Mitchell, W.J.T.

Mitchell, W.J.T. What do Pictures Want? (Chicago: Univ. of Chica Press), 2005.

or

Mitchell, W.J.T. "Vital Signs | Cloning Terror." What do pictures want? Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2005. 5-27. Print.

One never knows what a book is about until it is too late. When I published a book called *Picture Theory* in 1994, for instance, I thought I understood its aims very well. It was an attempt to diagnose the "pictorial turn" in contemporary culture, the widely shared notion that visual images have replaced words as the dominant mode of expression in our time. *Picture Theory* tried to analyze the pictorial, or (as it is sometimes called) the "iconic" or "visual," turn, rather than to simply accept it at face value.[1] It was designed to resist received ideas about "images replacing words," and to resist the temptation to put all the eggs in one disciplinary basket, whether art history, literary criticism, media studies, philosophy, or anthropology. Rather

"Vital Signs" was the title of an NYU/Columbia seminar I gave with Michael Taussig in the fall of 2000, and I owe much to the collaboration with Professor Taussig in the following pages. "Cloning Terror" was originally written for the Iconoclash symposium held at the Zentrum für Kultur und Medien in Karlsruhe, Germany, in July 2002.

1. Citations to specific works will appear in the following chapters, but some key figures and tendencies may be remarked at the outset. The notions of a "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord), of "surveillance society" (Michel Foucault), and the rule of "simulation" (Jean Baudrillard) are certainly foundational moments, as is the emergence of "gaze theory" in feminism (Joan Copjec, Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Anne Freedberg) and the extension of Frankfurt School critical theory to the visual field (Susan Buck-Morss, Miriam Hansen). There are now too many anthologies in visual culture, visual studies, the "hegemony of vision," and "scopic regimes" to count: among the most important figures in this area are Norman Bryson, James Elkins, Martin Jay, Stephen Melville, and Nicholas Mirzoeff. German art historians such as Gottfried Boehm, Horst Bredekamp, and Hans Belting are exploring notions such as *bildwissenschaft, bildanthropologie,* and the concept of an "iconic turn." This list does not even touch upon the important work of film scholars (Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen) and anthropologists (Michael Taussig, Lucien Taylor), or the new work in aesthetics, cognitive science, and media theory.

than relying on a preexisting theory, method, or "discourse" to explain pictures, I wanted to let them speak for themselves. Starting from "metapictures," or pictures that reflect on the process of pictorial representation itself, I wanted to study pictures themselves as forms of theorizing. The aim, in short, was to picture theory, not to import a theory of pictures from somewhere else.

I don't meant to suggest, of course, that *Picture Theory* was innocent of any contact with the rich archive of contemporary theory. Semiotics, rhetoric, poetics, aesthetics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, ethical and ideological criticism, and art history were woven (probably too promiscuously) into a discussion of the relations of pictures to theories, texts, and spectators; the role of pictures in literary practices like description and narration; the function of texts in visual media like painting, sculpture, and photography; the peculiar power of images over persons, things, and public spheres. But all along I thought I knew what I was doing, namely, explaining what pictures are, how they mean, what they do, while reviving an ancient interdisciplinary enterprise called iconology (the general study of images across the media) and opening a new initiative called visual culture (the study of human visual experience and expression).

Vital Signs

Then the first review of *Picture Theory* arrived. The editors of *The Village Voice* were generally kind in their assessment, but they had one complaint. The book had the wrong title. It should have been called *What Do Pictures Want?* This observation immediately struck me as right, and I resolved to write an essay with this title. The present book is an outgrowth of that effort, collecting much of my critical output in image theory from 1994 to 2002, especially the papers exploring the life of images. The aim here is to look at the varieties of animation or vitality that are attributed to images, the agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into "vital signs," by which I mean not merely signs *for* living things but signs *as* living things. If the question, what do pictures want? makes any sense at all, it must be because we assume that pictures are something like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites.[2] The question of how

2. I came across Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) too late to fully reckon with it in this book, but some aspects of his theory are quite compatible with my own. If I understand Gell correctly, he is arguing that "aesthetics" is not an anthropological universal; what is universal, for Gell, is "a species of anthropological theory in which *persons* or 'social agents' are . . . substituted for by *art objects*" (5). I would concur, with the qualification that the "lives" of inanimate art objects may be modeled on those of animals and other living things, not just persons.

that assumption gets expressed (and disavowed) and what it means is the prevailing obsession of this book.

But first, the question: what do pictures want? Why should such an apparently idle, frivolous, or nonsensical question command more than a moment's attention?[3] The shortest answer I can give can only be formulated as yet another question: why is it that people have such strange attitudes toward images, objects, and media? Why do they behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing, and leading us astray? Even more puzzling, why is it that the very people who express these attitudes and engage in this behavior will, when questioned, assure us that they know very well that pictures are not alive, that works of art do not have minds of their own, and that images are really quite powerless to do anything without the cooperation of their beholders? How is it, in other words, that people are able to maintain a "double consciousness" toward images, pictures, and representations in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naive animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes?[4]

The usual way of sorting out this kind of double consciousness is to attribute one side of it (generally the naive, magical, superstitious side) to someone else, and to claim the hardheaded, critical, and skeptical position as one's own. There are many candidates for the "someone else" who believes that images are alive and want things: primitives, children, the masses, the illiterate, the uncritical, the illogical, the "Other."[5] Anthropologists have traditionally attributed these beliefs to the "savage mind," art historians to

3. I'm well aware that some critics will regard the mere entertainment of this question as a regressive, even reactionary move. Victor Burgin, for instance, regards the "focus on the internal life of the autonomous object" as one of the chief "pitfalls" (along with formalism) that awaits "the art theorist with no grasp of semiology" (*The End of Art Theory* [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986], 1).

4. The echo of W. E. B. DuBois' concept of "double consciousness" is not accidental here. See *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903).

5. Slavoj Žižek calls this Other "the subject supposed to believe," the necessary counterpart to "the subject supposed to know." See *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 106.

the non-Western or premodern mind, psychologists to the neurotic or infantile mind, sociologists to the popular mind. At the same time, every anthropologist and art historian who has made this attribution has hesitated over it. Claude Lévi-Strauss makes it clear that the savage mind, whatever that is, has much to teach us about modern minds. And art historians such as David Freedberg and Hans Belting, who have pondered the magical character of images "before the era of art," admit to some uncertainty about whether these naive beliefs are alive and well in the modern era.[6]

Let me put my cards on the table at the outset. I believe that magical attitudes toward images are just as powerful in the modern world as they were in so-called ages of faith. I also believe that the ages of faith were a bit more skeptical than we give them credit for. My argument here is that the double consciousness about images is a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation. It is not something that we "get over" when we grow up, become modern, or acquire critical consciousness. At the same time, I would not want to suggest that attitudes toward images never change, or that there are no significant differences between cultures or historical or developmental stages. The specific expressions of this paradoxical double consciousness of images are amazingly various. They include such phenomena as popular *and* sophisticated beliefs about art, responses to religious icons by true believers *and* reflections by theologians, children's (*and* parents') behavior with dolls and toys, the feelings of nations and populations about cultural and political icons, reactions to technical advances in media and reproduction, *and* the circulation of archaic racial stereotypes. They also include the ineluctable tendency of criticism itself to pose as an iconoclastic practice, a labor of demystification and pedagogical exposure of false images. Critique-as-iconoclasm is, in my view, just as much a symptom of the life of images as its obverse, the naive faith in the inner life of works of art. My hope here is to explore a third way, suggested by Nietzsche's strategy of "sounding the idols" with the "tuning fork" of critical or philosophical language.[7] This would be a mode of criticism that did not dream of getting beyond images, beyond representation, of smashing the false images that bedevil us, or even of producing a definitive separation between true and false images. It would be a delicate critical practice that struck images with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them.

6. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For more detailed discussion, see chapter 3 of the present text.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (orig. pub. 1889; London: Penguin Books, 1990), 31–32.

Roland Barthes put the problem very well when he noted that "general opinion . . . has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning—this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life: the image is re-presentation, which is to say ultimately resurrection."[8] When Barthes wrote this, he believed that semiotics, the "science of signs," would conquer the image's "resistance to meaning" and demystify the "mythical idea of Life" that makes representation seem like a kind of "resurrection." Later, when he reflected on the problem of photography, and was faced with a photograph of his own mother in a winter garden as the "center" of the world's "labyrinth of photographs," he began to waver in his belief that critique could overcome the magic of the image: "When I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire."[9] The *punctum*, or wound, left by a photograph always trumps its *studium*, the message or semiotic content that it discloses. A similar (and simpler) demonstration is offered by one of my art history colleagues: when students scoff at the idea of a magical relation between a picture and what it represents, ask them to take a photograph of their mother and cut out the eyes.[10]

Barthes' most important observation is that the image's resistance to meaning, its mythical, vitalistic status, is a "vague conception." The whole purpose of this book is to make this vague conception as clear as possible, to analyze the ways in which images seem to come alive and want things. I put this as a question of desire rather than meaning or power, asking, what do images want? rather than what do images mean or do? The question of meaning has been thoroughly explored—one might say exhaustively—by hermeneutics and semiotics, with the result that every image theorist seems to find some residue or "surplus value" that goes beyond communication, signification, and persuasion. The model of the power of images has been ably explored by other scholars,[11] but it seems to me that it does

8. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 32.

9. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 75.

10. I owe this pedagogical exercise to Tom Cummins.

11. Most notably by David Freedberg. See discussion below and in chapter 3.

not quite capture the paradoxical double consciousness that I am after. We need to reckon with not just the meaning of images but their silence, their reticence, their wildness and nonsensical obduracy.[12] We need to account for not just the power of images but their powerlessness, their impotence, their abjection. We need, in other words, to grasp *both* sides of the paradox of the image: that it is alive—but also dead; powerful—but also weak; meaningful—but also meaningless. The question of desire is ideally suited for this inquiry because it builds in at the outset a crucial ambiguity. To ask, what do pictures want? is not just to attribute to them life and power and desire, but also to raise the question of what it is they *lack*, what they do not possess, what cannot be attributed to them. To say, in other words, that pictures "want" life or power does not necessarily imply that they *have* life or power, or even that they are capable of wishing for it. It may simply be an admission that they lack something of this sort, that it is missing or (as we say) "wanting."

It would be disingenuous, however, to deny that the question of what pictures want has overtones of animism, vitalism, and anthropomorphism, and that it leads us to consider cases in which images are treated as if they were living things. The concept of image-as-organism is, of course, "only" a metaphor, an analogy that must have some limits. David Freedberg has worried that it is "merely" a literary convention, a cliché or trope, and then expressed further anxieties over his own dismissive use of the word *merely*.[13] The living image is, in my view, both a verbal and a visual trope, a figure of speech, of vision, of graphic design, and of thought. It is, in other words, a secondary, reflexive image of images, or what I have called a "metapicture."[14] The relevant questions, then, are what are the limits of this analogy? Where does it take us? What motivates its appearances? What do we

12. Not that the recognition of this imperative is original with me. One might begin with the explorations of semiotics by Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, with their respective emphases on the *punctum*, or wound, and the *chora*, concepts that take us beyond the threshold of intelligibility, discourse, and communication into the life of the sign.

13. Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 293. Freedberg worries that the notion of "live images" may be "merely literary cliches, merely conventional metaphors for artistic skill." Yet he recognizes that "the issue revolves round 'merely.'" The designation of the living image as a literary cliché only postpones the question of the image by relegating it to another medium (language) and another form (verbal narrative).

14. See "Metapictures," chap. 2 of W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

mean by "life" in the first place?[15] Why does the link between images and living things seem so inevitable and necessary, at the same time that it almost invariably arouses a kind of disbelief: "Do you really *believe* that images want things?" My answer is, no, I don't believe it. But we cannot ignore that human beings (including myself) insist on talking and behaving as if they *did* believe it, and that is what I mean by the "double consciousness" surrounding images.

Cloning Terror

The philosophical argument of this book is simple in its outlines: images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that have desires (for example, appetites, needs, demands, drives); therefore, the question of what pictures want is inevitable. But there is also a historical dimension to the argument that needs to be made explicit. To paraphrase Marx, if people make images that seem to have lives and desires of their own, they do not always do it in the same way, nor under conditions of their own choosing. If the phenomenon of the living image or animated icon is an anthropological universal, a feature of the fundamental ontology of images as such, how does it change over time, and from one culture to another? And why does it impress itself so forcibly on our attention at this specific historical moment? If the living image has always been the subject of a double consciousness, of simultaneous belief and disavowal, what conditions are making the disavowal more difficult to maintain today? Why, in other words, do various forms of "iconoclash"—the war of images—seem so conspicuously a part of the pictorial turn in our time?[16]

15. I recommend here Michael Thompson's essay, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons: Essays in Honor of Philippa Foot*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 248–96, which argues that life is a logical category that does not admit of an empirical, positive definition. The logical status of life-forms is what permits the application of "life-predicates" to nonliving things like images, and vice versa, so that living things, biological organisms "proper," are discussed as if they were images.

16. As stated earlier, "Cloning Terror" was originally written for the Iconoclash symposium held at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, in July 2002. The Iconoclash concept (and the associated exhibition) were conceived by Hans Belting, Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, and Peter Galison, among others. See the exhibition catalog,

FIGURE 3
Dolly the sheep.
Roslin Design.

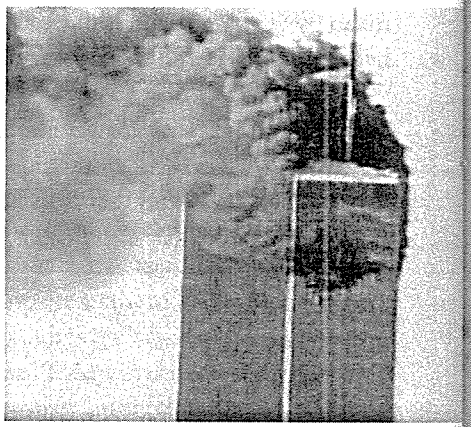

FIGURE 4
World Trade Center under attack, September 11, 2001. Reuters.

The answer to this question cannot be obtained abstractly. It must be sought in the specific, concrete images that most conspicuously embody the anxiety over image-making and image-smashing in our time. Consider two images that so clearly define our historical moment. The first is Dolly the sheep (fig. 3), the cloned animal that became the global icon of genetic engineering, with all its promises and threats. The second is the twin towers of the World Trade Center at the moment of their destruction (fig. 4), a spectacle that ushered in a New World Order defined by terrorism. The potency of these images doesn't reside merely in their presentness or topical currency but in their status as enigmas and omens, harbingers of uncertain futures. They also exemplify the sensuous spectrum of image anxiety in our time, ranging from the overwhelmingly traumatic spectacle of mass destruction on the one hand to the subtle creepiness of the cloned sheep, which, as visual image, is quite unremarkable, but as *idea* is a figure of considerable dread.

The clone signifies the potential for the creation of new images in our time—new images that fulfill the ancient dream of creating a "living image," a replica or copy that is not merely a mechanical duplicate but an organic, biologically viable simulacrum of a living organism. The clone renders the disavowal of living images impossible by turning the concept of animated icon on its head. Now we see that it is not merely a case of some images that seem to come alive, but that living things themselves were always already images in one form or another. We register this fact every time we say something like "She is the image of her mother," or remark on the link between the very idea of species and the specular image.[17] With the clone, these commonplaces take on a new resonance, a classic instance of what Freud called the Uncanny, the moment when the most ordinary forms of disavowed superstition (monsters in the closet, toys coming alive) come back as undeniable truths.

Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM/Center for Art and Media; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

The image of the World Trade Center, by contrast, signifies the potential for the destruction of images in our time, a new and more virulent form of iconoclasm. The towers themselves were already widely recognized as icons of globalization and advanced capitalism, and that is why they were the target of attack by those who regarded them as symbols of decadence and evil.[18] The destruction of the towers had no strategic military (as distinct from symbolic) importance and the murder of innocent people was, from the point of view of the terrorists, merely a regrettable side effect ("collateral damage" is the military euphemism) or merely instrumental to the aim of "sending a message" to America. The real target was a globally

17. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *species:* "The outward appearance or aspect, the visible form or image, of something, as constituting the immediate object of vision"; "The image of something as cast upon, or reflected from, a surface; a reflection"; "A thing seen; a spectacle; esp. an unreal or imaginary object of sight; a phantom or illusion." For further elaboration see my essay "What Is an Image?" in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), chap. 1.

18. From the beginning, their designer, Yamasaki, regarded the towers as "a symbolic monument for a new millennium that was to lead to world peace through global trade" (quoted in Bill Brown, "The Dark Wood of Postmodernism," MS in progress, p. 31). There is, of course, considerable resistance to talking about the towers as symbols or icons, because it seems to minimize the real human tragedy involved in their destruction. Readers responding to my article, "The War of Images," in *The University of Chicago Magazine* (December 2001): 21–23 (http://www.alumni.uchicago.edu/magazine/0112/features/remains-2.html) accused me of not knowing that this event really happened! Even a commentator as shrewd and unsentimental as Noam Chomsky, in his otherwise brilliant diagnosis of September 11, seems unable to accept the notion that the towers were attacked because they were symbols. See his *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 77.

recognizable icon, and the aim was not merely to destroy it but to stage its destruction as a media spectacle. Iconoclasm in this instance was rendered as an icon in its own right, an image of horror that has imprinted itself in the memory of the entire world.

Both Dolly and the World Trade Center are living images or animated icons. Dolly was literally a living organism that was also the exact genetic duplicate of its parent. The "twin towers" were (as their "twin" designation indicates) already anthropomorphized, perhaps even clonelike. And they were most certainly alive in the sense that historian Neil Harris has explored in his book *Building Lives.* Harris's aim is "to see what might happen by treating buildings as if they formed some kind of special species, a hybrid class . . . whose defined life stages merited systematic examination."[19] Harris notes that we often talk about buildings as if they were living things, or as if their intimate proximity to living beings made them take on some of the vitality of their inhabitants. The analogy between the living human body and the building is as ancient as the figure of the body as a temple for the spirit. Insofar as buildings are conceived in the mind of an architect, grow up out of the ground, and then become the habitat of other living organisms, from people to parasites, they are like plants that shoot up out of the earth, as in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil,* in which skyscrapers erupt from the ground like Jack's beanstalk. As they age they become, like persons, shabby and disreputable, or eminent and distinguished. When they are abandoned, they are haunted by the ghosts of those who once dwelt in them, and are shunned like a corpse from which the soul has departed; when they are destroyed, they leave ghostly replicas in memory and other media.

Harris is quick to disavow the animistic overtones in the "conceit" of buildings as living things. It is, he admits, "just a conceptual convenience," but one that is "deeply rooted" in our ways of thinking about buildings and the imagery used to describe them. In a move that has an almost ritual familiarity, Harris displaces the literal belief in the animism of buildings onto a primitive people—"the Taberma, a Voltaic culture in Africa who conceive of their houses as humans and whose language and behavior reflect such convictions. The Taberma greet their houses, feed them, eat and drink with them."[20] But we moderns engage in the very same conceit when we attribute speech acts to the White House or the Pentagon. In the case of the World Trade Center, this anthropomorphism helps to explain why, in critic Bill Brown's words, they exemplify "the social afterlife of things, the ceaseless circulation of the towers on behalf of various agendas, be it selling hamburgers or waging wars."[21]

19. Neil Harris, *Building Lives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

20. Ibid., 4.

But Dolly and the World Trade Center have an additional dimension of vitality in that they are symbols of forms of life—let us call them biotechnology and global capitalism respectively—that participate in the life process they stand for. They do not merely "signify" these life-forms in some arbitrary or purely conventional way, like the bare words *biotechnology* or *global capitalism.* They both stand for and act as symptoms of what they signify. The twin towers were not merely abstract signs of world capital, but what Coleridge called "living symbols" that have an "organic" connection with their referents, the subject of biography rather than history.[22] Both Dolly and the WTC were also, from certain points of view, "offending images,"[23] or symbols of forms of life that are feared and despised. That is, they were offensive to certain eyes, constituting an affront or visual insult to those who hate and fear modernity, capitalism, biotechnology, globalization.[24] At the same time, they are prime targets for offense in the form of destructive or disfiguring actions. The clone (not Dolly herself so much as the idea she exemplifies) is regarded by religious conservatives as a monstrous, unnatural life-form that should be destroyed, and prevented by law from being created in the first place. The twin towers were well known to be a target for destruction well before the events of 9/11. From certain points of view, the moral imperative is to offend the images themselves, to treat them as if they were human agents or at least living symbols of evil, and to punish them accordingly.

Why did a sheep become the icon of cloning and biotechnology? Other animals had been more or less successfully cloned before Dolly, and yet none of them achieved the global publicity achieved by this particular creature. The answer may lie partly in the preexisting symbolic connotations of

21. Bill Brown, "All Thumbs," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 457.

22. See Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

23. See chapter 5 below.

24. It's worth noting here that the twin towers were widely despised by architects and architectural critics, who deplored their lack of respect for their surroundings and their egregious dominance of the Manhattan skyline.

the sheep as a figure of pastoral care, harmlessness, innocence, sacrifice, and (more ominously) of masses led by authoritarian elites—sheep to the slaughter. To some eyes, the seemingly benign image of the cloned sheep is no less a horror than the catastrophic image of terrorist destruction. The creation of an image can be just as deep an abomination as its destruction, and in each case there is a kind of paradoxical "creative destruction" at work.[25] The clone, to some people, represents the destruction of the natural order, and reminds us of the innumerable myths that treat the creation of artificial life as the violation of fundamental taboos. From the story of the Golem to Frankenstein to the cyborgs of contemporary science fiction, the artificial life-form is treated as a monstrous violation of natural law. The second commandment, prohibiting the making of graven images, is not just a ban on idolatry but a ban on the making of images of any kind, and it may well be based on the belief that images will inevitably take on "a life of their own" no matter how innocent the purposes of their creators.[26] When Aaron makes a golden calf to "go before" the Israelites as their idol, he tells Moses that the calf seemed to come into being all by itself: "I cast [the gold] into the fire and this calf came out" (Exod. 32:24 [KJV]). Aaron's "casting" of the sculpture is rendered ambiguously accidental, as if he were casting a pair of dice, not casting molten metal into a preexisting form. The calf is a magical, uncanny creation, an image or idol with a life and shape of its own making, which may be why it is so often referred to as the "molten calf."[27] Only God is allowed to make images, because only God is possessed of the secret of life. The second commandment is the perfect expression of a jealous God who wants not only exclusive worship but exclusive custody of the secret of life, which means exclusive rights to the production of images.[28]

25. I'm using this phrase in the sense pioneered by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, as a description of the "evolutionary process" that is essential to capitalism. See "The Process of Creative Destruction," in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943).

26. Pier Cesare Bori notes that "the cult of images, whatever they may represent" is the "most urgent meaning of the condemnation of idolatry" (Bori, *The Golden Calf and the Origins of the Anti-Jewish Controversy*, trans. David Ward [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], 9). See Joel Snyder's brilliant reading of the second commandment in relation to the "automatic" production of images in photography: "What Happens by Itself in Photography," in *The Pursuits of Reason*, ed. Hillary Putnam, Paul Guyer, and Ted Cohen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 361–73.

27. For a survey of the many disputes over the interpretation of this passage, see Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1974), 555–56.

The figure of the clone combines our fears about both natural and divine law. A recent cartoon in the *Chicago Tribune* captures this convergence perfectly (fig. 5). Michelangelo's God is shown reaching out to give the touch of life and encountering, not the receptive gesture of the awakening Adam, but a white-coated lab technician with his test tubes, saying, "Thanks, but we've got it covered." That is why the objections to cloning seem to go beyond pragmatic or practical considerations. It would be one thing if people wanted to prohibit reproductive cloning only because it has not yet been perfected, and has a tendency to produce deformed or unviable organisms. But as a thought experiment, just ask yourself the following: if tomorrow a scientist announced that reproductive cloning had been perfected so that organisms (including animals and human beings) could be produced that were perfectly engineered in every respect; free of birth defects; healthy, beautiful "twins" of their parent-donors—would that overcome the objections to cloning? I think not. It might produce a realignment of the political opposition to cloning, however, and separate those with practical objections from those who have more metaphysical reservations based in natural or supernatural law. The true meaning of the second commandment, the blanket prohibition on the making of images, would finally become clear.

The second commandment is even more clearly in the background of the destruction of the twin towers. As an icon of modern global capitalism, the towers were seen by Islamic fundamentalists as no less an idol than the Buddhist monuments destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in the spring of 2001. The last words uttered by the 9/11 terrorists as the planes they hijacked collided with the towers were, no doubt, "God is great." The Qur'an's instructions on the Muslims' sacred duty to destroy idols are practically identical to those found in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. And the act of destruction as a holy duty is not some private or secret activity. It should preferably be conducted in public, in full view, as an

28. The link between the knowledge of image-making and the secret of life is perhaps the underlying sense of the opposition between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Bori notes that idolatry is the equivalent of "original sin" (the eating of the tree of knowledge). See Bori, *The Golden Calf*, p. 9. Milton's *Paradise Lost* reinforces this equation by suggesting that Adam and Eve began to worship the tree of knowledge as an idol after eating from it.

FIGURE 5 "Thanks, but we've got it covered." Richard Locher, Chicago *Tribune.*

admonitory exhibition.[29] The widely televised spectacle of the destruction of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad during the second Gulf War was clearly a staged ritual meant to achieve iconic status. The uncertainty about the ritual—whether it was more humiliating to the effigy to decapitate it, or to wrap the head in an American flag—reflects the degree to which iconoclastic calculations were part of the conscious media strategy for the American military. The disfiguring, vandalizing, or humiliating of an image (like the mutilation of a living human body—cutting off hands or feet, blinding) can be just as potent as its actual destruction, since it leaves an imprint in the mind of the idolater of the grave consequences that attend the sin of idolatry. In other words, iconoclasm is more than just the destruction of images; it is a "creative destruction," in which a secondary image of defacement or annihilation is created at the same moment that the "target" image is attacked.[30] That is why composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's description of the 9/11 spectacle as "Lucifer's greatest work of art," however disturbing it

29. Outside the gates of Mecca, archaic pre-Islamic stone idols are allowed to remain standing, but piles of rocks are placed near them so that pious Muslims can stone the idols.

30. As the events of 9/11 unfolded, it was widely speculated that the timing of the destruction of the second tower, just a few minutes after the first, was part of an effort to stage the spectacle of destruction for the world's media apparatus. The notion that the destruction of an image may also be an image in its own right was a leitmotif of the Iconoclash symposium in Karlsruhe and the accompanying exhibition catalog.

might have been at the time, was strangely accurate, and why we should not forget that the creation of the twin towers was already seen by many as a destruction of lower Manhattan.[31]

The ancient superstitions about images—that they take on "lives of their own," that they make people do irrational things, that they are potentially destructive forces that seduce and lead us astray—are not quantitatively less powerful in our time, though they are surely different in a qualitative sense. They have taken on radically new forms in the context of new scientific and technical possibilities, new social formations, and new religious movements, but their deep structure remains the same. That structure is not simply some psychological phobia about images, nor is it reducible to straightforward religious doctrines, laws, and prohibitions that a people might follow or violate. It is, rather, a social structure grounded in the experience of otherness and especially in the collective representation of others as idolaters. Accordingly, the first law of iconoclasm is that the idolater is always someone else: early Christian anti-Semitism routinely invoked the story of the golden calf to suggest that the Jews were inherently unbelievers, deniers of the divinity, from the Original Sin of Adam to the Crucifixion of Jesus.[32] The grammar of iconoclasm can, in fact, be conjugated rather straightforwardly around the first, second, and third persons, singular and plural—"I," "You," "We," and "They." "I" am never an idolater because I only worship the true god, or my images are merely symbolic forms and I am an enlightened, modern subject who knows better than to worship mere images. "They" are the idolaters who must be punished, and their idols destroyed. "You," finally, may or may not be an idolater. If you

31. "At a Hamburg press conference in 2001 Stockhausen said he believed that the destructive activities of Lucifer (the Devil) were apparent in the world today, for example in New York. When asked to be more specific Stockhausen said the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre was Lucifer's greatest work of art. Johannes Schulz of NDR, just one of the reporters in attendance, filed a malicious report (omitting the word Lucifer and the context of the question) which was subsequently broadcast on German radio. Before the broadcaster had clarified its original mistake other networks world-wide picked up the story, humiliating the composer cruelly and unjustly. Many newspapers set the record straight in future articles, but inevitably these corrections achieved less prominence." From the unofficial Stockhausen Web site: http://www.stockhausen.org.uk/ksfaq.html.

32. See Bori, *The Golden Calf,* 16–17.

are one of "Them," you probably are. If you are one of "Us," you had better not be, because the penalty for idolatry is death. "We" do not suffer idols or idolaters in our midst.

The second law is that the iconoclast believes that idolaters believe their images to be holy, alive, and powerful. We might call this the law of "secondary belief," or beliefs about the beliefs of other people. Iconoclasm is not just a belief structure but a structure of *beliefs about other peoples' beliefs.* As such, it depends upon stereotype and caricature (image repertoires that reside on the borders of social difference). Stereotypes might be seen as the images that govern a normative picture of other people. A stereotype establishes the general set of beliefs and behaviors that are attributed to others (as humorist Garrison Keillor characterizes the typical Minnesotans of the fictitious Lake Wobegon on *The Prairie Home Companion:* "all the men are strong, all the women are good-looking, and all the children are above average"). The caricature, on the other hand, takes the stereotype and deforms or disfigures it, exaggerating some features or rendering the figure of the Other in terms of some subhuman object in order to ridicule and humiliate (all the men are curs, all the women are bitches, and all the children are mischievous monkeys).[33] A typical strategy of caricature is to render the human features in terms of some lower life-form, usually an animal. Similarly, a recurrent trope of iconoclasm is the accusation of animism and animal worship: the claim that idolaters are worshipping the images of brutes, and that this worship transforms the idolater into a brutish, subhuman creature who can be killed without compunction. The iconoclast, in short, is someone who constructs an image of other people as worshippers of images, and who sets out to punish those people for their false beliefs and practices, and to disfigure or destroy their images—both the images constructed and worshipped by the idolaters and the images of them constructed and reviled by the iconoclasts. In this whole process, real human bodies inevitably become collateral damage.

The deep structure of iconoclasm, then, is alive and well in our time. It may even be a more fundamental phenomenon than the idolatry it seeks to overcome. My sense is that real idolaters (as contrasted with the demonic images fantasized by iconoclasts) are generally rather liberal and flexible about their beliefs. For one thing, most idolaters do not insist that other

33. A more comprehensive discussion of this topic in the context of racial stereotyping and caricature will be found in chapter 14 below.

people worship their idols. They regard their sacred images as theirs, and would regard it as improper for other people to adopt them. Polytheism, paganism, and a genial pluralism about gods and goddesses is the general attitude one associates with actually existing forms of idolatry, as distinct from the phantasmatic projections of Hollywood movies and iconoclastic phobias. Iconoclasm, by contrast, is mainly a product of the three great religions of the Book (the same book, basically). It proceeds from the first principle that images are something to be suspicious of, that they are dangerous, evil, and seductive. It tends to be rather draconian in its sense of the appropriate punishment for idolatry, and rather lurid in its attribution of horrible beliefs and practices to idolaters. The place where idolatry and iconoclasm converge, most notably, is around the issue of human sacrifice. One of the chief arguments for a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance approach to idolaters is that they are reputed to make human sacrifices to their graven images, to kill children or virgins or other innocent victims in obscene, murderous rituals[34] ("You . . . took the sons and daughters that you bore to me and sacrificed them to those images as food" [Ezek. 16:20 (KJV)]). The attribution of this sort of practice to idolaters makes a good pretext for murdering them, making them into a sacrifice to the nonimageable, invisible God who will be pleased by our moral seriousness. The second commandment generally overrides the commandment against killing persons, since idolaters have, in some sense, ceased to be persons at all.

The symmetry between iconoclasm and idolatry explains how it is that acts of "creative destruction" (spectacular annihilation or disfigurement) create "secondary images" that are, in their way, forms of idolatry just as potent as the primary idols they seek to displace. The pleasure principle that governs Hollywood films and video games at this moment in history has never been more obvious: it is the spectacle of violent destruction, from car crashes and the hand-to-hand combat of martial arts movies to visions of entire cities and the world itself enveloped in catastrophic destruction. The image of the destruction of the twin towers (rehearsed in numerous disaster films) has become an idol in its own right, justifying a war on terrorism that plunges the world's most powerful nation into an indefinite state of emergency and unleashes the most reactionary forces of religious fundamentalism within that nation. It will also no doubt inspire acts of

34. See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 16, for further discussion.

imitation and repetition, attempts to stage equally spectacular feats of iconoclasm. Thus "terrorism" has become the verbal idol of the mind for our time, a figure of radical evil that need only be invoked to preempt all discussion or reflection. Like cloning, terrorism is an *invisible* idol, a shape-shifting fantasy that may be instantiated in almost any form, from the stereotyped (or "racially profiled") figure of the brown person with an Arab surname to the caricature of the zealous fanatic, the suicide bomber as psychotic. Insofar as terror is a collective state of mind more than any specific military action, the strategic choices of the U.S. government—pre-emptive warfare, suspension of civil liberties, expansion of police and military powers, and repudiation of international judicial institutions—are perfect devices for cloning terror, for spreading the fantasies of dread and the conditions for their global circulation.

The "building lives" of the twin towers are perhaps most spectacularly figured in the most literal fact about them: that they were *twin* towers, and almost identical twins at that. The first reaction to their destruction was an impulse to clone—to raise the buildings from the dead by erecting replicas of them or (even more ambitious) to rebuild them in even taller, more grandiose forms.[35] Temporary attempts at memorialization, such as the "towers of light" installation at Ground Zero, were remarkable for their uncanny appropriateness as phantasmatic, ghostly spectacles of resurrection. The (generally unconscious) awareness that the light towers device had been previously explored by Hitler's architect and armaments minister, Albert Speer, as a crucial feature of the iconography of Nazi mass rallies only added to the sense of the enigmatic hovering around the spectacle. Clearly something more permanent is wanted—by the people of New York City, by Americans and others, and by the Ground-Zero site itself. If buildings, like all other images, want something, they are called into existence by desire as well.

So what do the twin towers want? What would be adequate to the symbolic, imaginary, and real trauma wrought by their destruction? Clearly the first answer is "nothing," and the maintenance of an *empty* space, the hollowed-out subbasement or "tub" (respected, notably, in architect Daniel

35. I am grateful to David Dunlap, architecture critic of the *New York Times*, for sharing his thinking about the "twin-ness" of the towers with me. See his article on the motif of twin towers in architecture in the *Times*, November 2, 2001, edition: "Even Now, a Skyline of Twins."

Liebeskind's proposed memorial) has been a recurrent motif in images of commemoration. On the constructive side, it is notable that the public was quite dissatisfied with the first attempts to replace the towers with some functional, merely adequate architectural complex that would satisfy the many competing interests in the site. Something more was clearly wanted, and the grandiosity of the proposals has mirrored the public longing for an adequately spectacular monument. The indelible image of the towers' destruction demands a counterimage of commemoration and resurrection. To my mind, the most satisfying proposal so far, both at the level of image and concept, is one that has absolutely no chance of being realized. It is a proposal not by an architect but by the sculptor Ed Shay, who envisions the erection of twin towers on their original sites, fused at the top by a combination of Gothic arch and Borrominian knot (fig. 6). This solution strikes me as both simple and elegant, respecting the original footprints of the twin towers but going beyond them to bring something new (and yet logically predictable and calculable) into the world. The upper floors could be illuminated at night as a memorial beacon, a vortical torch shape suggesting an eternally unified flame growing out of the twin supports. However, the important thing is not that such a megastructure be built but that it be imagined, if only as a visible answer to the "divided we stand" symbolism noted by Eric Darton in the title of his book about the World Trade Center.[36]

The image of the clone, for its part, presents a more insidious and gradual object of iconoclastic fervor, a more subtle horror along with a more utopian prospect. Arnold Schwarzenegger's film *The Sixth Day* suggests in its very title the linkage between ancient religious law and modern technophobia. The "Sixth Day" law gets its name from the biblical creation myth, in which God creates human beings on the sixth day. This law prohibits human cloning, though it permits the cloning of pets and other nonhuman organisms. In the movie, human cloning is banned because it turned out to be impossible to reproduce the memories and personalities of cloned persons, so the new organisms (created fully grown) come out as psychopaths. Even newer technology, however (pioneered in secret by an evil corporation suspiciously similar to Microsoft), has discovered a way to clone the mind as the well as the body, and to produce clones who can carry on when their "parent" organism has been killed. This is a handy device for

36. Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

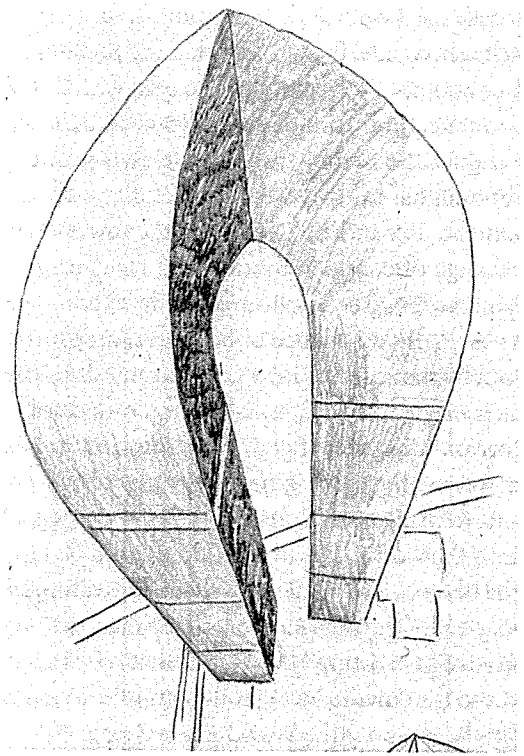

FIGURE 6
Ed Shay, proposal for rebuilt World Trade Center, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

ensuring the viability of a squad of hired assassins who always seem to be killing themselves in high-speed car chases. Needless to say, this death squad is no match for the combined force of two Arnold Schwarzeneggers, a dynamic duo in which it is impossible—even for Schwarzenegger himself—to tell who is the original, and who is the clone.

Perhaps someday we will design replicas of ourselves that can live together in peace and harmony without iconoclasm or its evil twin, idolatry. On the positive side, this is clearly what cloning signifies, what the desire to clone entails. Clones just want to be like us, and to be liked by us.[37] They want us to attain ever more perfect realizations of our genetic potential. Mimesis, as anthropologist Michael Taussig argues, in both traditional and modern societies, has never been simply the production of the "same," but

37. See chapter 12 for more on this subject.

a mechanism for producing difference and transformation: "the ability to mime, and mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other."[38] Therapeutic cloning aims to replace worn-out organs and tissues, to restore burned-out cartilage and brain cells. Reproductive cloning aims to give us a kind of genetic and genealogical immortality, to fulfill even more perfectly a desire that is already manifested in the motivations for having "one's own" biological children as opposed to adopting. In a rather straightforward sense, then, the desires of clones are simply our own human desires to reproduce and to improve. At the same time, of course, they activate the deepest phobias about mimesis, copying, and the horror of the uncanny double. In the latest installment of the *Star Wars* saga, we are not surprised to learn that those hordes of identical white-armored storm troopers who mindlessly march to their destruction are all clones of a single daring bounty hunter, genetically modified to reduce individual initiative. The clone is the image of the perfect servant, the obedient instrument of the master creator's will. But the cunning of the master-slave dialectic, Hegel reminds us, can never be stabilized; the servant is destined to revolt against the master.

The clone, then, shows us why the lives of images are so complex, and why the question, what do pictures want? will never be settled with some unequivocal answer. The clone is what Walter Benjamin called a "dialectical image," capturing the historical process at a standstill. It goes before us as a figure of our future, threatens to come after us as an image of what could replace us, and takes us back to the question of our own origins as creatures made "in the image" of an invisible, inscrutable creative force. Strange as it sounds, then, there is no way we can avoid asking what pictures want. This is a question we are not used to asking, and that makes us uncomfortable because it seems to be just the sort of question that an idolater would ask, one which leads the process of interpretation toward a kind of secular divination. What do the images want from us? Where are they leading us? What is it that they *lack*, that they are inviting us to fill in? What desires have we projected onto them, and what form do those desires take as they are projected back at us, making demands upon us, seducing us to feel and act in specific ways?

A predictable objection to my whole argument here is that it attributes a power to images that is simply alien to the attitudes of modern people.

38. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.

Perhaps savages, children, and illiterate masses can, like sheep, be led astray by images, but we moderns know better. Historian of science Bruno Latour has put a decisive stumbling block in the way of this argument in his wonderful book, *We Have Never Been Modern.* Modern technologies, far from liberating us from the mystery surrounding our own artificial creations, have produced a new world order of "factishes," new syntheses of the orders of scientific, technical factuality on the one hand and of fetishism, totemism, and idolatry on the other. Computers, as we know, are nothing but calculating machines. They are also (as we know equally well) mysterious new organisms, maddeningly complex life-forms that come complete with parasites, viruses, and a social network of their own. New media have made communication seem more transparent, immediate, and rational than ever before, at the same time that they have enmeshed us in labyrinths of new images, objects, tribal identities, and ritual practices. Marshall McLuhan understood this irony very clearly when he pointed out that "by continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions. An Indian is the servo-mechanism of his canoe, as the cowboy of his horse, or the executive of his clock."[39]

So we must ask the question, what do pictures want from us? and stay for the answers, even though the question seems impossible to begin with. We might even have to entertain what I would call a "critical idolatry" or "secular divination" as an antidote to that reflexive critical iconoclasm that governs intellectual discourse today. Critical idolatry involves an approach to images that does not dream of destroying them, and that recognizes every act of disfiguration or defacement as itself an act of creative destruction for which we must take responsibility. It would take as its inspiration (as I have already suggested) the opening pages of Nietzsche's *Twilight of Idols,* in which Nietzsche recommends "sounding out" the idols with the hammer, or "tuning fork," of critical language. The idols that Nietzsche wants to strike are, as he says, "eternal," which I take to mean indestructible. The proper strategy, then, is not to attempt to destroy them, an iconoclasm that is doomed to failure, but to play upon them as if they were musical instruments. The power of idols over the human mind resides in their

39. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (first pub. 1964; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 46.

silence, their spectacular impassiveness, their dumb insistence on repeating the same message (as in the baleful cliché of "terrorism"), and their capacity for absorbing human desire and violence and projecting it back to us as a demand for human sacrifice. It also resides in their obdurate indestructibility, which only gains strength from the sense of futility that accompanies the vain attempt to destroy them. "Sounding" the idols, by contrast, is a way of playing upon them. It does not dream of breaking the idol but of breaking its silence, making it speak and resonate, and transforming its hollowness into an echo chamber for human thought.