I feel honored to have the opportunity to respond to David Carrier’s editorial on Ernst H. Gombrich—all the more so as my book ART and the MIND: Ernst H. GOMBRICH has been published in February 2018 [1]. The 2009 international conference devoted to Gombrich in Greifswald, Germany, for which I was able to attract the financial support of the Wissenschaftskolleg Alfried Krupp Stiftung, allowed me to spread my vision of engaging—as in a cycle of sowing and reaping—with certain concepts and insights of Gombrich in the context of image science. The subtitle of the book is in German: Mit dem Steckenpferd unterwegs, intended to evoke such reflections as “What could Gombrich’s hobbyhorse support best, or Where does it go next?” The “Steckenpferd” (hobbyhorse) became a metaphor for the approach or lifelong interest of E.H. Gombrich, and recalls the fundamental questions Gombrich posed in the volume Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art [2]. I want to make clear that this book is not biographical and not an homage but offers firm ground for building upon.

Among the international contributors to the book are some of the most influential figures in art history, original authorities in their own right; among them are former students of Gombrich. David Freedberg, who traveled far to work with Gombrich and Michael Baxandall, established an interdisciplinary postdoctoral program to bridge the epistemological gap between the humanities and the sciences for the benefit of understanding cultures and human behaviors, especially in the presence of images. For the last twenty years, John Onians has been using neuroscience to advance the study of the history of art. Gombrich anticipated the extent to which neuroscience could be of service to the art historian, but sadly he did not live long enough to hear his archenemy, Norman Bryson, join him in the “biological” camp, having abandoned his earlier theories as of purely “clerical” interest because of their emphasis on words in favor of an approach founded in neuroscience and rooted in lived experience, as Onians notes. Robert Kudielka (of the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin) draws attention to another of Gombrich’s hobby-horses, the conviction that cooperation with painters could be more productive than with art historians—a point of view he sustains with the observation that the phenomenon of color as a particular totality of all colors, irreducible to the single hues involved, long exploited by painters, has only recently found scientific explanation through the study of neurobiology.

The special insights of a painter are illustrated by the well-known writer Julian Bell, who, in a generous but critical spirit worthy of Gombrich himself, explores the benefits and limitations of neuroarthistory. Hans Belting, having generated impulses toward a fundamental revision of the self-conception and methodology of the discipline of art history, became a leading voice in the fields of image research. Nadia J. Koch focuses on the interaction between classical rhetoric and the theory of art production. I asked her to share her new insights into the ancient techne, thereby reviving models of visual communication that are of contemporary interest. These are only some ideas from the book.

Gombrich’s scholarly publications persuaded academic art historians to rethink many of the cozy assumptions on which their conservative field was built. They also brought renewal in areas of philosophy and psychology. Gombrich introduced students in many fields to the complexities of the artist’s mind and helped them to realize the power of their own eyes and intellects. These achievements were obscured in the last decades of his life by a wave of fashion, but this has now receded, leaving the rocks of his achievement standing out as landmarks in the history not just of art but of culture. (See Fig.1.)

It is true that there have been extensive debates about some of Gombrich’s claims, especially on perspective; many of the battles that he fought no longer seem very relevant, because they have been won. But it is easy to forget that, when he was writing, the ideas that he opposed still exerted a power-
ful hold on many art historians. (See Charles Hope in his sensible analysis "How Gombrich will be remembered" [3].)

My project aims at encouraging further debate about some of Gombrich’s insights first presented in his Art and Illusion (1960). His popular Story of Art (1950) has no relevance to what art history is today, say many who want to historicize him. Some go no further in their reading, although a methodological investigation would reveal his vigorous mind.

After 1945, German art history was mostly characterized by the search for the ideal narrative for a “sacralization of the aesthetic experience” [4]. In this precarious situation Gombrich continued to seek a rational approach to understanding the riddle of style. Responding to the ambitious book Signs, Language and Behavior by Charles William Morris, Gombrich called in a review for an open in-depth debate about the image [5]. His lifelong interest was in reconstruction of an image’s context and the conditions of its production, to understand how images where made to respond to certain expectations and to learn more about the uses of images. Initial titles of his ambitious image-project included “The Realm and the Range of the Image” or simply ”The Language of the Image.” He acknowledged the role of attention in the process of perception as a puzzle still unsolved by psychology, and his short formula for the subject he never tired of researching—the riddle of how images are made and then perceived by a beholder—was “making comes before matching.” He also emphasized the importance of the schema. This was Gombrich in 1960! It is no secret how much current discussion of the brain’s activity—the capacity of the memory—today is focused on the role of schemata. To obtain a greater theoretical insight into the artistic process, Gombrich again and again tried to cooperate with artists, joining forces with them even in the last days of his life. He was convinced of the importance of what I call the interface between art and science, the common ground of artists and scientists, their shared interest in creating models of reality through a process of learning and discovering. Artists, he thought, have long been vision scientists avant la lettre.

The links between art and science have only been recognized recently by some of my art history colleagues. Art history has a strong German tradition, rooted in philosophical Idealism. Yet many in my discipline, although not most of them anymore, still set the focus on “history” and not on art. Because of a specific conceptual mindset, with its roots in German romanticism, they research most of the Why of a certain configuration and not How it is achieved. Gombrich, when asked what he would like to advise his colleagues, said: “I really have the impression that . . . they write about everything except about art . . . but after all one may surely ask of the history of art that it concern itself with art! Because I think that we still know too little” [6].

As ART and the MIND: Ernst H. GOMBRICH. Mit dem Steckenpferd unterwegs will show, he never tired of warning against the ideological occupation of art history by reductionist and speculative approaches. Meanwhile we observe not only the historicizing of the work of art, but the occupation of scholars with a historicizing of the discipline itself. Where will the making of art history or Kunstwissenschaft go? How necessary it is to encourage young colleagues to have an undeviating drive to become art historians and to learn that:

Since nature and art are among the richest sources of metaphor, they answer the needs of the mind, quod erat demonstrandum . . . this capacity of the mind consciously or unconsciously to articulate and order the world of experience by linking it with a natural phenomenon of universal significance—from the description “a sunny temperament” to the old song-hit “You Are My Sunshine.” . . . Without forming such compounds linking our sensory experience with our emotional life we could not communicate our feelings to others—and to ourselves. In short, it is my belief that it is only through this process of creative articulation that the mind becomes wholly mind [7].

References and Notes
1 Sybille Moser-Ernst, ART and the MIND: Ernst H. GOMBRICH. Mit dem Steckenpferd unterwegs (Göttingen, Germany: V&R Unipress, 2018).

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