New Images. Imagination in the Process of Aesthetic Practice—The Process of Collage †

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Abstract: This paper provides a brief discussion of ideas taken from the history of Western thought on the topic of inventing the new. The aims of the Design Methods Movement of the 1960s are contraposed to an in-depth reading of concrete processes conducted in the context of practice-led iconic research. The distinction of imagination versus configuration leads to the second part of the paper, in which experimental arrangements are analyzed and their connection to a collective archive of images is established. In a third section, an artistic process of developing painterly collages is evaluated in respect to its methodology of developing unseen images.

Keywords: new images; design process; imagination; configuration; collage; archive; image schema; practice-led iconic research

1. Introduction—Inquiry into Design Processes vs. Design Methods

"If I knew where my ideas come from, I'd go there" [1] was the title of Thomas Demand's lecture on Imagination at a conference in Basel in the autumn of 2010. This may sound tongue-in-cheek at first glance, but it reminds us that this inquiry into the processes of visual innovation is not going to be unveiled by mere formulas. The core of creating new images is elusive [2].

While contemporary aesthetic practice hesitates to reflect on its processes on a scientific level and, therefore, fails to explain its impact, the history of Western thought offers a number of descriptions directly related to the creative process. The idea of an individual's talent or disposition being responsible for the creative capacity reappears in different contexts. In these descriptions, the faculty of an individual's imagination is either a result of godly influence [3], of genius [4], or of social interaction [5], depending on the status of the individual in respect to divine powers, to an autonomous constitution, or social interaction. Instead of elaborating the numerous references the humanities provide for a discussion of imagination [6], my contribution will start with a prominent attempt to reflect the processes of design in the middle of the 20th century.

In the Design Methods Movement, which started with a conference at the London Imperial College held from 19 September to 21 September 1962, an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into the processes of design was initiated. The protagonists of the movement extended the field of design from a process of aesthetic decision-making to a science of decision-making for the development of a better future of society. The aim was to bring together a variety of scientific disciplines such as engineering, architecture, urban planning, and design in order to describe their processes of invention [7]. This often led to flow chart-like descriptions of generalized problem-solving processes intended to provide a guideline for systematic steps of planning. In retrospect, we can state that—for the sake of being scientific in the post-war context of economical growth and optimism—the intuitive search for an unknown visual solution was neglected [8]. Even the founders of the movement critically commented on the outcome of their previous intentions. The following statement

of 1971 by Christopher Alexander, one of the founders of the Design Methods Movement, can be used in support of the analysis of practical design processes but also to critically assess the proposed analysis of design processes in the following part of this contribution:

> Since the book was published [in 1963], a whole academic field has grown up around the idea of the leading exponents of these so-called design methods. I am very sorry this has happened and want to state publically that I reject the whole idea of design methods as a subject of study, since I think it is absurd to separate the study of designing from the practice of design. [9]

We may argue that the proposed field of inquiry into the design processes in the context of practice-led iconic research [10] is an attempt to involve the existing competence of the practice in order to avoid a discourse detached from the practice of visual communication. On the other hand, we may also interpret Alexander's statement as a statement against any kind of scientific reflection on design processes and on design in general. The inquiry into design processes by the Design Methods Movement of 1962 has been characterized by three layers which, according to John Langrish, have all failed:

1. A general all-purpose optimistic zeitgeist that saw the world as getting better than it had been.
2. A belief that the process of designing had an important part to play in this 'getting better'.
3. A belief that the design process could itself be made better through becoming more scientific. [11]

In opposition to the above described aims of the Design Methods Movement, this contribution and its analysis of image generation avoids these pitfalls in the following manner:

1. Only in one respect does the inquiry into the design process after the iconic turn [12] attempt to "change the world" by implying that the understanding of images is a crucial part of information dissemination in a society which is based on democratic principles.
2. The importance of design in improving the world is shared until this day, but, following the iconic turn, the inquiry into the design process aims, more than anything else, at providing evidence that the practice of design actually does have an impact on society.
3. At their core, practical design processes will not be improved by means of scientific inquiry. But research will provide the means to conceptually frame the processes in new ways and help to further develop the design practice, the educational design principles, and the knowledge about images.

In due consideration of the declared differences from the Design Methods Movement, the inquiry into the design process suggested by practice-led iconic research places the practical procedures of image generation at the centre of its attention. The processes are executed and recorded for the purpose of a later comparative analysis.

If we return now to the humanities and their discourse on imagination, we can start with the etymological aspect and emphasize the close relationship between the term of "image" and that of "imagination". As the term suggests, imagination is closely related to images and consists of the ability to form new ones [13]. Kant has described the necessity of imagination to form sensuous experiences out of a schema and sensuous stimuli. To him, everybody has the faculty of imagination, but only a genius is able to use it to achieve beauty in art [14].

In opposition to the faculty of imagination, there is the idea that nothing is truly new. All that we hold to be new can be either something that may already exist but of which we are simply not aware or something which is the result of a re-configuration of existing elements. An early source of this position can be found in Plato's Meno (B.C.E. 380) [15]. In their dialogue, Meno and Socrates declare that any inquiry into a subject is merely pure recollection. Beyond this view, the terminology of configuration grants the existence of new occurrences but only under the aspect of a reconfiguration of existing elements. While imagination is closely related to the processes of an emerging image and, therefore, to experience, configuration is related to the processes of conceptual abstraction through words in language [16].

In accordance with the philosophical debate on the schema [17] and the use of the term of image schema [18] in the cognitive sciences [19], the concept prevails that our memory holds condensed and generalized records of past experiences, which are constantly interacting with the signals perceived by our senses [20]. With this structure in mind, the creation of images and their perception depends on the memorized experiences of their designers as well as their beholders. Both hold an archive of images and their generalization in their mind. Yet, every image we perceive can be seen as a constant reconfiguration of the rules defining a class of memorized experiences in a condensed form and below the threshold of consciousness. The image schemas appear to be organized by categories that are not equal in their likelihood to be recalled.

In contrast to the philosophical positions addressed above, the main focus of this paper is based on a close reading of practical design processes. Following the dichotomy of imagination and configuration, the starting point could be the analysis of drawing processes, which are closely related to the idea of imagination [21]. However, in the following part, I shall focus on the analysis of concrete processes of collage, which are directly related to the concept of configuration, by using already existing photographic images.

2. Processes of Configuration I—Arrangements and Archive

The following image combinations were created in an experimental setting selected and arranged from a pool of 300 images representing products on the Amazon web site (Figure 1).
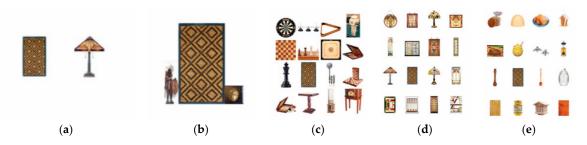

| (a) | (b) | (c) | (d) | (e) |

Figure 1. (**a**–**e**) Arrangements and their meaning, A Matter of Arrangements, Pauline Guex, MA Thesis, 2013. Archive Visual Communication Institute, the Basel School of Design HGK FHNW.

We can distinguish different levels emerging in the process of perceiving the compositions. At first, there is an overall evaluation of the plane. On the second level, one starts to recognize the single objects represented photographically and, in a last step, we are comparing the objects in search of the reason for their combination. Even though the examples selected show a small range of possible options, each of the compositions addresses a specific message through the placement of the objects within the format. On the first level of interpretation, the composition on the left suggests that we compare the two objects (Figure 1a). The three objects in the second composition from the left are suggesting a spatial situation (Figure 1b). The objects seem to sit on the ground. Due to the difference in the size of the objects, they are not asking for a one-on-one comparison. Perhaps, they are to be understood as telling the story of an accidental arrangement encountered when setting up a gallery exhibition. The middle composition (Figure 1c) is providing each object with a comparable space and, because of the closeness of the objects, we are requested to draw conclusions from the similarities and differences of the objects depicted. It is hard to isolate one object from another, and the objects are competing with each other for attention. Both compositions on the right (Figure 1d,e) present the objects with more space around them. This leads to an orderly and structured impression, within which each object is placed according to a systematic evaluation. We know these systematic arrangements shown in Figure 1d and 1e from biological collections or archaeological surveys of artefacts, from displays of collections in general, from museums and archives. Specific objects or their images are presented to the beholder in a grid-like arrangement that emphazises the intentionality of the selection. Each arrangement could consist of many more images, but we see only a small selection of the endless amount of images we can imagine. Therefore, beholders are requested through the arrangement to find a motivation of the

presented selection. This interpretation of the arrangement and of collage is based on the concept that there is an individual archive of images we hold in our memory. What Gilles Deleuze describes for the painter can be transferred to the creator of arrangements and collages, their beholders, the curators of an archive, or the visitors of a collection:

> It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface. The figurative belief follows from this mistake. If the painter were before a white surface, he- or she- could reproduce on it an external object functioning as a model. But such is not the case. The painter has many things in his head, or around him, or in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it. [22]

The "figurative belief" as a belief in the mimetic relationship between an object and its representation on a canvas is criticized by Deleuze. In his understanding, the relationship occurs between the images the painter holds in his memory and their representation as traces on a canvas. The distinction between *figuration* and *figurative* is made by Deleuze by attributing the *figurative* to a concrete narrative situation, whereas *figuration* is a composition, in which the elements are taken out of context, but indicate through their composition their dependence on invisible forces [23].

In this sense, the collage can also be seen as the result of emptying out, of clearing and cleaning and, therefore, the request of finding the criteria guiding the process. Even more than the individual archive held in the painter's memory, the collage/arrangement of existing images depends on a collectively negotiated archive. The photographs used in a collage have often been made by someone else and were selected for publication in a magazine by a group of editors. The photographs used in the case of the discussed arrangements were taken and selected for an optimum representation of products on a commercial web site. Also, in the new context, they carry traces of the value system of a specific time in a specific culture. In this sense, and in reference to the discourse on the archive, we can see the discussed collages/arrangements as the result of invisible forces, rules, and value judgements which enable the visibility of objects and images [24]. We can refer to the concept of the archive developed by Giorgio Agamben, who—in a critical approach—described the archive as a collection of testimonies representing the relationship between the said and the unsaid [25]. Transferring this idea to the collage/arrangement, we can claim that the discussed configurations and collages in general represent the relationship between the visible and the invisible following an underlying system of value judgments.

Collages can follow collective rules in selecting and positioning images according to conventions. Or the selection and combination of the images works against the expected and experienced combination we know from former instances of perception and social exchange.

Clement Greenberg's famous analysis of collage in Cubism (1959) [26] describes the unexpected juxtaposition of the image plane with the three-dimensional space developed around 1911 by Braque and Picasso. Also, the representation and actual objects such as wall papers, newspapers, or wood panels and any painted representation of reality were perceived at the time as unconventional. The shocking effect of the collage was explored more decisively later on by protagonists of Dadaism and Surrealism. To this very day, to see combinations of images that we do not usually experience next to each other and that we do not connect in the archive of image schemas evokes a puzzling effect.

3. Processes of Configuration II—Collage and Image Schemas

On the level of the individual objects represented in the arrangements discussed above, we can highlight the doormat with the diagonal pattern. The doormat does not belong to the image archive of Art Nouveau or to a collection of objects of an African culture, the context of board games, or to beekeeping. But the arrangements lead us to believe that the doormat belongs to these categories of objects. This exemplifies the flexibility with which we are adapting the core structure of an image-schema to a context. The specific diagonal pattern of the doormat is not part of the rule defining what a doormat is. It could be any kind of textile decoration. Therefore, we can bend the meaning of the diagonals in many directions, supported by the overall reading of the objects thus arranged. The pattern lies within the boundaries of the generalized rules describing the essence of a doormat.

With the following arrangements combining shoes, baby seats, and baby carriages, we can experience the matching process within an image-schema (Figure 2a–c). What makes us recognize a shoe and what do we need to relinquish the expectation of seeing an arrangement that only consists of shoes?

In the combinations of shoes, baby carriages, and baby seats, we are at first scanning the outlines of the object and consider them to be similar enough to belong to the same set of rules defining the schema [17] of shoes, the schema of baby seats, or the schema of baby carriages. By a closer look at the interior structure of the images, we are able to distinguish the objects.

(**a**) (**b**) (**c**)

Figures 2. (**a**–**c**) Triggering schemas beyond similarity of form, A Matter of Arrangements, Pauline Guex, MA Thesis, 2013. Archive Visual Communication Institute, The Basel School of Design HGK FH.

Besides, the example of arrangements of 16 similar shapes representing 15 vacuum cleaners and the Empire State Building (Figure 3) is a confusing experience. Given the formal similarity of the silhouette and the absence of scale, we can see all of the objects as vacuum cleaners or as high rises.

Even though the photographic image is not as ambiguous as drawn images, the ornamental repetition of the objects and their formal similarity let us change our point of view and attribute a new meaning to the process of perception. In addition, the clash of meanings between a daily household item and a landmark of national importance triggers a series of associations. They are evoked by the perception of formal similarity and by the experience of misinterpretation either of the vacuum cleaners or the landmark. The shock in this case is evoked, on the one hand, by the clash of confronting two or more images contradicting the order of values of our culturally determined archive, juxtaposing the landmark to the banal household object. On the other hand, both surprise and insecurity are evoked by the ambiguity of the interpretation. This example can be used to demonstrate a model-like situation in which the transfer from a preconceived first idea to a new interpretation can happen in a beholder as well as in the designer who is creating the collage.
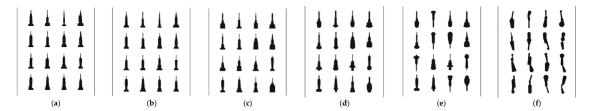
To see "something as something else" is an aspect of visual perception which cannot be transferred to a translation in language. We see the similarity of the vacuum cleaner and the Empire State Building only because of the congruence of their silhouette. The analogy in language "The Empire State Building is a vacuum cleaner" does not evoke the same effect [27].

Figure 3. "Seeing as", A Matter of Arrangements, Pauline Guex, MA Thesis, 2013. Archive Visual Communication Institute, The Basel School of Design HGK FHNW.

If we go one step further and alter the photographic representations to high-contrast silhouettes and simplify them even further, the ambiguity of the shapes is even stronger (Figure 4). By leaving the mimetic quality of the photograph behind, we are approaching a purely ornamental arrangement. This is most effective in triggering a long process of matching elements of the material image with the archive of image schemas. On the other hand, the ambiguity of the silhouettes in all the compositions of Figure 4 does not lead to the "seeing as" effect which we have described with the vacuum cleaner and the Empire State Building.

Figures 4. (**a**–**f**) 4a: Eliminating the mimetic quality of the vacuum cleaners and the Empire State Building. (**b**–**f**) Altering the shapes from simplification (**b**) to the deconstruction of the mimetic resemblance (**f**). A Matter of Arrangements, Pauline Guex, MA Thesis, 2013. Archive of the Visual Communication Institute, The Basel School of Design HGK FHNW.

In contrast to the cubistic collage, which triggers the ambiguity between space and image plane as well as reality and representation, the example of the arrangement of 16 images triggers an experience of ambiguity as to photographic images. In the process of drawing or painting, the strokes, lines, and blotches are set on the image plane leading from an open, tentative composition to a more defined stage of the image. Ambiguity is inherent in this process of hand drawing and painting. The arrangement/collage with photographic images does not start with such an ambiguous situation.

The photographs of the commercial website are taken in order to represent the qualities of the products as clearly as possible. The irritation is due to the congruence of a dominant indication for the quality of an object, the silhouette line which is contradicted in a second step by perceiving more descriptive details of the images.

We have now defined the process of making a collage as a combination of existing images. The experimental arrangements have indicated, firstly, the dependence of the image combination from the individual memory of a designer that is in correlation with the value system held in the collective memory of a society. Secondly, the relationship between the shown objects does not exclusively develop a striking effect by combining images with the aim to contradict the order of our value system. There are many ways and processes the combination of images may affect a beholder.

The comparison of the processes of Cubism, Dadaism, political activism, and the experiment of arrangements discussed above, support the claim that the process of collage stands for a variety of procedures of combining, integrating, and juxtaposing images. While the arrangements discussed have been purely focusing on composing existing images, the cubist collage is first of all a painterly process in which existing image elements are integrated after being placed onto the image plane. How the alteration of an image-generation process can lead to new images in an actual context is evaluated in the following example.

4. Processes of Configuration III—Collage with a Painterly Approach

In contrast to the above discussed experimental arrangements, designed by Pauline Guex in order to inquire into the process of arranging, the following process is conducted in the context of artistic image generation. Since 2008, Sabine Hertig has been developing a collage design process using existing photographs from magazines found in thrift stores and second-hand book stores. The early examples of her collages often evoke the "seeing as" ambiguity described above (Figures 5 and 6). The images are selected and carefully merged in order to achieve a balance of at least two different spatial interpretations.
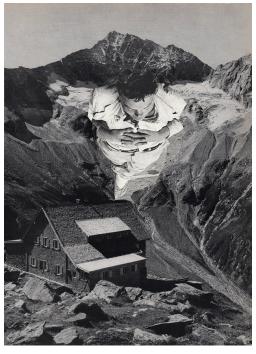

Figure 5. Sabine Hertig, Untitled 2010, Analogue Collage on Paper. 24.5 × 18 cm, Archive No. 0025.
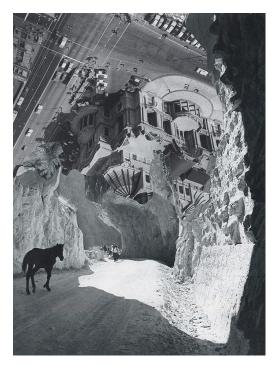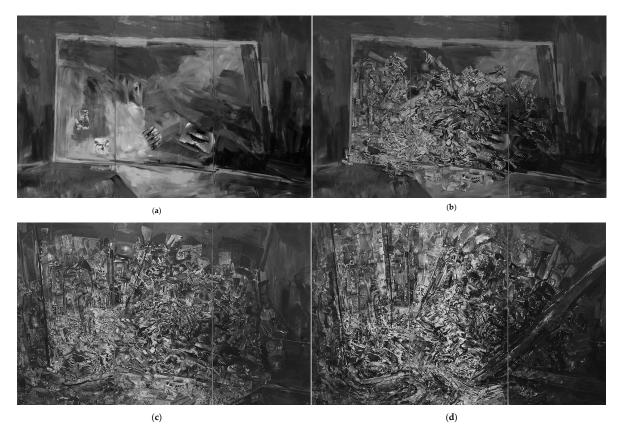
Figure 6. Sabine Hertig, Untitled 2012, Analogue Collage on Paper 27 × 20 ccm, Archive No. 0062.

The processes of her more recent, large-scale landscape series are beginning with a painted ground in which a spatial situation is indicated through loose brush strokes in various shades of grey (Figure 7a). Landscape 14, developed from February until September 2017, began by painting a spatial description connecting the three separate vertical panels. Within the rectangular shape of the canvas, a smaller horizontal rectangle is established with a lighter grey, indicating a stage-like situation. A plane leads from the bottom of the canvas to the box.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figures 7. (**a–d**). Sabine Hertig, four steps in the development of Landscape 14, February until September, Analogue Collage on Canvas, 300 × 465 cm, 2017.

In this open setting of grey values, Sabine Hertig is placing photographic images from her collection of magazines and fits them to the existing grounding (Figure 7b,c). She has a big pile of magazine clippings on the floor of her studio and calls this her palette. The grey value of the photograph taken from the pile is the most important criterion of selection. As we can see in the development to the final stage of the collage, the grounding is merely used as a starting point. The spatial perception of the overall composition is changing throughout the process and remains the guiding principle to form the overall composition. Beyond the grey value of the selected photograph, it is in a later stage of the process also the structural quality of the photographs which is important for the representation of the three-dimensional space of the landscape. The same as in a drawing or painting, repetitive lines can be used in order to describe the direction of a represented surface. The textural quality of some photographs are suited to trigger the beholders' imagination and represent material qualities. In the process, the canvas develops from the painterly grounding into an assembly of images, leading to a spatial organization of images with different layers of perception.

These layers, established in the final collage (Figure 8), depend on a beholder's distance to the canvas. From a large distance, the canvas presents an overview and scope we do not usually experience when walking through a landscape. It is a gaze coming from nowhere. The beholder is suspended in the air and looks down into a valley. The landscape is full of dense textures. Rock formations, landslides, and dense vegetation are some of the interpretations, which we can infer from the textural information. We can imagine a waterfall indicated by the vertical white elements dropping from the top edge of the canvas slightly to the left of the middle of the composition. The water collects in a roaring basin and flows out of the frame in an S-curve.

On the next level, closer to the canvas, some of the magazine photographs reveal their content. We see a person, hands or parts of a body separating itself from other elements, which were not recognizable at first glance. We see people crushed by the dynamic masses of material indicated by the overall composition and are reminded of apocalyptic images. The last level of viewing the composition is achieved close to the canvas, which forces us to see a selected part of the whole image. We can now see the single images which are assembled on the canvas. We can see that they are all representing situations on a different scale and from different angles. Some are showing unrecognizable textures and, all of a sudden, we see an identifiable object explaining other elements in the context and forming a description of a scene.

Figure 8. Sabine Hertig. Landscape 14, 2017, Analogue Collage on Canvas, 300 × 465 cm, composed of three panels, 2017.

5. Conclusions

With the described effect of the large-scale landscape collages of Sabine Hertig, we have addressed a novel and, therefore, surprising effect of these images on their beholder. In respect to the process of their generation, we have described a procedure that combines painterly aspects in the grounding of the composition but also and foremost in the selection of the photographs based on the grey value and structure. In this regard, Sabine Hertig's process is opposed to the above described processes of arrangement and different to the expected process of collage in general. In opposition to the Cubist collages of the early 20th century, the landscapes described are not surprising by the juxtaposition of the flat canvas and the three-dimensional space, or the confrontation of a representation with the real. The discussed landscape surprises its beholders by a three-fold experience of "seeing as". This experience starts with the overall impression of a vast amount of undefined elements seen as a landscape. On a second level, the overall interpretation is contradicted by recognizing some of the elements of the collage as representations. And a third experience is provided by a close-up view seeing the constitution of the illusion perceived beforehand.

If we now return to the question of how new images occur, we are unable to infer a general principle to evoke a new image from the discussed examples. A flow chart-like process similar to the ones developed by the Design Methods Movement, contradicts the described findings. In opposition to a determined set of decisions which have to be made, the described procedure of Sabine Hertig's landscape collages and the experimental study on arrangement by Pauline Guex support the claim that the observation and alteration of design processes is a way to overcome one's own preconceptions. Combining a painterly process with the process of collage in the described landscape images has led to hitherto unseen results. In this sense, our imagination is stimulated by the material and sensuous processes of image generation and reflects upon the decisions employed as well as upon the outcome of the processes. In these material processes, the experimental procedures bear the potential to go beyond the predictable set of images guided by the collective archive. This is how far we can locate the occurrence of new images.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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20. "The image space is that in which images of all sensory types occur explicitly. …The dispositional space is that in which dispositions contain the knowledge base and the mechanisms with which images can be constructed from recall, with which movements can be generated, and with which the processing of images can be facilitated".

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