



I think that we live in a visual environment whose aesthetics are increasingly determined by digital media and we keep turning into users of predefined computer and software-based processing technologies. The aesthetics created in this way have become more and more interchangeable. A rich variety of visual manifestations is now on the verge of withering away, be it in the fields of architecture, graphic arts, photography or other design disciplines, which nowadays make use of computer-based processing techniques. It is time to develop more specific and individual forms of expression with computers and to achieve a more creative approach to computer-based technologies. This means circumventing the program's clearly defined application scenarios and predefined settings and devising one's own and more unrestricted processing chains and aesthetics.

This conversation with Philipp Schaerer was held via Skype on July 15, 2016 and on October 18, 2016.

You are an architect, but since you left university it seems that your focus has shifted from architecture towards something more and more related to the field of the arts and representation, without ever abandoning architecture definitely. How would you describe what you do at the moment?

I'm originally a graduated architect, but work today as a visual artist in the field of digital image processing. I work at the intersection between architecture, photography and graphic design - exploring digital image strategies. Whether this involves the creation of abstract image compositions by means of sampling digital image components and elements from 3D model libraries or whether it's by inventing and building photorealistic images, designed by means of image synthesis or digital image editing from the ground up. Generally the work exploits the freedom offered by two-dimensional imaging techniques and the increasing blurring of the boundaries between an image and the pictorial representation of reality.

On your website your work is divided into "work/series" and "commissions". How are these two fields related, to what extent do they intersect and influence each other?

The commissioned section on my website is more a thing of my past. These are commissioned architectural visualizations which I did for a number of offices between 2001-2012. I would say that these images no longer belong to my website, but to my biography. I think quite a few images, especially from the period when I was collaborating with Herzog & de Meuron or with Made In, still have a certain relevance and show a specific interest in doing architectural images even then. The focus was to provide images that were not hyper-photorealistic, but to think that visualisations are created in the realm where there is the potential to really express what is useful to understand the project - the idea. The question was: how can I create images that should not be seen as a copy of a reality, but rather

images that try to visualise an imagined, possible reality. By means of a selective handling of the image components I tried to balance between realism and fiction and to produce images that not only follow a pure implementation of photographic representation, but are also capable of creating a picturesque haptic of their own visual reality.

Today, I rarely produce architectural visualizations for offices, but focus more on non-commissioned work (*work series*). I still have a few commissions, but they are of a different type. An example would be a commission for a set design in the US - for a piece called *Pandæmonium* - a cinematic dance-theatre - by the Nichole Canuso Dance Company and the Early Morning Opera; or some *Kunst am Bau* interventions - the latest being in Baden where I made a small installation in a staircase of an multistorey housing building. There is also the ongoing collaboration with the architect Roger Bolthauser where I intervene during the project development, that means not visualizing a finished design but developing image series and visual approaches as variants for the design. We investigate how shared digital technologies influence the creation of architecture and its photographic representation through images.

What about your images you have behind you, hanged on the wall of your office?

It's a type of topic and inspiration board - a collage of printed items like images, notes, postcards - visual fragments which I find stimulating or intriguing and which often serve as a starting point for my visual inquiries. At the moment for instance, it's a compilation of postcards - paintings from the Niesen mountain which I also see from my studio in Steffisburg. It includes painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, also Ferdinand Hodler, August Macke, Paul Klee, Cuno Amiet or Johannes Itten, the Niesen has almost without exception been painted from the north showing the natural symmetry of the mountain, with its pronounced triangular shape. Abstract figures have especially attracted me, ones in which the mountain exhibits its most auratic presence. I was interested in relocating the genre of abstract landscape painting to the digital workspace and working with 3D data form the mountain directly taken over from Google Earth - like a contemporary "painter" standing in this parallel world or virtual space and working with the current

material and techniques - in this case by means of the computer rendering. Here, again, the aim was not to imitate a photographic representation, but rather an atmospheric and abstract image creating his own reality. [Images 15-23]

How and how much does the image - be it a photograph, a visualisation or a model picture - influence the way architects work?

It's probably important to differentiate the term "image" in this context. There are several meanings. The first, which you probably refer to, is the term which is directly linked to its carrier or media - a photograph, a painting, a picture you see on the screen.

The other meaning of "image" is more abstract, unmaterialized, linked to our imagination and can be understood as "a picture or idea of something". I think there is no doubt, architecture and images have always been strongly connected and architects often make use of both types of "images". In their quest for a design, architects, undoubtedly turn first and foremost to the graphic form in order to develop "a picture or idea of something". From such images, fragments or "set pieces" are drawn to create new design scenarios. Resulting images such as photographs, perspectives, sketches are then used for representation and communication purposes. From the beginning of our architectural career at university we are trained to discuss and even define architecture through an elaborate construct of media and image representation.

The image has doubtlessly become the most powerful medium for the distribution of visual content regardless of location. Unfettered by any particular carrier, it can be multiplied at will and transported anywhere. The growing use of the image is mirrored in the publication of architecture. In print or online, the contents have become biased towards graphics and images. Producing images has become an integral part of the making of architecture. Bearing this in mind, I think it is all too evident today that architects, when developing the design, increasingly turn to image techniques in order to monitor and control the appearance of the project from the outset. It has almost become imperative to review the image potential of the project as early as possible, to make necessary adjustments in order to improve its visual clarity and make it more competitive. This is especially important

considering the current climate of mass consumerism, across regional markets and accelerated communication, where we are ceaselessly bombarded by visual images. The embedding of images in the development and production of architecture has undoubtedly increased. However, we have to be careful that we do not develop and judge architecture only on its two-dimensional representation, which could lead to producing buildings that look good online, but lack a spatial richness in reality.

While developing an architectural project, when you are involved in the visualisations, do you also contribute to the development of the project?

At the moment I only produce very few architectural visualisations for offices. As mentioned before, the work with Roger Boltshauser is an exception and a long term collaboration where I intervene early on during different project developments. That means not visualising a finished design, but developing visual approaches for certain aspects of the design. In this collaboration I'm working more as a visual consultant in creating image based options and propositions for a specific architectural issue. An example would be a project called *Ozeanium* in Basel for which the competition was already won - my work consisted in developing pictorial mock-ups for the materiality and refinement of the façade. The architect, Boltshauser, had the idea to work with an arrangement of adobe and bricks and I made a series of elevation studies of different material compositions and blending arrangements. [Images 2-5]

The closest field to what you do appears to be architectural photography, as the images you produce are characterised by a neutral aesthetic and deep accuracy of detail, which is typical of photography. Assuming that photography in architecture is rarely a precise documentation of reality, but often implies a representative interpretation, since images not only provide access to the object, but also create something new by their display, could you explain the limit between that and a digitally created image?

A photographer has to work with the elements that are out there - the physical environment. By choosing the distance, angle, time, light, type of lens, he is able to create a new view of something with his camera, but he will never be able

to fundamentally invent or remodel the scene. A photographer has to admit the physical laws in which the materialized objects of the scene are bound. He cannot compete with gravity or light optics, he can't beat atoms - merging a plant with a stone for instance. In contrast to that, when working with a virtual scene, computer rendering allows the photorealistic rendition of a total fictional scene far removed from physical constraints and the forces of gravity. Everything is possible.

Yes, but could we still define precisely the difference between architectural photography and your work?

My work doesn't consist of taking photographs of existing buildings. I mainly work with digital image processing techniques - manipulating, collaging or generating images without the use of a camera. My instrument is the computer and not the camera. I'm building fictional image constructs (of natural and built environments) by inventing a potential reality. It's very close to architectural activity: an architect too is also constantly anticipating and trying to formulate a potential piece of built future. By tradition we are still used to linking an abstract representation to an idea or concept of something - which can be totally independent from the outer physical reality, and in contrast we still tend to read photorealistic images in the documentary way - images depicting something that exists.

However, things have definitely changed recently. The fast development of the computer and information technology has fundamentally changed the relationship between image and architecture as well as the perception of them. Digital image processing allows the creation of images that are barely distinguishable visually from a photograph. In addition to the conventional types of mostly abstract images used until now in the design and planning phases - sketches, plans, elevations or axonometric drawing - a new type of image is now being used: an image that appears to be a photograph. In the context of architecture, this type of image has exclusively been associated with the image of built architecture. Now, it is increasingly used to allow something that has not yet been built to appear real. This leads to confusion - made evident by your question - and challenges the claim to the reality of images that appear to be photographs.

The fact now, that the architect increasingly conveys design ideas via digital imaging methods ties him more and more to the functionality and the uniform expressiveness "offered" by the applications he uses. The image aesthetics created in this way have become more and more stereotyped and interchangeable - especially in today's architectural renderings. It seems that a rich variety of visual manifestations is now on the verge of withering away. I'm really worried about these "out of the box" aesthetics and that's why I'm trying to cultivate an open-minded attitude in my classes at the EPFL by using digital image techniques in an experimental and unconventional way.

We would like you to talk about your stunning work *Diary* [Image 1]. It has the quality of allowing one to perceive the quantity of data you have accumulated. Could one say that this image is an abstract and ongoing portrait of your life and actions perhaps?

It's an instant portrait or snap-shot of my organized data which I have been accumulating over the years. I have been collecting images, photographs, graphics, plans, schemes, texts and layout documents in digital form since 1998 and have used a media database since 2004 to record them. The data is tagged according to criteria I find coherent as well as intuitive, imported into the database and then labelled with key words. All this data does not take up any physical extension. Using search masks I am able to quickly and easily navigate this universe and I find what I am looking for. However, all I can see on the computer are merely subsets taken out of context, clearly separated, only parts of a whole. I wanted to allocate a physical extension to the data, to experience it as a whole and assign a quality of sensual perception to it.

Philipp Schaerer is a visual artist living and working in Zurich, Lausanne and Steffisburg.

Renè Magritte
La Reproduction interdite
1937

1 Philipp Schaerer
Diary 06.07.2007 - 18.05.2010
Records, 2010

2-5 Philipp Schaerer
Ozeanium Serie (Selection)
from top left, clockwise:
No B, No L, No G, No I,
Image Montage, 2013

6-14 Philipp Schaerer
Capriccio Serie (Selection)
Image Montage, 2015

15-23 Philipp Schaerer
Niesen
Computer Rendering, 2016