PREFACE

Figures and Grounds

A distinction is drawn by arranging a boundary with separate sides so that a point on one side cannot reach the other side without crossing the boundary.

GEORGE SPENCER-BROWN, *Laws of Form* (1969)

There is an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within
Beyond the Outline of Identity both ways, which meet in One . . .

WILLIAM BLAKE, *Jerusalem* (1804)

We Germans have no lack of systematic books.

G. E. LESSING, *Laocoon: On the Limitsof Poetry and Painting* (1766)

"How to begin without having begun, since one needs a distinction in order to begin." The answer, for philosopher Niklas Luhmann, is a simple imperative: "draw a distinction."[1] This remark might be taken as the fundamental mantra of modern systems theory, as important to contemporary social and natural sciences as the Cartesian cogito, "I think, therefore I am," was to early modern science. But it is also a foundational moment for iconology, the science of images. An iconologist is bound to notice the figurative expression hidden in the notion of *drawing* a distinction, and then to insist on taking it literally, as a visual, graphic operation. The philosopher or sociologist might say it means merely to *make* a distinction, to provide a verbal definition that distinguishes one thing from another—truth from falsehood, good from evil, clarity from obscurity, here from there—especially when the two things might otherwise be confused: art and life, meaning and significance, expression and imitation. In any case, the iconologist's attention is drawn to *drawing*, to the inscription of a boundary, the marking of a form in space, the contrast between a thing and the environment in which it is located. In short, the delineation of figure from ground.

Of course, drawing a distinction between figure and ground is only

1. *Art as a Social System* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 31.

the beginning. In systems theory, that distinction marks the boundary between a system and its environment or between a form and the medium in which the form appears. It inevitably draws attention to three things: (1) the boundary between an inside and an outside that constitutes a figure or form in a space; (2) the frame or support in or on which an image and its surrounding space make their appearance; (3) the outline that curves in upon itself, drawing the beholder into a vortex that reverses the locations of figure and ground. Thus, what was marked becomes unmarked, and the previously unmarked suddenly emerges as remarkable: the vase disappears to reveal two faces, or vice versa.

From the standpoint of image science, then, systems theory ceases to be abstract. It takes on a body and locates that body somewhere. It becomes visible, graphic, and even palpable. And it puts into question its own Cartesian moment of drawing because, after all, is drawing really all there is to images? What about color? Doesn't color obey a different logic, one that spills over boundaries, shades into an infinite spectrum of infinitesimal differentiations and vague indeterminacies? Is it not the ultimate ground out of which every figure must emerge? And isn't color precisely the phenomenon that defies the fundamental gesture of systems theory, insofar as every distinction that is drawn between one hue, one tonality, and another generates an intermediate possibility, a mixture of the two colors being distinguished, the gray zone of the everyday?

The following essays, written unsystematically over the last decade in response to a variety of occasions, display a certain adherence to these basic gestures and limitations of systems theory. The essays are gathered here as a diptych, part 1 focusing on figures, part 2 on grounds. The first eight essays deal with the nature of images, from the ways in which they breach the disciplinary borders of art history, to their potential as scientific objects, to their centrality in questions of language, social and emotional life, realism and truth-claims, technology and life-forms, and, finally, in the notion of world pictures, or "the world as picture," as Martin Heidegger put it.[2] The second eight essays focus on the media in which images appear, the sites and spaces where they live, and the frameworks of temporality and spectacle that frame them in a history of the present.

2. "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 129: "world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture."