move from “appearance” to “conception” (Kosuth 1993, 844). Is it still justified then to talk about appearances and appearing images in analyzing his work? I believe it is. If an artist wants to present or communicate a “concept” to others, and not just to imagine it to himself/herself, he or she must put it in some kind of physical form that necessarily have an appearance. Gregory Currie has made similar point in his article about visual conceptual art. To quote him:

So the work needs, after all, to be seen. There is no paradox in the idea that the viewer is expected to notice the *appearance* of the work and then self-consciously to put it aside, though this may in fact be a difficult thing to do. But doing it involves *seeing* the work. (my italics) (Currie 2007, 35–36).

Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) is composed of three objects: a photograph of a chair, a photostat of a dictionary definition of the word “chair,” and the chair. In the following paragraphs, I will examine each of them separately in order to show how they illustrate Husserl's various meanings of the concept of the image.



Figure 1. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (1965)

Photograph of a Chair

In Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, a full-size photograph of a chair is presented. The photograph is a typical example of depiction according to Husserl. In fact, his own frequently used example of depictive image consciousness is a black and white photograph of a child (Husserl 2005, 20). He even explains the theory of depictive image consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*) using that example. According to the theory, we can distinguish three objects: 1) the physical image (*das physische Bild*), e.g., the photograph as a physical thing; 2) the image object (*Bildobjekt*) or the depicting object, e.g., the photographically appearing image child; and 3) the image subject (*Bildsujet*) or the depicted object, e.g., the real child (Husserl 2005, 20–21). In the same way, we say that the photograph of a chair that hangs on the wall at the MoMA, or some other material device (computer screen) that awakens the appearing image, is the physical image. The appearing image of the chair is the image object, and the real chair that was in front of the camera when the picture was taken is the image subject. In this case, the real chair also stands next to the photograph in the exhibition hall.

When Husserl writes: "Without an image, there is no fine art" (2005, 44) he means the image object.³ He believes that whereas the subject is what is *meant* by the image, the image object is what *genuinely appears* (Husserl 2005, 22). As Husserl writes, "I see the subject in the image object; the latter is what directly and genuinely appears" (2005, 48). The appearing image object is a nothing (*ein Nichts*) (Husserl 2005, 50), however much it appears, and therefore it is in conflict with actual reality. More specifically, Husserl believes that the image object is in conflict with the physical thing (the physical image) and with the image subject.⁴ The first kind of conflict emerges when we understand that what appears to us in image has no continuity with the perceptual world of the physical image. In other words, we understand that the physical image and the image object do not belong to the same "worlds." We cannot sit on the chair that appears in the photograph of the chair, but we could sit on the real chair standing next to the photograph. The latter belongs to the same reality as the photograph as a physical thing.

³ John Brough, for instance, suggests that the physical image should not be called image at all: "It is not itself the image, but it founds the image, serving as its substrate [...]" (Brough 1997, 29–48).

⁴ For a detailed account of various conflicts in image consciousness (including empirical and non-empirical conflicts) see my article "Husserl and Cinematographic Depictive Images: The Conflict between the Actor and the Character" (Mion 2016, 269–293).

Another way to explain the first kind of conflict, the one between the physical thing and the image object, is through the theory of content-apprehension-schema.⁵ According to Husserl, we get sensuous contents while perceiving the picture. These contents are apprehended in two ways: we see a physical image and we see an image object. As Husserl writes, "The same visual sensations are interpreted as points and lines on paper *and* as appearing plastic form" (2005, 48). In normal situation, the image object appearance "triumph" over the physical image appearance.⁶ Thus, the image object appearance has sensuous appearance, but since we do not take it to be real, the image object is only quasi-perceived.⁷ It should be noted, at this point, that the pure sensuous appearance does not make the image object to be a *depictive* image object. Pure appearance is not yet depiction; neither is it an image of something (I come back to this in section 3). To quote Husserl:

The apprehension of experienced sensuous contents—of sensations in the case of the contemplation of a physical image, of phantasms in the case of phantasy imaging—yields the appearing image, the appearing representing image object. With the constitution of this appearance, however, the relation to the image *subject* has not yet become constituted. With a simple apprehension, therefore, we would not yet have any image at all in the proper sense, but at most the object that subsequently functions as an image (Husserl 2005, 24–25).

To become a depictive image, an additional apprehension or a new apprehension-characteristic is needed (Husserl 2005, 31). Only this way we see the subject in the image. The image subject can be a fictional or a real object. We know that the subject of Kosuth's photo is an existing object in the real world, and we also know that the chair depicted in the photograph is the same that stands next to the picture. As Kosuth writes, "Everything you saw when you looked at the object [the chair] had to be the same that you saw in the photograph, so each time the work was exhibited the new installation necessitated a new photograph" (Siegel 1992, 225). Despite the fact that the photo depicts the subject that we can actually see in front of us, next to the photograph, Husserl believes that there is a conflict between how the subject appears in the photograph and how it appears in the real world. For one thing, we can see the real chair from different sides, it can even be sit on (although the museum visitor is expected not to do that), but we cannot see

⁵ Husserl uses it to explain his early theory of (depictive) image consciousness. He abandoned the schema later. See Husserl 2005, 323.

⁶ "The image object *does triumph*, insofar as it comes to appearance" (Husserl 2005, 50).

⁷ Husserl's technical term is *Perzeption*, as opposed to *Wahrnehmung*.

the back side of the depicted chair and we definitely cannot sit on it. Moreover, the photographically appearing colors of the chair are not identical to the perceived colors of the real chair either. This means that, according to Husserl, there is a conflict between “what appears and what is demanded empirically” (Husserl 2005, 171). Or, as John Brough puts it, there is a conflict “between a subject as it appears in an image and the subject as it would or does appear in an actual perception” (Brough 2005, xlvi).

I would also like to point out that the photograph of the chair can function as a pictorial sign. For Husserl a sign is something that “refers to something else via the mediation of a physical, sensible substrate” (Drummond 2007, 190). A pictorial sign has the same threefold structure as depictive image, that is, we can distinguish the image object in it, but it refers to the subject in a different way. According to Husserl, symbolic representation functions as externally representative but images in the proper sense function as internally representative (an example of immanent imagining) (Husserl 2005, 38). A particular type of (pictorial) sign is a memory-sign (*Erinnerungszeichen*) (Husserl 2005, 38), and a typical example of a memory sign is a picture in a museum catalogue that only serves to remind us the artwork we have seen at the exhibition. To quote Husserl:

The Stuttgart publishing house recently issued volumes containing complete series of works by Dürer, Raphael, and so on, in the most minute reproductions. The chief object of these volumes is not to awaken internal imaging and the aesthetic pleasure given with it; their point, instead, is to supply pictorial indices of the works of those great artists. [...] They do still operate pictorially, of course, but they also function as memories: They are supposed to function *associatively* and to reproduce more complete image presentation in memory (2005, 38).

In fact, the picture of the *One and Three Chairs* (Figure 1) printed in this article can also function as a memory sign that refers to the original artwork at the MoMA in New York. The one who has been in New York and seen the work itself, can even say: “I experience the image as a sign for the original, which I have seen at an earlier time” (Husserl 2005, 185).

A picture functions as a sign not only when it refers to the original but also when it reminds us of some other artworks or objects. Everyone familiar with the history of art will probably say that Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* brings to mind Van Gogh’s painting of his chair (1888) exhibited at the National Gallery in London.⁸ Based on Kosuth’s texts and similar works, we

⁸ Carolyn Wilde also compares these artworks in her article “Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art: Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*” (Wilde 2007, 119–137).

know that he did not want to “reproduce” Van Gogh’s painting. Kosuth makes it clear that similarly looking (visually related) objects or images do not necessarily involve any artistic or conceptual relationship (Kosuth 1993, 843). We should also take into account that he made other similar three-part compositions using completely different objects: *One and Three Tables*, *One and Three Lamps*, *One and Three Brooms* etc., in which he presented the chosen object together with the dictionary definition and a photograph of it. In this sense, the *One and Three Chairs* is not about a *chair* at all since it could have been any other object presented in a similar way. The chair was not chosen on its aesthetic qualities or any formal properties either. But still, the photograph of the chair in *One and Three Chairs* can, even if only additionally, function as a pictorial sign.

Definition of the Word “Chair”

According to Husserl, words are signs that are similar to depictive images in that they also *represent* something.⁹ The difference is that the image must have some kind of similarity to what is depicted but the sign need not to. A sign can have some likeness to the subject—a pictorial sign (a picture in a museum catalogue) has some likeness to the object referred to (the artwork in the museum)—but a textual sign involves no visual similarity between the visual appearance of the word and what is meant by it or referred to.¹⁰

Another question is whether we also experience *images* in the case of words and written text? This seemed to be an interesting question for Husserl as well. In one of his texts on the theory of art, he asks: “Are the spoken words, the describing words or the words of the persons represented [in poetic works], image words (*Bildworte*)?” (Husserl 2005, 652).¹¹ And based on his writings the answer seems to be affirmative. To quote Husserl:

⁹ Cf “No enrichment of content can make up that by which images, signs, objects of whatever sort that ‘re-present’ something (that are taken as something, that exhibit it, re-present it, depict it, designate it, signify it, and so on) are distinguished from objects that do not re-present something” (Husserl 2005, 125).

¹⁰ Unless a word (or a letter) is used to refer to the same word or letter. For instance, when we write: “A is a letter of the Latin written alphabet”. In this case we use the sign A as a sign of the sign A, and despite its representational similarity, we still treat A as a sign. Husserl 2001, 219.

¹¹ “Die gesprochenen Worte, die beschreibenden oder die Worte der dargestellten Personen sind Bildworte?” (Husserl 1980, 541).

The white form stands before me and is accepted as something else. In a manner similar to that in which the word-image (*Wortbild*), the visual and acoustical word-image in its context, stands before me and the signification consciousness (*Bedeutungsbewusstsein*) gives it signification with respect to something else, which can be present (or re-presented) or not. (Since, of course, the image functions here as a depiction (*Abbild*) of another image) (Husserl 2005, 178).

Even more, similar to the threefold depictive consciousness of the photograph of a chair, we can distinguish three objects here: 1) the written words on the photostat, the physical thing, that awakens 2) the word-appearance, that in turn becomes the bearer of a new apprehension, the apprehension of 3) the subject. In this case, the new apprehension is a signitive apprehension, that points “beyond to an object foreign to what appears internally” (Husserl 2005, 37). Husserl explains it in the following way:

It is just as in the reading of a word—“integral,” for example—the word is seen but not meant. In addition to the word-appearance (*Worterscheinung*), we have, built on it, a second apprehension (which is not an appearance): The word is taken as a sign; it signifies precisely “J”. And in the normal usage of the word, we do not mean what we see there, what sensuously appears to us there, but what is symbolized by means of it. The word seems entirely different from some arbitrary sound, from a senseless acoustic or written formation. The latter is not the bearer of a new apprehension. It can be meant, therefore, but cannot be the bearer of an act of meaning referring beyond itself (Husserl 2005, 26).

This word-image has no visual similarities with the real chair (the subject), which is why the word is a sign and not an image (in the narrow sense); and yet still appearing as an “image.”

Having said this, I believe that Husserl’s theory leaves room for another interpretation, according to which a text is experienced without any signitive function. In this case our sole focus is on the size, color, texture, and other visual appearances of the text. As Martin Seel suggests, Joseph Kosuth’s photostats of dictionary entries are experienced exactly this way. We experience the photostat as a picture, “as a composition in black and in white, as the exhibition of virtually an ornament made of letters that loses all substantive meaning in this viewing” (Seel 2005, 125). Because of the way the dictionary entry is presented on the photostat—the enormous enlargement of the text, the impression that the letters are “handmade”—our experience of the written words is *pictorial*. As he writes, “the letter signs acquire a pictorial quality [...] they lose the character of standardized tokens; they acquire a graphical individuality” (Seel 2005, 125).

The Chair

As explained earlier, the photograph of a chair is a depictive image of a real chair. Also, the written definition of the word “chair” can be experienced as appearing image-words. Can the chair as a real perceptual object function as a depictive image as well? In some situations it can. For instance, if someone points to the real chair in *One and Three Chairs* and tells me: “I have a similar chair at home!” In this case, she is comparing the visual appearances of the two chairs—the one at the MoMA and the other one at her home. The chair in the museum reminds her of her own chair at home which means that the chair in the exhibition hall functions as a *memory-sign* (see section 1).

However, to see the real chair as a memory-sign is probably a rare case. This is why I want to suggest another reading of the appearance of the chair: the chair appears as image (*Bild*) but not as depictive image (*Abbild*). This interpretation follows Husserl's later theory of image consciousness in which he comes to the conclusion that not all works of fine art are depictions.¹² He believes that theatrical performance (*Theateraufführung*) is an example of imaging presentation (*bildliche Darstellung*) that does not necessarily involve depictive presentations (*abbildliche Darstellungen*).¹³ When an actor produces an image of a character in a play then the actor's presentation “is not a presentation in the sense in which we say of an image object that an image subject is presented in it” (Husserl 2005, 616). Instead, what appears is a pure *perceptual figment* (*perzeptives Fiktum*) (Husserl 2005, 617) that does not *depict* anything.

This does not mean, however, that the figment is not *about* something. There are various interpretations of how to understand Husserl's later theory. Claudio Rozzoni suggests that the subject is *produced* by the image: “what we see is an image *subject* expressed and *produced* by images differing from the *subject* they are supposed or claim to depict” (Rozzoni 2017, 121); the latter being the case of depiction. John Brough suggests that “images would still have subjects in a more general sense” so that we can still say that they are “about” something (Brough 1997, 44). He even suggests a reading that

¹² Text no 18 part b in Husserl 2005.

¹³ “If Wallenstein or Richard III is presented on stage, depictive presentations are surely involved although the extent to which this depictiveness has an aesthetic function itself is a question we will have to consider. Certainly depictiveness is not the primary concern; rather, it is a matter of imaging in the sense of perceptual phantasy understood as immediate imagination. In the case of a domestic comedy or drama, depiction is obviously omitted [...]” (Husserl 2005, 616).

“the subject of a work of art literally becomes the image-object” (Brough 1997, 33). In my view, the important point is that the “image” in Husserl’s later text does not become a pure appearance, and that it is still an image of something.

In the same text about theatrical performances, Husserl explains how we experience the furniture on the stage. He says that the pieces of furniture are “just as much actual pieces of furniture as they are figments in the image world,” but they are not images of figments (*Bilder für Fikta*) (Husserl 2005, 619). As Javier Enrique Carreño Cobos puts it, “a chair on stage is not a semblance of another chair” (2013, 156). According to Husserl, actors and objects on stage excite a double perceptual apperception.¹⁴ Because of the apperceptions we can have very different experiences of the same object, depending on the attitude we take. We can see the chair as an actual piece of furniture or as a figment in the image world. The genuinely perceived stock is common for both seeing because even though the figment is not real, it presents itself in the real thing (Husserl 2005, 619). However, the non-genuinely, non-intuitively perceived parts—what is apperceived—are in conflict. Therefore, we can say that the same thing happens as in the case of depiction: the figment and the real thing do not belong to the same worlds. Moreover, we also have a conflict here, although it is a different kind of conflict than in depiction. Cobos has explained it in this way: “Whereas for illusory perceptions and for depictions conflict remains on the level of what is genuinely and directly intuited, in the case of theatrical representation conflict arises on the level of what is ‘apperceived’—i.e., the perceptually co-intended but not intuitively given, unseen sides of things” (Cobos 2013, 156).

Thus, one possible reading of Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* is to take this artwork as an artistic performance (*Aufführung*) (Husserl 2005, 616) in which the chair (and possibly other objects of the three-part work) is experienced as a part of the artistic performance. The chair is a real chair *and* a chair-figment in the image world.

¹⁴ Apperception is involved in every perceptual experience. For instance, looking at a chair from the front we do not see the back side of the chair. What is genuinely perceived (or intuitively given) then is the front part of the chair and the back part is perceived non-genuinely, non-intuitively. In other words, we *apperceive* or co-perceive the non-genuinely perceived back part of the chair.

Concluding Remarks

In one of his later texts, Husserl writes: "In a certain sense, I can view anything as an 'image'" (2005, 713).¹⁵ To take something as an image is to value its mode of appearance and inhibit all actual belief in the thing's reality (Husserl 2005, 713). Any perceptual object can be experienced as an "image" in this way. However, in this article I have tried to show that to "appear as an image" has a special meaning when it comes to artworks. The image is not a pure appearance extracted from depiction, reference, or other kind of presentation (*aboutness* in general). We must have image consciousness in order to experience artworks as images. I have also tried to show that Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* is an excellent example for explaining Edmund Husserl's theory of image consciousness and the concept of "image." The three objects in Kosuth's artwork illustrate Husserl's usage of the notions of "image object," "image word," and "perceptual figment."¹⁶

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¹⁵ "In gewisser Weise kann ich jedes Ding als 'Bild' sehen" (Husserl 1980, 593).

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