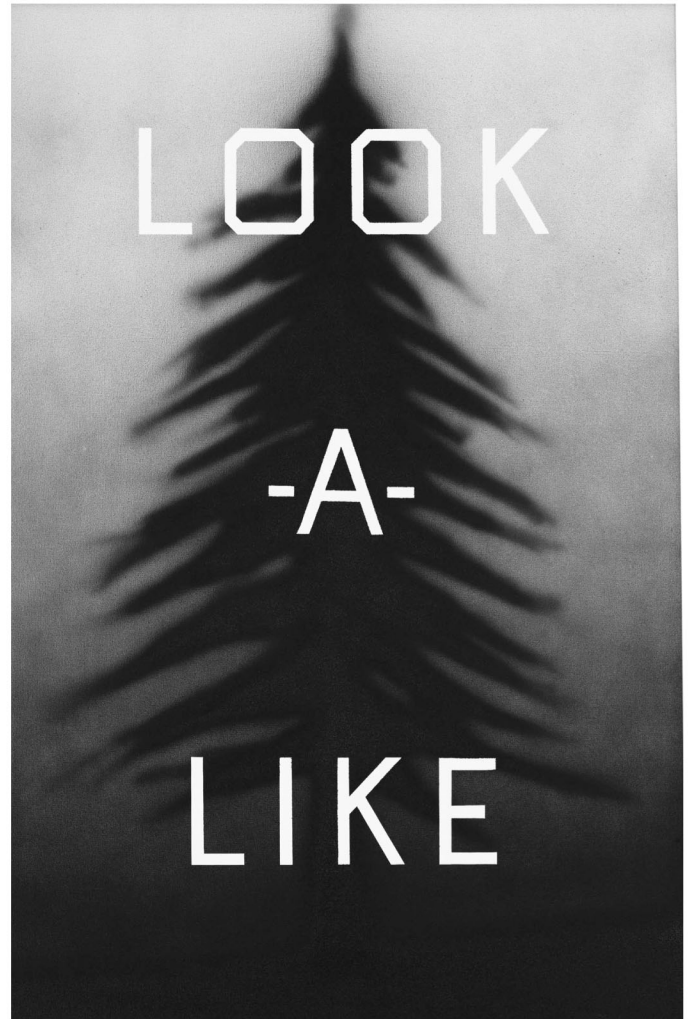


## Tom Huhn

*Mimesis* is an ideal term to describe the dynamics of affirming continuity between things and ourselves, or—more generally—the word *mimesis* might best refer to the plausibility of likeness in the world. We may not fully fathom just how deeply *mimesis* grounds such connectivity.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s renowned definition of drama as a *mimesis* of human action—as well as his characterization of both knowledge and human events as centrally mimetic—has overshadowed his more profound insight regarding narrative unity as itself a mimetic achievement.<sup>2</sup> That is, the seeming obviousness of Aristotle’s delineation of plot as the inexorable procession from beginning to middle and thus to end has obscured the real triumph of narrative chronology in the unity conjured up out of singular events. The thoroughly mimetic character of plot can be seen, then, not solely in its representational content—the imitations of human actions—but rather, and more profoundly, in the very form of plot as the forging of a unifying continuity from beginning to end. Aristotle acknowledges that though a far more noticeable mimetic continuity appears always to reside in the visual imitations that bind a representation to a referent, the true import of *mimesis* lies elsewhere. And we can surmise that even such a well-tethered continuity as the one between thing and referent—or, say, the one between image and object—is underpinned by the far less obvious unities of narration and visual form. It is from this latter species of *mimesis*—the one that produces not so much likenesses and representations as unities and continuities—that we have much to learn. That is, the mimetic genius of images may lie not in the imitative likening of images to things but in the manner in which every image reproduces and approximates the unity of an object (Fig. 1).

F1

Paul Ricoeur explains the origin of a more expansive, indeed, sweeping understanding of *mimesis* as first arising out of Aristotle’s break with Plato. Plato, convinced of the thoroughly unoriginal and solely reproductive tendency of *mimesis*, considered it to be the most powerful deflection from truth and reality, a threat to politics and intellect. For Ricoeur, an enlarged, active understanding of *mimesis* constitutes Aristotle’s “rupture” with Plato’s static conception, which depicts all human making as proceeding shadowlike from whatever already exists. Whereas Plato’s doctrine of *mimesis* confines it entirely to the realm of reproduction and aftereffect, Aristotle’s (mimetic) reconceptualization construes *mimesis* as a form of dynamic, original human action—



1 Ed Ruscha, *Look-A-Like*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 32 in. Gagosian Gallery, New York (artwork and photograph © Ed Ruscha)

more specifically, of making and production not prejudged as inevitably unoriginal. As Ricoeur explains, “far from producing a weakened image of pre-existing things, *mimesis* brings about an augmentation of meaning in the field of action, which is its privileged field. It does not equate itself with something already given. Rather it produces what it imitates, if we continue to translate *mimesis* by ‘imitation.’”<sup>3</sup>

In the enlarged view, mimesis is a form of überproduction: it produces, *and* it produces meanings. The making of meaning, in other words, is another mimetic means of forging continuities.

Mimesis is enabled by the epistemological relation between sense and judgment. David Summers's *Judgment of Sense* shows the great variety of ways in which sense and judgment were construed by a host of medieval and early modern thinkers as necessarily continuous with one another. Judgments about things could thus readily come to be seen as mimetic recapitulations of sensations.<sup>4</sup> We witness this same mimetic coupling of sense and judgment in the essay that would become the most important touchstone for many eighteenth-century writers on taste and aesthetic judgment: Joseph Addison's 1712 essay "Pleasures of the Imagination."<sup>5</sup> Addison describes imagination as an elaborated, controlled, and willed resuscitation of the pleasures of sensation. Imagination's pleasure is grounded in a return to the pleasures of sensation, and imagination takes pleasure in the submission of sensation to the possibility of imaginative mimetic repetition.

The appearance in 1755 of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works* marks a watershed in the history of thinking about mimesis, since it cordons off mimesis to the realm of art making.<sup>6</sup> Winckelmann's contraction of mimesis severely restricts the range of the term, stipulating that originality can arise only from imitative continuity. With a wave of the hand, Winckelmann elevated mimesis to the center of all genuine artistic production. His exhortation to make truly original art by imitating the art of the ancient Greeks is complemented by his justly

renowned phrase in praise of all successful art: "a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur [*eine edle Einfalt und eine stille Grösse*]" not only elevates the best of ancient Greek art, it also signals elevation and equipoise—of style, subject, and affect. Winckelmann's famous phrase is no empty recommendation of beautiful art but an acknowledgment, via simplicity and stillness,<sup>7</sup> of the Aristotelian formulation of mimesis as the simultaneous movement toward continuity and unity (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whom we rightly thank for the modern discovery of artistic medium,<sup>9</sup> conceives his book *Laocoön* as a rebuttal to what he takes to be Winckelmann's mischaracterization of mimesis.<sup>10</sup> Lessing's division of the arts according to their kinship either to painting or poetry signals more than the recognition of the distinction between time-based and non-time-based arts. It is also an implicit claim that all art making proceeds mimetically from one of two constitutive categories of human experience: time and space.

From the Aristotelian position, all of the now long-standing characterizations of mimesis as variations of imitation, resemblance, representation, and so on are mere secondary appearances of a more primal mimetic impulse toward unity. The suspicion that mimesis is more importantly a momentum toward unity perched very deep within us is likewise found in Sigmund Freud's investigation of what underlies our human inclinations toward pleasure. Freud locates a tendency akin to mimesis in his speculation that repetition—more fundamental even than pleasure—manifests itself most often as imitation.<sup>11</sup> Freud comes to characterize this overarchingly imitative, repetitious momentum as the return motion toward whatever state a thing might previously have been—and he asserts that this fundamental inclination lies at the base of all organic life. Alongside Freud we might nominate Walter Benjamin as having provided another important twentieth-century reconfiguration of mimesis. Benjamin's conception of the human mimetic faculty yields an ideal location in which to witness the convergence of its most primal and most sophisticated facets. For Benjamin, human language is both the active instigator as well as the passive resonator of nature's self-generative, repetitious dynamic.<sup>12</sup> Human language is the appearance, the approximation, and the most recent iteration of nature's own recapitulating mimetic pulse.<sup>13</sup> For Freud and Benjamin, mimesis figures a continuity constitutive of human experience.<sup>14</sup>

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, oddly enough, comes to mind here. Granted more time and space, perhaps even his dialectic could be made to reveal its mimetic allegiances. For Hegel, the origin of consciousness emerges when sensuousness takes flight. Consciousness first appears in the content arising from the negation of the features and stuff of sensuousness.<sup>15</sup> In this view, consciousness is the obverse mirror image of sensuousness, for consciousness comprises all that sensuousness leaves behind.<sup>16</sup> Just picture that.

*Tom Huhn, chair of the Art History and Visual & Critical Studies departments at the School of Visual Arts, has published Imitation and Society: The Persistence of Mimesis in the Aesthetics of Burke, Hogarth, and Kant; The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetics; and The Cambridge Companion to Adorno [Visual & Critical Studies, School of Visual Arts, 209 East 23rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10010, thuhn@sva.edu].*



2 Mary Jo Vath, *Batman Pinata*, 2010, oil on linen, 25 × 20 in.

## Notes

1. I thank Ellen Levy for helping me collect and recall my ideas about mimesis.
2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).
3. Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 138.
4. David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
5. Joseph Addison, "Pleasures of the Imagination," in *Spectator*, nos. 411–21 (1712).
6. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755), trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987).
7. For an illuminating discussion of alternative translations of *stille* (calm, quiet), see the introduction to Alex Potts's *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
8. This point is made still more forcefully in Winckelmann's remarks on the unity between surface and depth in successful works of sculpture. It's just this unity of surface with all that appears to be beneath it that signals the triumph of a work of sculpture.
9. This is, of course, Clement Greenberg's view of Lessing. See Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1940*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 23–38.
10. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
11. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).
12. I'm grateful to Jon Edelson for reminding me of Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," which begins: "She sang beyond the genius of the sea. / The water never formed to mind or voice, / Like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion / Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry, / That was not ours although we understood, / Inhuman, of the veritable ocean."
13. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, *1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720–22.
14. For a particularly illuminating treatment of the mimetic history of the term *figure*, see Erich Auerbach's "Figura" (1938), reprinted in Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959).
15. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
16. Hegel credited Schiller for having inspired in him the insight that the shape of consciousness was first and foremost set by the determinations of sensuousness. See Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1794), ed. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).