

early generations of art historians almost never, themselves, theorized their own assumptions about representation. They simply took it as a given that it was in the connotative richness and density—that is, the intension—of the aesthetic sign, that it lay claim to being art at all. Its intension we could say, was taken as a record or index of the multiplicity of human meaning or intention; and they equated this capacity for multivalent content with the very capacity to conceive aesthetic signs.

No technical field is monolithic, and of course art historical practice has been divided about method, purview, and almost everything else one could name. But it is probably the case that, with very few exceptions, the unspoken assumptions about the intensive powers of visual representation were shared by most practitioners in the first part of this century.

Thus the revision in the theory of representation that is currently underway, in its overturning of those older beliefs, is all the more striking. The revision involves a return to a notion of pictorial representation as constituted by signs with referents but no sense: to the limiting of the aesthetic sign to extension, to the dependent condition of the classically conceived proper name. Although the epidemic of extension is widespread in art-historical practice, nowhere is it more virulent and obvious than in Picasso studies. And as I shall go on to demonstrate, nowhere should its spread evoke more irony.

*I have said everything when I have
named the man.*

—Pliny the Younger

What I have been calling an aesthetics of extension or an art history of the proper name can be likened to the detective story or the *roman à clef*, where the meaning of the tale reduces to just this question of identity. In the name of the one “who did it” we find not only the solution, but the ultimate sense of the murder mystery; and in discovering the actual people who lie behind a set of fictional characters, we fulfill the goal of the narrative: those characters’ *real* names *are* its sense. Unlike allegory, in which a linked and burgeoning series of names establishes an open-ended set of analogies—Jonah/Lazarus/Christ—there is in this aesthetics of the proper name a contraction of sense to the simple task of pointing, or labeling, to the act of unequivocal reference. It is as though the shifting, changing sands of visual polysemy, of multiple meanings and regroupings, have made us intolerably nervous, so that we wish to find the bedrock of sense. We wish to achieve a type of signification beyond which there can be no further reading or interpretation. Interpretation, we insist, must be made to stop somewhere. And where more absolutely and appropriately than in an act of what the police call “positive identification”? For the individual who can be shown to be the “key” to the image, and thus the “meaning” of the image, has the kind of singularity one is looking for. Like his name, his meaning stops within the boundaries of identity.