Press Release

**Philippe Descola**

**The Slade Professor of Fine Art Lectures Series 2021**

Beyond structuring memory, conveying information and expressing emotions, figuration is a precious index of ontological pluralism, that is, of the diversity of ways according to which humans select and organize salient properties of the worlds they inhabit. Using material from a wide variety of iconographic traditions, the lectures will show the cross-cultural similarities and contrasts of the patterns thanks to which these ontological properties are made visible. They will focus on the comparative analysis of the types of entities that are revealed, or omitted, in images – a single object, a network, a presence embodied in a human, a chimera – as well as of the relations that their depiction renders manifest – for instance a relation of subject to subject between humans and animals, or a relation of subject to object, or even of cause to result. The lectures will also consider the array of formal means employed for constructing a two-dimensional visual space and the relation of this means to ontological predicates, a way to emphasize Western exceptionalism and its obsession with emulating human vision from a single point of observation. Finally, the lectures will endeavour to show that the agency with which most collectives endow their images is far from uniform. It varies as much according to the visual mechanisms through which this objective is attained – mimesis, animating a human body in disguise, or treating artefacts as if they were persons – as to the pragmatic circumstances and networks activating images, all these conditions being themselves closely related to each of the ontological frameworks providing the filters for figuration.

The lecturer, Philippe Descola, is Emeritus Professor at the Collège de France where he held the chair of anthropology from 2000 to 2019, and Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Among former positions, he has been George Lurcy Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, Jacques Leclercq Visiting Professor at the University of Louvain, Fellow of the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, Munich, and Visiting Fellow at King’s College and at Pembroke, Cambridge. He obtained his doctorate in ethnology at the École Pratique des Hautes Études under the supervision of Claude Lévi-Strauss after having studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. Among his books translated into English are *In the Society of Nature*, *The Spears of Twilight*, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, *The Ecology of others*. Recipient of the Gold Medal of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, he is a fellow of the British Academy and a foreign member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**Making Things Visible**

An Anthropology of Figuration

Lecture titles:

1. The Embodied Sign

2. Animated Spirits

3. Templates and Tracks

4. Exercises in Composition

5. Facing the World

6. Having it Both Ways

7. Forms of Transposition

8. Saliency, Agency, Ostension