UNSEEN IMAGES
IMAGINATION THROUGH THE ALTERATION OF DESIGN PROCESSES

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This paper begins with a brief summary of a variety of theories on the creative process, addressing the question how unseen, surprising and intriguing images come about. A close reading of the collage process employed by the artist Sabine Hertig is conducted, following the claim by Gille Deleuze, that the artist is emptying out the canvas instead of filling it up (Deleuze, 2003). The analysis of her process to create small and large-scale collages, taking 'scraps' from old magazines, shows how her specific methodology alters and combines preconceived processes so that they lead to unexpected results.

'If I knew where my ideas come from, I'd go there' was the title of Thomas Demand's lecture at a 2010 conference on the subject of imagination at the Schaulager in Basel (Demand, 2010). The artist, who creates paper models starting from well-known press images and then documents these as photographs, had been invited so that attendees could discover how his pictures came about and how his creative process had developed. At first, Demand's presentation title sounds as if it were casually thrown out. But it indicates that we cannot solve the puzzle of how fascinating and surprising images are generated with a simple formula. Nonetheless the goal of creating surprise remains a key concern, both in the making of images in an art context and in the applied field of visual communication (Lyotrad, 1997). How does it come to pass that images are created which differ from the familiar, from conventional expectations?

In search of an answer to these questions we encounter the notion that an individual talent is responsible, or that an individual is predisposed to being imaginative and is also thus able to create unseen images. In these sources imagination is described – depending on the individual's relationship to religion, their autonomous constitution or their social environment – as the result of divine inspiration (Assmann, 2003), as a predisposition to imaginative genius (Kant, 1790) or as a consequence of social interaction. Whether there can be anything new at all is contradicted by the viewpoint that everything we perceive as new has only been forgotten and is waiting to be rediscovered (Plato. 380BC).

What is less radical is to imagine that the new can be achieved just by combining known elements. With this a spectrum opens up between imagination, the power to create something genuinely new, and figuration, meaning the principle of combining familiar elements (Mersch, 2006). Different creative processes can be placed on this spectrum. At first glance, thus, drawing and painting are processes that enable images to appear from an empty space and are therefore apportioned to the imagination. As the arrangement of

existing pictorial elements, collage is a process of generating images linked with the principle of figuration which starts from an existing pool of image elements and their combination. The differentiation of these creative processes is, however, questionable, if we include Gilles Deleuze's conception of the painting process in our survey: '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 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.' (Deleuze, 2003)

This statement relating to painting can be applied, broadly speaking, to other creative processes such as drawing or collage. In these too there is a direct relation between the images saved in the artist's memory and the material image appearing on a surface. A definitive image is carved out from the mass of possible image variations and is, according to Deleuze, more directly dependent on the artist's mental images than on a relation to an actual object. If we now turn to the concrete example of Sabine Hertig's collages, the emptying out of the artist's existing image archive at the moment of the image's genesis can be the starting point of our observation.

THE FORMAL COMPOSITION OF THE IMAGE ELEMENTS
AND 'SEEING AS'

In contrast to the emptying out of the image surface in the process of drawing or painting, using her collage method Sabine Hertig falls back on a cultural archive that is, materially, at hand. The artist calls the collections of images and image

clippings from various sources piled up in her studio her painting palette. The palette's picture clippings reflect not only the artist's approach to emptying the image surface of existing mental images; they are also the results of the photographers' image finding processes, as well as those of the editors of the magazines and books used. Before Sabine Hertig's involvement they had discharged image surfaces and made one definitive picture visible, while other possible images were not photographed, could not subsequently be printed and cannot now be used in a collage. In this web of influences on Sabine Hertig's work even the reader who, by buying a magazine, influenced its general direction might be ascribed a role in the definition of the collectively fixed image archive.

During the creative process this collectively negotiated picture collection from newer and older books, magazines, newspapers and the internet interacts with the artist's individual image memory, as Gilles Deleuze made clear in relation to the painting process. Hertig chooses the images from her palette in alignment with the images fixed in her own memory. She combines images and varies the composition until they create meanings that accord with her knowledge of images. The definitive arrangement of the picture elements comes about through the unconscious comparison of her individual image memory with the physical archive of collectively fixed images available. In this process the combination of picture elements follows either a familiar constellation, in which a viewer can find a sensible combination of the parts, or the parts bring about a surprising confrontation through their encounter on the image surface, one which contradicts conventions, with combinations that the viewer cannot easily account for. In this sense Sabine Hertig's early, small-scale collages, which mostly consist of just two image elements, challenge the viewer by virtue of their decisiveness. While the photograph of a white-clad, dramatically foreshortened person fits formally very easily within the illustration of the landscape (Fig. 1), irritation arises from the fact that we cannot harmonise the landscape view and the figure in a familiar

Fig. 1 Sabine Hertig, *Untitled*, 2010, analogue collage on paper, 24.5 x 18 cm.

scheme that would unite figure and context. Examining the collage, it strikes us that we can focus on either the landscape or the person, but we are not in a position to consider both images equally or simultaneously. Depending on our focus, either the person in white becomes a glacier, or the mountain hut becomes an abstract element that stands apart from the background of the recumbent figure. In this tilting tolerance of 'seeing as' a phenomenon can be identified that is decisive for our imaginative capacity (Wittgenstein, 1984). As a viewer, I experience how something seemingly familiar – a mountain landscape or a recumbent figure – can be seen as something else. The collage mentioned thus enables an aesthetic experi-

ence, part of which exceeds conventional meaning.

Further examples of small-scale works also play with the precise comparison of two contradictory perspectives, including one untitled collage (Fig. 2). Focus on the horse that walks along the mountain road at the centre of the image and the city landscape with its complex constructions becomes a tun-

Fig. 2 Sabine Hertig, *Untitled*, 2012, analogue collage on paper, 27 x 20 cm.
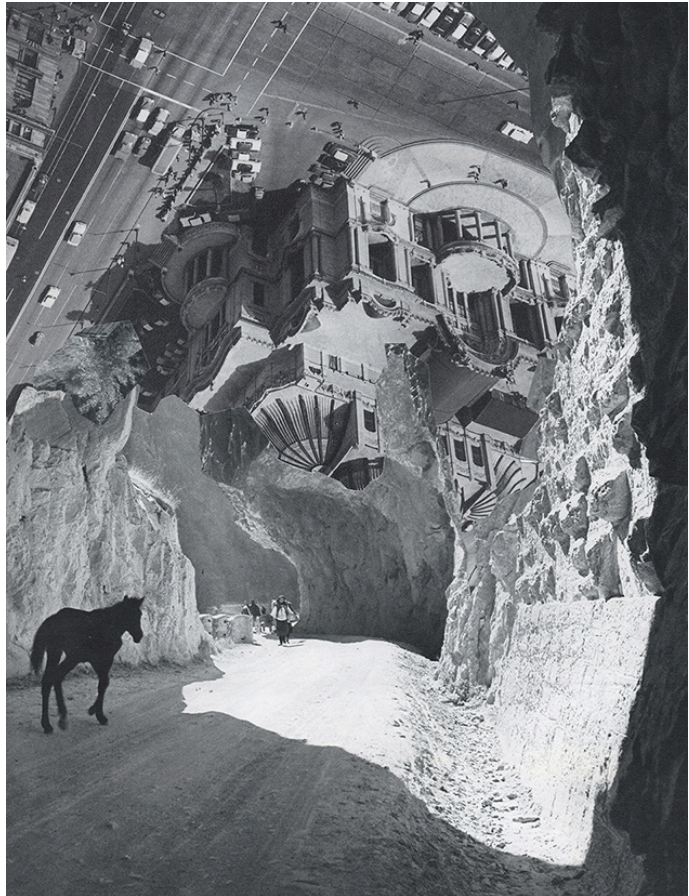
nel roof from which cliff formations hang, whereas focussing on the urban landscape makes the mountain road appear to be a spatial element reaching towards the sky. In this example the 'seeing as' is crucially achieved by the formal qualities of the photographic images which allow one part of the picture to relate to the other in a meaningful fashion. The urban

landscape could not be transformed into a tunnel roof if the lines starting from the street crossing were not to represent a plane. Grey values and surface structures are pivotal for the phenomenon described; Sabine Hertig's process is thus distinct from purely semantically motivated selection criteria when creating a collaged image. Two elements can be described that are characteristic for observation of the small-scale collages. Firstly, a formal connection is a precondition, in order that the two image elements complement each other, displaying a relatedness in their tonal values and composition. This apparent match which creates the conditions for 'seeing as' is also the basis for the other level of observation. For secondly, despite their putative formal harmony, a confrontation occurs between the semantic contents of the two image parts. Viewers search for an explanation why the person and the landscape confront each other in this unusual form. The combination of country road and urban landscape cannot be decrypted with a simple explanation either, evoking a string of possible narratives and associations. In contrast with the large-scale collages, the photographic integrity of both image elements remains. The photographic images are cut out but each continues to be a representation of a scene.

THE PAINTERLY COLLAGE

Building on the significance of the visual qualities of the image parts within small-scale collages as described, Sabine Hertig continues and extends her selection of images based on grey tonal values and image structure in her large-format Landscape works. In the foreground of the composition of these large-format Landscape collages is the interaction of the individual image parts in relation to the larger image and its spatial effect. As can be grasped from series of progressive images of the most recent large-scale Landscape images, the work begins with a painted underlying composition which the artist paints on the canvas with a brush in generous strokes of different greys before

she selects suitable image fragments and places them on top.

The documentation of the work *Landscape 14's* creative process, which took place from February – December 2017, shows a first stage during which the three vertical canvases are linked by a lighter painted rectangle that stands apart from a darker painterly background. A spatial structure can be discerned here already. The rectangular area can be interpreted as an image within an image, or as a stage to which a lighter surface leads starting from the lower edge of the canvas (Fig. 3a). The first image pieces from the pool are placed on this painted ground. Selected image clippings become part of the whole image; structurally they often follow the texture of the brushstrokes applied in the first phase (Fig. 3b).

Unlike the small-scale collages discussed previously, clippings are glued over each other during the working process and the pieces are frequently cut in such a way that conclusions can no longer be drawn about the broader context they were taken from. As the work continues, the spatial structure of the painted base is not imitated as precisely as possible. Instead new spatial constellations emerge which occur as image elements are placed, to be recognised and ultimately elaborated (Fig. 3c/3d). So, bit by bit, an apocalyptic waterfall develops from the painted composition, bursting forth vertically on the picture surface with the brightest clippings and reaching the lower edge in a s-shaped, flowing mass. Cliff formations also appear to the left of the waterfall, contrasting with diagonal tectonics on the right-hand side of the picture.

We regard the roaring gorge of *Landscape 14* from a floating perspective and are, for now, at a safe remove from what is happening. Different viewpoints are decisive for these large-format works. Depending upon the viewer's proximity, they can have three different experiences of the image: (1) seeing the whole canvas, the spatial impression is conveyed, above all, of a fantastical landscape, one whose materiality reminds you of craggy formations, geological stratification or molten lava masses, not to mention fields
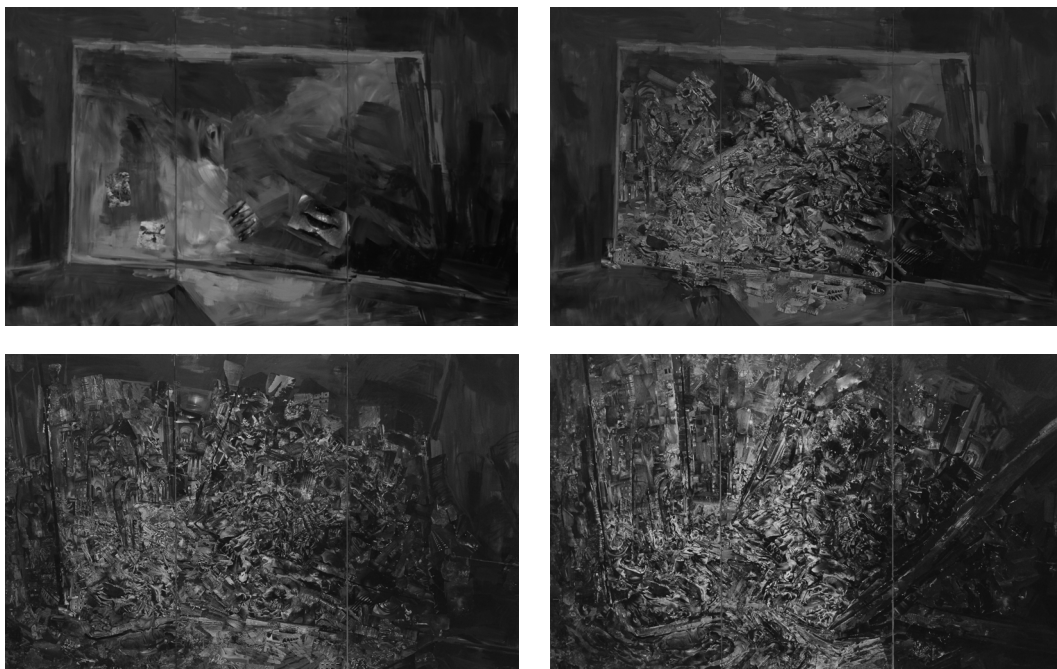
Fig. 3a - 3d Sabine Hertig, four stages of the development of *Landscape 14*, February – September 2017, analogue collage on canvas, 300 x 465.

of rubble or microscopic structures. Seen as a whole the image content of the individual clippings is meaningless. You are only conscious of each element as a part of the whole image; its concrete pictorial content is overlooked. (2) Examine *Landscape 14* more closely and individual images become recognisable. Here there is an arm, there a car or a statue, which rise to the surface out of the abstract texture and dispel the illusion of a total view of the landscape. At this level the viewer tries to make sense of how the particular images come together. A possible narrative that offers meaning in *Landscape 14* is of this apocalypse as a vision of the end of the world. (3) But a concrete interpretation, such as that of the apocalypse, is dispelled in the next stage of viewing. Observing the collage at close range, all the clippings are recognisable as photographic images, and the illusion of a landscape is entirely stripped away as clipped edges and overlapping become visible. When looking from up close, we recognise a dense web of juxtapositions of image content, like the juxtapositions so exemplarily isolated in the small-scale collages (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Sabine Hertig, detail from Landscape 14, 2017, analogue collage on canvas.

Fig. 5 Sabine Hertig, *Landscape 14*, analogue collage on canvas, three vertical sections, overall dimensions 300 x 465, 2017.

WORKSHOP OF THE IMAGINATION

If we return to the question of how unseen images are created, we cannot generate a formula even after an analysis of Sabine Hertig's collage process. But what distinguishes the artist's creative process is the unexpected conjunction of two traditional, and seemingly contradictory, approaches. In the

small-scale collages, thus, the focus lies on the formal structures of the image parts which create the basis for friction between the meaning of both parts. In large-scale works, on the other hand, the painterly method of dealing with images and image parts diverges from conventional collage process in which new statements are deliberately made through the combination of existing image content. The visually-led composition principle differs significantly from traditional, semantically informed figuration in the collage process. Examining *Landscape 14*, with its composition generated according to visual principles, a multitude of 'seeing as' experiences occur. The oscillation between appreciating a three-dimensional landscape and the dispersal of this illusion through the recognition of the individual 'scraps'. So, honing in on the question of where new images come from, we can describe an approach: invention lies in the numerous possibilities there are to develop creative processes, to transform and combine them, to superimpose and to customise them. This consistent, considered and intuitive way of dealing with a creative process holds the potential to create from our collective image memory and indeed to expand it with fresh input. And from this an artistic oeuvre can, in turn, over time, emerge. The place where new images are created is not, accordingly, to be found on a map, but a conscious engagement with creative processes enables some insight into the workshop of the imagination. Here materials, processes and the artist's physical actions are as much part of the emergence of unseen images as the collectively fixed, individually marked, image memory.

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