One of the difficulties with using iconographical methods in the history of medieval art is their ineffectiveness in dealing with individual cases of the reuse of images and the decontextualizing effects of quotation. Medievalists often stand at a confusing hermeneutical crossroads between, on the one hand, ‘reading’ images as a descriptive process of systematic assignment of meanings to forms and, on the other, ‘understanding’ objects, and alterations in their materiality, as a way of comprehending the unpredictable dynamics of cultural change.¹ The relevance of such divergent and flexible approaches as art patronage and politics, images and shifts of power, and resonances between public iconography and individual intention, have suffered a long period of neglect in art history due to the domination of iconographical, logo-centric research on images. We cannot quote all of the discipline’s breakthrough moments in this respect, such as George Kubler’s elaborations on the different time modes of the objects over the course of history, or David Freedberg’s studies in the theory of response, both of which saved images from the burden of semiotics and paved the way for the anthropological studies of images and their changing meanings that is now current.² But let us mention in this respect the prominent statement by Horst Bredekamp from his brilliant short analysis of Donatello’s Judith with Holofernes, a Florentine masterpiece that will appear several times in our study. Bredekamp investigated the changing levels of its political efficacy as an ambivalent image of decapitation and thus surgically demystified the assumption of its inherent ‘image magic’ by pointing to ethnographical origins of the previous research. The conclusion was that it was ‘precisely the forms of images that determined


whether these worked in a representational or in a magical way. Two polarities of interpretation are relevant to our investigation: one the so-called ‘magic of the image’, and the other the use of established modes of pictorial representation as a tool for the public appropriation of power. The present study accordingly raises the question of reuse of a certain visual potential that had long been part of the public visual culture, and examines ways in which beholders’ existing visual experience could be reshaped in accordance with political premises. The depictions analysed show the head of John the Baptist, which gives an additional charge to the process of argumentative quotation studied, since representations of a severed head necessarily share in the ambivalent status of any images of fragmentation. Such partial images appear as sovereign substitutes for the body, but at the same time they work intensively as relative references exactly because of their unsettling visual incompleteness. It is in terms of such visual fluctuations that we shall trace the reception history of the head of John the Baptist and those depictions of it that functioned as political emblems of power in the Silesian capital of Wrocław (Breslau) in the Late Middle Ages.

The public display of images of John’s head by the municipal authorities of this city, which was also the see of the local bishopric, can be regarded as a source of tension between the secular and the ecclesiastical powers. In Wrocław’s cathedral of St. John some fragments of bone said to be from the saint’s skull had been preserved ‘in disco’, that is to say within a reliquary in the common shape of the so-called Johannesschüssel, since at least 1428. Permanent possession of these head relics was an argument in support of episcopal authority. The same relics were to a certain degree decontextualized as depictions in the public space of the city multiplied for purpose of legitimization of the secular political power, and in this

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4 This article is meant as a pilot study of a broader project on this subject to be further conducted by the author.  