# SEDUCTION OR PROOF? REVEALING ASSUMPTIONS IN THE NEGOTIATION OF PERCEIVED REALITY THROUGH IMAGES

**Michael Renner[1], Kambiz Shafei[2]**
[1]University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland
Academy of Art and Design
michael.renner@fhnw.ch
[2]University of Art and Design Linz

REPRESENTATION
DRAWING
PHOTOGRAPHY
MATERIALITY
ARCHITECTURE

Throughout the history of Western thought, images are dismissed in the search for truth claiming their seductive nature (Plinius, 2007) and at the same time they are used as proof e.g., in Geometry (Nelsen, 1999), documentary photography (Sontag, 1973) or political argumentation (King, 2014).

All images are objects which represent a selection of what we perceive as reality. They would be clones, if they would represent all aspects of what we can perceive (Jonas, 1961). Some images declare their selective nature of representation. Other images are deceptive because they are pretending to be what they represent. In comparison to language, using propositional argumentation, images can provide evidence (Mersch, 2005). This contribution provides a closer look at how we preconceive the relationship of images to reality.

In the first part of the contribution, we refer to experimental drawings of landscapes and portraits. We analyze their relationship to four levels of what we can define as a reality perceived in images. In the second part we continue the inquiry into the relationship between images and reality in the context of architectural photography. We refer to experimental photographic image series, which focus on the materiality of photography and propose to overcome the hierarchical order between original building and fake copy of architecture in the photographic image, by making the photograph to a material object. In a third and final section of the paper the findings of the previous two sections are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

In reference to early sources of reflection upon the agency of images, there is a recurring binary-coded description of them.

1. The image understood as being a seductive copy of what we perceive as reality (Plato; Nietzsche, 1954; Heidegger, 2010);
2. the image as an inscription of what we perceive as proof of an instance in reality (Sontag, 1973; Nelsen, 2016).

The image and its deceptive agency is already described for example in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (Plinius, 2007). He elaborates on the competition of two painters, Parrhasios and Zeuxis. When they met to present their paintings to each other, the one by Zeuxis represented grapes in such a naturalistic fashion that birds were deceived and tried to pick them. In response, Zeuxis asked Parrhasios to unveil his painting and realized, afterwards, that the cloth covering of the painting actually was the painting itself. Since deceiving a person is considered to be more difficult than deceiving a bird, Parrashios was called the winner of the competition.

Also, Pliny the Elder already addressed the aspect of a process of inscription in his *Natural History* (Plinius, 2007). He refers to the portrait as a means to prove the historical existence of an individual person and describes the beginning of portraiture as a technical process. The daughter of Sykion, a potter, wanted to preserve the memory of the young man she loved, since he had to leave her for a while. With a candle she cast his profile on the wall and traced his silhouette. Even though the anecdote does not describe the process of preserving the memory as proof, the silhouette, and the method to represent it, is proving the presence of a specific young man at the location where the silhouette was cast. Until today, the effect to inscribe reality into an image is usually attributed to technical processes of image generation (Flusser, 1994; Daston & Galison, 2007). The photographic process was compared to a "pencil of nature" suggesting an objective rela-

tionship to what it represents (Talbot, 2011). Even though we know that, today, a photorealistic continuous tone image can be achieved through processes of algorithmic calculations, it is still assumed that a photographic image directly correlates with a specific situation of reality. This kind of preconception is the starting point of this contribution. What kind of preconceived notions do we share when interpretating images as regards their relationship to the real. Beyond the photographic image –which is considered to be the most transparent medium (Barthes, 1993) since it does not reveal the materiality of its medium– we will inquire in the first section of the paper into the field of images created through the trace of a bodily gesture – landscapes, portraits, and individual signatures. In the second section, we will return to photography and its relation to built architecture.

But how can we discuss the relationship between images and perceived reality? What is the relationship of a real experience and its representation by an image?

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2013) points out that our perception is not bound to a specific point of view. Rather, it is a conceptual schema which is derived from looking at something from all angles.

> I see the next-door house from a certain angle, but it would be seen differently from the right bank of the Seine, or from the inside, or again from an airplane: the house *itself* is none of these appearances: it is … the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived … the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths, leaving nothing hidden. (p. xx)

Even though the author refers in this quote to visual perception, the schema is formed by a multisensory experience encompassing all our sensuous perceptions such as vision, audition, olfaction, gustation, and tactition. Images are not conventional signs the way linguistic terms are. Even though

they have to entail generalization, they have to refer to a concrete experience in reality in order to create meaning. They have to imitate, represent, simulate, exemplify, and copy the characteristic aspects of an experience. They are imitating selected qualities of our perceived reality but cannot imitate its entirety. Otherwise, images would become clones of reality (Jonas, 1961). In the mode of an exemplification of reality, the perception of images can have the agency of a deceptive illusion or of proving a real situation. In the following two sections, we critically inquire into this binary division of images in reference to concrete examples of drawing and photography.

## THE REALITIES WE PERCEIVE THROUGH DRAWING

A drawing consists of lines which are material traces resulting from the gestural process of the designer. In its difference to the visually perceived reality, the drawing reveals its status as an interpretation through its material constellation. Nevertheless, there is a relationship to reality, and we can differentiate the dependency of drawings on four notions of reality by asking the following questions: (1) What is the relationship of the traces to our perceived reality? (2) What kind of shared understanding does a socio-cultural context contain of the representation of reality in a drawing? (3) What is the reference of the drawing to the individual identity of the designer? (4) What reality is created through the materiality contained in the tools used for drawing?

In order to elicit an answer to these questions, we can turn to a set of experiments conducted with a group of Master students in Visual Communication. When asked to draw a fictional mountain range, which makes a beholder believe that it is the representation of an existing landscape, it is part of the exercise that there is no direct relationship between this drawing and a landscape (Question 1). None of the lines is attempting to resemble an interpretation of an observa-

**Fig. 1** Class Project, *Imaginary Mountain Scapes*, 2020, Charcoal in Sketchbooks, A3 Spread. Five results from a class experiment which show a dominance of a triangular shape in the representation of fictional mountains. Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst FHNW, Archive Institute of Visual Communication 2020.

tion. Rather, it is the internal 'accuracy' of lines and planes to each other which makes us believe that there is a relationship between the drawing and a visually perceived reality. The relationship of the iconic elements and their quality makes us question or believe that the drawing we look at is the result of an observation, a fictional imagination, or a representation related to a convention. By comparing a first set of sketches, it becomes apparent that the majority of drawings are clinging to a shared schematic preconception of a mountain range as an arrangement of triangular shapes (Figure 1).

This observation points to the relationship between the drawing and a shared understanding within a socio-cultural context. The mountains represented by a stereotypical triangular shape is comparable to a conventional sign. Even though we can claim that a drawing follows the visual experience memorized over time and that its conventional aspect is less engrained through social exchange, it becomes obvious that, in the context of a representation through drawing, we also find a shared understanding of what the representation of a visual experience actually is. In reference to Merleau-Ponty's (2013) description of perceiving a house, we can claim, that the triangular shape is addressing a slice of the shared schema of looking at a mountain from all sides. In this way, the triangle refers to a shared understanding of reality. This kind of reality is a precondition so that a representation is able to develop meaning and is not read as a mere accumulation of lines on paper. The mountains depicted as triangles are not deceiving their beholder, they are shared ideas of how mountains look like. They are readable without simulating their appearance in a naturalistic manner (Question 2).

Beyond the above-described similarities of the results, each drawing shows an individual approach. The lines may

tentatively be placed in large number in order to find the definite form. The representation of light and shadow is achieved by using a wide spectrum of grey values. Or the description of the landscape is achieved by using a textural approach which refers to the qualities of rock, snow or meadows. Beyond the description of these different approaches, the quality of the traces in each drawing is situated within a certain range of contingencies and refers to an individual designer. Just as much as a signature counts as proof of the presence of an individual person at a certain time and space, the individuality expressed in the lines of a drawing are proof of the presence of the designer (Question 3).

Thus, the interpretation of the signature by Derrida (1988) is transferrable to the individual trace of the designer.

> From this point of view, let us attempt to analyze signatures, their relation to the present and to the source. I shall consider it as an implication of the analysis that every predicate established will be equally valid for that oral 'signature' constituted –or aspired to– by the presence of the 'author' as a 'person who utters,' as a 'source,' to the production of the utterance.
>
> By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non presence of the signer. But, it will be claimed, the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now or present [maintenant] which will remain a future now or present [maintenant], thus in a general maintenant, in the transcendental form of presentness [maintenance]. That general maintenance is in some way inscribed, pinpointed in the always evident and Singular present punctuality of the form of the signature. Such is the enigmatic originality of every paraph. For the tethering to the source to occur, what must be retained is the absolute singularity of a signature-event and a Signature-form: the pure reproducibility of a pure event. (p. xx)

In addition, the tool of natural charcoal, the materiality of the paper and the object of the sketch book form a framework and a reality to which the drawings of the Invented

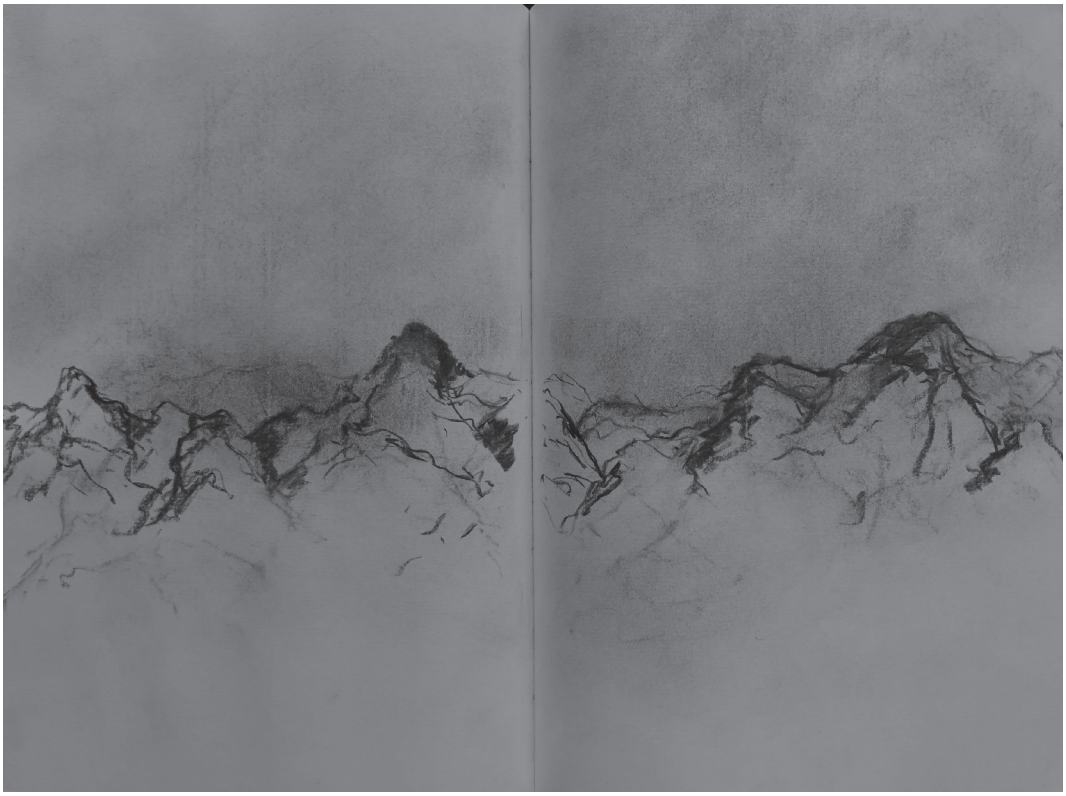

**Fig. 2** Nicole Salnikov, I*maginary Mountain Scapes*, 2020, Charcoal in Sketchbooks, A3 Spread. An example from the class experiment which shows a believable representation of the landscape. Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst FHNW, Archive Institute of Visual Communication 2020.

Mountain Scape exercise also refer to. The charcoal allows us to draw precise lines, to smudge them and erase them, to create a wide range of grey values, to drag the tool at an angle so that it leaves a textural mark on the paper. Even though these possibilities are allowing a large variety to create gestural traces we cannot let the charcoal bleed like ink into water or use the charcoal to develop greys through cross hatching such as achieved with a drawing pen. If we now turn to a result of the Invented Mountain Scape exercise which is successful in convincing us to be a 'true' representation of a landscape, we can once again go through the above discussed aspects of negotiating reality (Figure 2).

Even though the triangular aspect of the shared preconception of a mountain is still recognizable in the successful drawing, the variation of forms is higher, symmetry is avoid-

ed and the description is less predictable (Question 2). The strokes of the drawing are energetic and confident and appear to be traces of a spontaneous gesture. Their use is consistent throughout the drawing without being repetitive. The different means of representation –lines, grey values, and textures– are used to convey a logical spatial relationship of the landscape. The consistent use of marks and traces in the drawing emphasizes the presence of the individual designer leaving a personal interpretation observing the landscape (Question 3). Through the application of the tools and their affordances in a pragmatic way, the medium becomes less apparent. Even though the gutter of the sketch book is interrupting the illusion of the represented landscape, the drawing successfully overcomes these material restrictions (Question 4). The tools and materials are employed appropriately and we may ask in how far this appropriateness is again influenced by a shared understanding of the tools of representation.

If we now return to the assessment of the agency of images –being on the one hand deceiving and on the other one providing proof of a real situation– the differentiation into the four realities has been discussed with the example of fictional drawings of mountain landscapes. This approach has eliminated a 'true' relationship of the drawing to the represented object from the beginning. In order to evaluate what a deceptive drawing of a mountain range is, we can draw the following conclusion from the discussion: To a certain degree, the representation has to follow a schema shared in our collective memory. This schema is related to the form of what is represented in the drawing as well as to the appropriate and consistent use of tools and materials. The drawing, which is pretending to be a result of observation, has to relate, through the individuality of its gestural traces, to the presence of a designer who provides the interpretation of the observation. The relationship to a shared schema, the appropriate use of tools and materials, the individuality of gestural traces and their reference to a designer's identity, unpredictable lines, avoidance of symmetry and repetition,

contribute in combination to the assumption that the fictional drawing is an interpretation in view of the depicted object. We can now turn to a category of images which have been described, as mentioned above, by Pliny the Elder as proof of the existence of an individual person. In contrast to landscape drawings, portraits are much less forgiving. In daily communication, we are continuously interpreting faces and are, therefore, trained to detect any inaccuracy of a representation of a face in a portrait (Renner, 2014). Here, we shall return to Merleau-Ponty's description of our perception resulting in schemas, which entails the object seen from everywhere. We can also find in the representation of faces drawings that refer to a schema or drawings that refer to a singular occasion of an existing face depending on the intention of the designer. In an architectural illustration, the schematic representation of a person and his/her face is of advantage, since the purpose of the representation is the communication of scale and inhabitable space. In another situation, we want to remember the presence of an individual person and, therefore, another kind of accuracy as to the existing face has to be achieved. But what kind of accuracy is required, so we may take a portrait as proof of the presence of an existing person? In contrast to the representation of landscapes or objects, the schema from experiencing a person is not just formed by looking at a person from all sides. The individuality we expect is beyond the spatial organization of the face and has to be individually invented for each person by the designer. Gadamer (2004) distinguishes between the model and the portrait and claims the necessity of "occasionality" for the portrait. In view of invented portrait drawings, which pretend to be representations of living people in the presence of the designer (Figure 3), we may ask, what leads to the effect of occasionality in these fictional portraits.

Recapitulating the analysis of the fictional landscape drawings from above, we may refer to the same qualities. But in comparison to the landscape drawing, the reference to the individuality of the designer through his/her signature has

**Fig. 3** Yaao Jiang, *Imaginary Mountain Scapes*, 2020, Charcoal in Sketchbooks, A3 Spread. Two examples from the class experiment which show a believable representation of the presence of individual faces. Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst FHNW, Archive Institute of Visual Communication 2020.

more significance than in a landscape drawing. In the consistent use of an individual trace by the designer, we seem to perceive non-visual qualities of the sitter's character. In these fictional portraits, the individuality of the designers' traces significantly contributes to the idea of the presence of an individual sitter at a specific time and space.

Having concluded with the necessity of a reference to the designer in drawings to make them 'true' representations and qualifying them as individual testimonies of perceived reality, we could look at images of visual communication which are hiding, at first glance, the authorship of a designer. In opposition to drawings, information graphics, data visualizations, maps and plan projections are considered to be objective means of information. Photographs, as mentioned above, are also considered closer to perceived reality than drawings.

But is their normative appearance, pretending to be the one and only representation, not as deceiving as a drawing which is a declared and individual testimony in time and space by a designer? In how far can we then talk about photography as a 'true' representation of architecture?

## THE REALITIES OF ARCHITECTURE WE PERCEIVE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS

Related to the four notions of reality conveyed through images discussed in the context of drawing, we may also ask those questions in regard to photography. At first glance, we may answer the questions asked above as follows: we can state that the relationship of the photograph to a visually perceived experience is mimetic as it can be in a process of flattening the three-dimensional space into a plane (Question 1). The quality of similarity between photograph and perceived reality, as well as the delegation of the image creation to a technical apparatus, lead to the shared assumption of an objective representation with the potential of proof (Flusser, 1994) (Question 2). Therefore, the influence of the photographer is often overlooked. Selection of image content, choice of lens, framing the scene, lighting, timing of exposure, selection of the image from a series of images, etc. can and has been discussed as individual traces of the photographer (Question 3). But what reality is actually provided by the materiality of the photograph? And what is the relationship of the materiality of the photograph to the representation of materiality and space in architecture?

One way of challenging the binary order of reality versus a seductive representation through a materialist view in the field of representing architecture is to go to the very root of photography by studying its invention. An invention that belongs to the realm of chemistry and matter rather than arts, crafts, or philosophy.

In the field of architecture, the deceptive nature of photographic images has resulted in many criticisms of the role they play in both projection and documentation of built space (Frampton, 1990). The question is why does the exchange between architecture and photography fail?

To answer this question, we need to understand what exactly happens between the moment a photograph is taken and the moment that it is viewed. As described with the portrait and the signature above, at its most fundamental form, a photograph of a building conveys presence at the site – at least the presence of the camera and the photographer. Therefore, we can say that the photograph participates in an act of displacement which aims at bridging the gap between the moment and the place of its recording and the moment and the place of its viewing. The most problematic question when dealing with this displacement is the hierarchical difference between architecture and its image. Here architecture is accepted to be the original and the photograph as a second order representation of it.

Therefore, our central question becomes: is being present at the site the only way to be linked to its original? Of course, this question brings us to a fundamental debate of Western philosophy. For example, Plato's comparison between the truth of speech over writing as something that is mediated. Here again we deal with the question of being present. Based on Plato, it is the presence of the speaker that shapes the unmediated truth and in writing the same presence is mediated and of second order. Therefore, we have to think of the architectonic presence as the truth and any other form of architecture as models, writings, or images as mediations of this presence.

But is the presence of architecture, just like speech, which is mediated by written language, not conveyed by the presence of construction materials and how they are juxtaposed, too? If so, what if we use materials themselves as a mediator between architecture and its image? Would this help us in finding an alternative middle ground between the binary

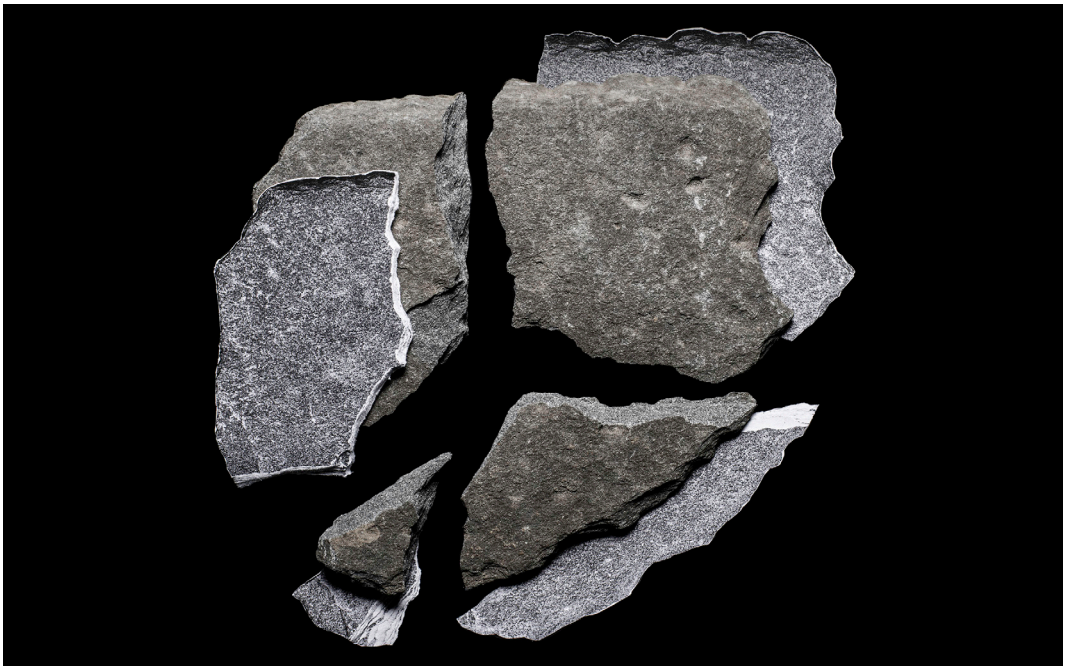

**Fig. 4** Kambiz Shafei, *Stone N°12*, 2019, photography, laser print and stone. Basel, Switzerland. Archive of Kambiz Shafei.

modes of the real and its representation? Would this approach help us in the ambitious task of challenging the privileged position of the original?

Mediating photography through its materiality asks for a reconsideration of some of the theoretical basis of the medium. Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* (1993) describes photography as a signifier which does not have a signified. He writes: "a photograph is always invisible: It is not it that we see" also "the photograph is never distinguished from its referent" (p. xx) Barthes describes that we do not see a photograph, but we see through it. The beholder of a photograph is deceived since the medium is hidden in comparison to a drawing, where the mediality is declared. For Barthes, the photograph is not an object, it does not really exist. We can challenge this position when we compare an object and its photograph next to one another (Figure 4).

Here two types of materials are present. Four stone fragments on the one hand and four photographic copies of these

stones on the other one. The fragments of the photograph are made of several layers of laser prints glued together in order to create an impression of thickness and depth. When we deal with visuality in general, we mainly consider the surface of things. This experiment narrows the gap between the stone surface and the surface of the photograph by exploring similar tensions in both subjects. The photograph is no longer an invisible surface but it rather is a simulation which participates in the three-dimensional world.

The goal of this contribution cannot be to write a material theory of photography. Looking at photography through its material does not try to replace any philosophical reflections on it. However, what it does try to do is to move beyond the traditional dualisms of original and image. Adopting the materialist approach, we can say that the photograph exists regardless of its reference. This approach questions the essence of a photograph by bringing its autonomy to the foreground. The photograph is an object and, therefore, it occupies a physical space and has its own physical space. As a result, the photograph can be freed from the representational task which is imposed on it. The photograph, on the other hand, gains something very significant by participating in the material exchange of the material word. It becomes a part of the material world and it can, therefore, have a direct impact on the material world.

This approach is particularly important when we are dealing with a discipline like architecture. During the design process of architecture, it is a common practice to use photographs. They represent other buildings and, in particular, their materials as a source of inspiration. In this process, photographs next to the real material can be seen as agencies that help define the materials of future built environments. Such photographs are also used to assemble collages and renderings in order to study both natural and artificial light at different times of the day. These studies guide the design process when it comes to the positioning of the windows as well as any other light sources. What these observations tell

us, is that a photograph is not an inert object waiting to be filled with meaning from outside. On the contrary, in this case a photograph participates in a process of negotiation which informs other materials. This quality is embedded within the photographic process as opposed to being imposed from outside by the genius of the form giver – in this case the photographer.

Therefore, we can say that the entire photographical process can be interpreted as a new and materialist event (Barad, 2007; Ingold, 2013). Consequently, we can change our question from what the reality that an image represents is, to what the realities of material translations involved in the shaping of a photograph are? This allows us to open an entirely new way of understanding built space through its material translation into images.

Deleuze's 'system of differences' (Deleuze, 1995) can be interpreted as a mechanism in the material exchange between photography and architecture. The system is an active process, since it deals with the unfixed phenomena of architecture containing its own temporalities. It results in simulations that need to be considered in sequences. Therefore, the photographs within the sequence have to relate to the original exactly by being different to one another in the way that they expose materials. Just like Merleau-Ponty's (2013) "infinite number of present scrutinies" (p. xx), these different images need to be experienced individually as well as in their totality as sequences.

In the 9 photographs of Figure 5, the experiment focuses on the reflection of light on concrete. Several photographs of the same scene at different times of the day are the starting point for digital manipulations. By collaging different parts of different photos together at both shadows/highlights and joins between the walls and the floor, several illusions of lighting are conveyed. Here we can see how a photographic image can be seen in the binary of a technical means that aims at representing a certain kind of reality and on the other hand as something that creates illusions

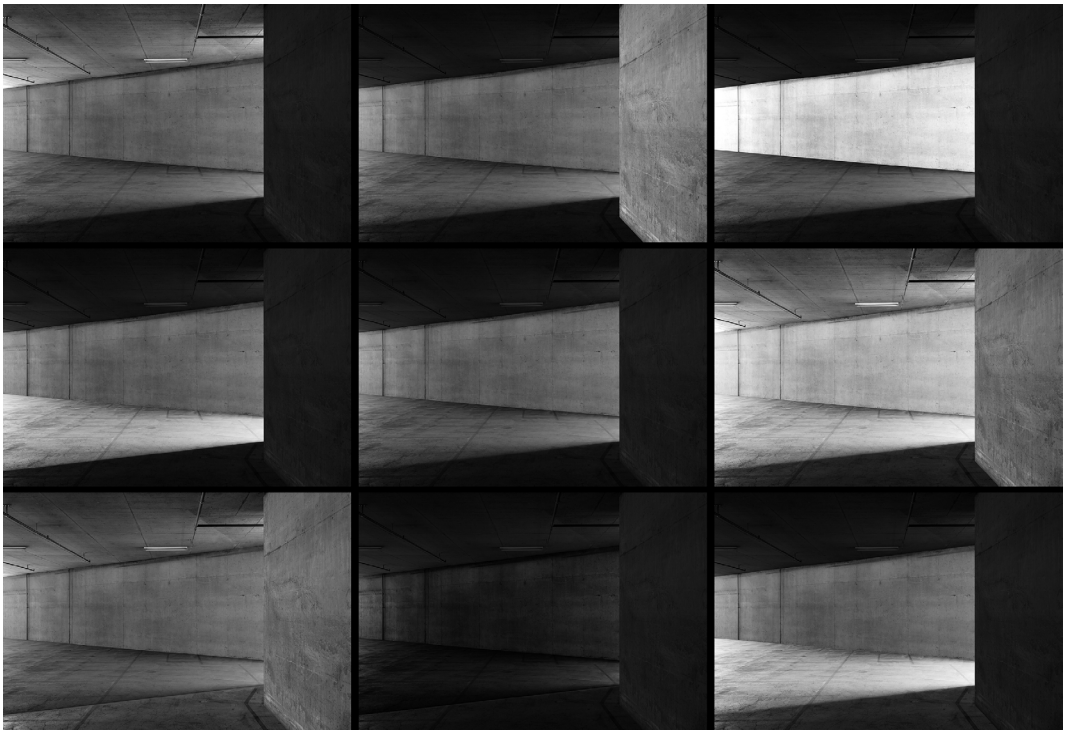

**Fig. 5** Kambiz Shafei, *Room N°8*, 2018, photography. Basel, Switzerland. Archive of Kambiz Shafei.

of reality. Neither of the represented temporalities is real in its singular form. Rather, it is the totality of the photographs as a sequence which comes close to the representation of reality by illustrating architectonic space as a fluid process. The architectonic materials would not be perceived, experienced and, therefore, understood in the same way if they would have not gone through this process; or in other words, if they were experienced directly. It is under these circumstances, that the privileged position of architecture, as the only reality of the building, can be questioned. Simulating architecture into other things such as images can add to this reality. To borrow from Deleuze, we can say that it is this process of simulation that challenges the 'privileged position' of the original (Deleuze, 1995).

Figs. 6a and 6b are another image pair presenting a certain type of material exchange through photographs in

**Fig. 6a, 6b** Kambiz Shafei, *Concrete Blocks*, 2019, Photography, laser print, and concrete. Basel, Switzerland. Archive of Kambiz Shafei.

order to explore different types of meanings. On the left photograph, a printed copy of a concrete block is placed on top of it. On this photograph, the different materials of the two blocks, namely the weights of neither the block nor the paper copy are understandable. In the right photograph, once the position of the model and the image are switched, the materiality of each becomes evident. The illusion of reality of the left photo is unveiled through the photograph on the right. This is the result of a material exchange through the deconstruction of a three-dimensional photograph. These photos are once again proof of the deceptive nature of photographs. It is only after juxtaposing the materialities of the original and the copy that the reality of a photograph as an object is revealed. The crushed photo is a singular simulation which is not repeatable like a two-dimensional reprinted photograph. It is no

more a copy but rather a simulation that becomes a part of the material world maintaining its own reality.

## CONCLUSION

We have approached the issue of the relationship to a perceived reality in landscape and portrait drawings, as well as in architectural photography, through the creation of image series. We have set the creation of image series and their interpretation in relation to the historical discourse in the humanities affected by a strong binary preconception of images as either seduction or proof.

With the deictic quality of the visual experiments, their quality to point at something, to present, reveal or provide insight, a distinction between images and the propositional structure of language can be drawn. With the employment of practice-led iconic research (Renner et al., 2017), we assume that images are able to provide evidence (Mersch, 2005). As we have demonstrated above, the image series serve as visual arguments, which can be described through language in view of the outcome of the material experiments. In this sense, the methodology exemplified above is another aspect of how the agency of images can go beyond seduction or proof. The images employed are interpreted by the authors of this contribution. In a hermeneutic sense, they can be viewed, interpreted by any reader/beholder – and the interpretation of the images by the authors can be critically evaluated. Coming back to the initial aim of this contribution to "reveal assumptions in the negotiation of perceived reality through images," we can refer back to the four realities which images can refer to: relation to the formal mimetic quality of the visual experience, the relation to the collectively shared schema, the relation to the reality of the individual form giver, and the reality of materiality.

It is surprising though that in both image categories – drawing and photography– the mimetic aspect is the least

important relation of an image to reality. In the context of landscape drawings, it is the consistently applied unique trace of the individual designer which we conceive under the described formal aspects to be a testimony of the designer's observation in the presence of the landscape or sitter.

In the context of architectural photography, we have shown that a practical investigation of the materiality of photography lets the photograph become a physical object in space, overcoming its transparency and second-order destiny as a copy by becoming a physical object in its own right. The relation to architectural reality has been demonstrated as being successful by the necessity of image series. And the two images representing two cubes each (Figures 6a, 6b) are presenting a visual proof of the materiality of the cubes.

With these differentiations and the range presented in which images can relate to reality, we can conclude, that the dualism of seduction and proof is a remnant of Platonism, which we have to overcome in order to improve our ability to interpret images in the context of communication.

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Article available at

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12649

How to cite

as article

Renner, M., Kambiz, S. (2021). Seduction or Proof? Revealing assumptions in the negotiation of perceived reality through images. *img journal*, *4*, 300-321.

as contribution in book

Renner, M., Kambiz, S. (2021). Seduction or Proof? Revealing assumptions in the negotiation of perceived reality through images. In M. Ghizzoni, E. Musiani (Eds.), *img journal 04/2021 Copy / False / Fake* (pp. 300-321). Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586195

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