

Methods of Cataloguing Inventory: What Do Pictures Want



This inventory arranges theoretical ideas as one might archive images: by themes, desires, and contradictions. It sorts ideas from W. J. T. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?* into smaller categories like ways of thinking about what images are, what they do, and how they relate to human desire.

It talks about how images act not just as objects to be seen but as beings that seem to see, feel, and want something in return.

Totemism and Fetishism: The Personhood of Things

Totemism and fetishism deal with how humans give life to objects. We treat certain things like idols, artworks, or even photographs (of loved ones) as if they are alive.

Mitchell says that even in modern society, we still hold these pre-modern feelings. We continue to treat some images as if they have power, emotion, or presence. The idol, like the figure of the Black man, carries both fear and fascination. It is worshipped and rejected at the same time.

Images as Agents

Catherine MacKinnon argues that pictures, especially pornographic or cinematic ones, can act as agents of violence. They shape how we think about gender and power. Cinema and popular culture construct women as objects of the male gaze, blurring the line between representation and reality.

Mitchell expands on this by saying that pictures are "alive" in a different way — not because they breathe, but because we respond to them emotionally. A picture's "wanting" is not about ownership but about connection. It wants our attention, our belief, our fear, or our love.

What do Women Want

In Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, a knight must discover what women most desire. He hears many wrong answers — money, beauty, love — before learning that what women truly want is maistrye, or mastery: the right to choose and control their own lives.

The story reveals how women's desire for power grows from centuries of not having it. "Want" here means both desire and lack. Mitchell later uses this same question, "what do pictures want", to explore how images, like women in culture, seem powerful but are defined through absence.

The Picture That Wants You

Mitchell looks at the World War I recruiting poster "I Want You for the U.S. Army." The image points straight at the viewer. It wants your body, your loyalty, your service.

Yet Uncle Sam isn't real — he stands for the nation, calling others to sacrifice themselves. The picture wants power, but its demand also shows its weakness: it needs us to look at it to exist. Its desire is built on dependence.



Paradox of desire and the Gaze in Art

Art theorist Michael Fried believed that great modern paintings appeared absorbed or self-sufficient as if they seemed unaware of being looked at. This indifference was itself a form of power. But even the wish not to show desire, as Lacan says, is still a kind of desire.

Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* plays with this tension. The marble face looks calm and unaware, but the added text turns that calmness into confrontation. The artwork both invites and resists the viewer's gaze, exposing how looking itself can be violent.

What Pictures Want ?

Mitchell suggests that pictures are not passive things but living participants in human life. Like people, they have complex, mixed desires. Their "power" often comes from their lack as they depend on our gaze and our response to feel alive.

If we could ask pictures what they want, they might give many wrong answers like fame, love, control etc. But their deep desire, Mitchell says, is not to be mastered or explained. They want to be acknowledged, to be seen as active or a feeling, and uncertain, just like us.

Conclusion

Mitchell's question - "What do pictures want?" is not meant to be answered, but to change how we think about images. It reminds us that pictures are not silent; they act, they speak, they demand. Their "wanting" mirrors our own: our desire to see, to know, to possess. In the end, what pictures most want (and perhaps writing itself) is not our mastery over it but simply to be looked back at — to be treated not as things we own, but as partners in the ongoing exchange between seeing and being seen.

Reference

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005) *What Do Pictures Really Want? - the lives and loves of images*, pp. 28-56. University of Chicago press