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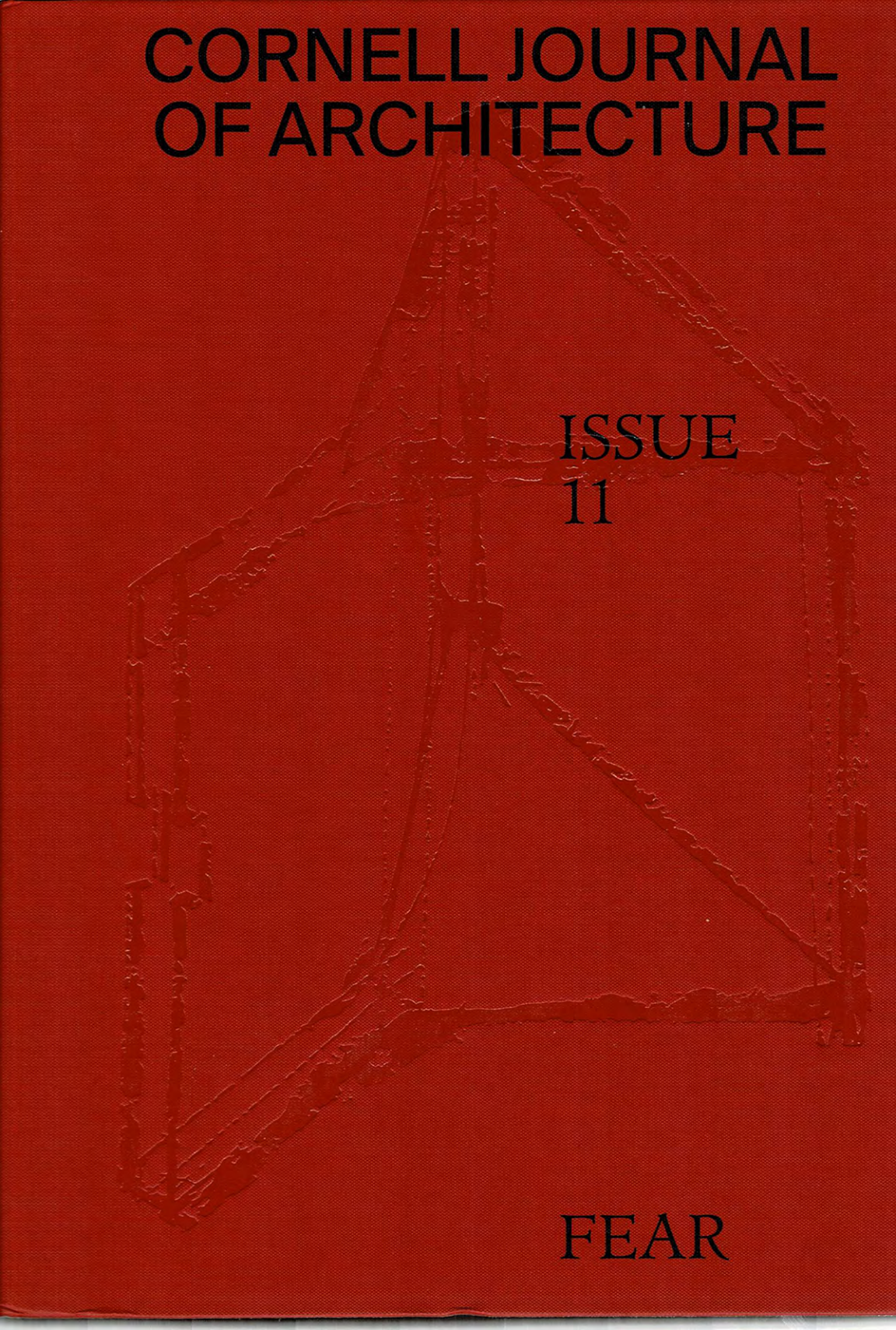

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FEAR

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MICHAEL
YOUNG

SCIOPHOBIA

Photography did not become an art because it employed a device opposing the imprint of bodies to their copy. It became one by exploiting a double poetics of the image, by making its images, simultaneously or separately, two things: the legible testimony of a history…and pure blocs of visibility, impervious to any narrativization, any intersection of meaning. This double poetics of the image as cipher of a history written in visible forms and as obtuse reality, impeding meaning and history, was not invented by the device of the camera obscura. It was born before it, when novel writing redistributed the relations between the visible and the sayable.

–Jacques Rancière, "The Future of the Image," 2002.[1]

FEAR OF THE MEDIATED IMAGE

Architecture has a troubled relationship with images. As an embodied physical experience, an architectural environment is always more than its mere visual appearance. These qualities, beyond the optical, include affective haptic and aural sensations, dynamic shifts of attention, and the contingencies of context in all of its manifestations, from the material to the social to the conceptual. To reduce this dense block of experience to an image loses much of the richness of reality. But, if we consider this issue more broadly, all mediations miss some aspect of the real. We could even say that one of the conditions of what we term reality is that it always has qualities that withdraw, eluding sensation and cognition.

The problematic relation between the image and the real becomes substantially more pressing considering that architects do not make buildings, they make representations. These representations, these images, establish a base for a significant amount of architectural discourse. It thus not only becomes crucial to articulate which modes of mediation will best aid an architect in an accurate forecast of future projections, but also equally important to dig deeper into the roles that representations play in the construction of discourse. As the discipline of architecture developed, a curious divide occurred in the classification of representations. Images that abstract aspects from reality are given a place of privilege, while images that "look like" reality are devalued. In fact, many architects will use the word "image" only for the second species, reserving the word "drawing" for the first. Part of this judgment relates to a deeply ingrained distrust of visual similitude in picturing practices, but another aspect is determined by how architecture uses representation as a basis for an ethics of labor and the delineation of disciplinary knowledge. This second aspect was initiated by the control of construction through measurable drawings, but also speaks to the discursive history that linked architecture to the humanities through geometry and rationality as the basis of aesthetic judgment.

If we directly evaluate our digital image culture and its ceaseless flow through internet dissemination, it becomes ever more difficult to divide the production of architectural representation into two clear-cut species. The images formerly known as drawings are behaving socially more and more like the images formerly known as photographs. And if we peer just a bit deeper, we find that the mediations we construct as architects

Previous: Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ik01*, 2006, chromogenic print with Diasec, 68.5" × 127.6".

through digital software are much closer to the world of images than they are to the world of drawing. It is becoming apparent that the genres architecture has used to value certain representations over others will no longer be sufficient for our current situation. In order to have some modicum of hope for architectural discourse within this image deluge, it may be necessary to question several of our disciplinary assumptions regarding the fear of the image. Specifically, we may need to look a little closer at photography's relation to veracity, at digital versus mechanical reproduction, and at the ties between aesthetics and politics when considering images.[2]

The veracity of the photographic image to what it represents is not a simple equation. I will propose that there are two general tensions that need to be untangled: one is epistemological, the other aesthetic. The first concerns the photographic image as a sign of the real. A common belief is that traditional mechanical or chemical photography faithfully represents occurrences in the world. This is often explained through the double sign system of the photograph as both icon and index.[3] As icons, photographs look like the things they represent, producing similitude with many qualities of our unmediated vision. As an index, light passes through a lens, focuses on an emulsified strip of film, chemically reacts to the intensity of the stimulus, and is recorded as a physical trace. This process occurs without the so-called intervention of the human hand, and the photograph develops an unadulterated copy of real phenomena in the world. This dual nature of icon and index has been discussed at length throughout the history of photography. It is an epistemological question regarding knowledge through systems of signification.[4] This double bind is found in dismissals of photography as true art (Baudelaire).[5] But, it is also present in arguments for how photography *is* an art different from other picturing practices (Krauss).[6] It is there in the establishment of mechanical objectivity in nineteenth-century science (Daston, Galison).[7] It underlies our belief in reportage through the documentation of past events (Barthes).[8] The double signification of icon and index typically align, but there are moments—common enough that we have all experienced them—where they diverge. These are photographs where the image indexes phenomena that do not align with our assumptions of visual resemblance. This split is primarily explained in two manners. In the sciences, these images reveal truths that the senses

failed to predict; in the arts, they are intriguing phenomena for aesthetic contemplation. Both explanations for the contradiction between iconic resemblance and indexical record are curious. If it is true that we trust a photograph because of its double signification in representing the world, then why is it that when the iconic and indexical referents diverge, we explain the discrepancy as either a deeper scientific truth or as an art object? Why do the misalignments become more interesting, more valuable, more real? It would appear that the glitch between these two sign systems cannot easily be explained away as an anomaly, and we should be encouraged to question the stability of photography as a true representation of reality.

Secondly, there is an aesthetic tension. David Campany writing on the photographs of Jeff Wall provides a description of this condition.

> A photograph is apprehended as a tableau if it is given to be seen, by whatevermeans, as an internally organised image that compels on the basis of that organisation. It may be documentary in origin or highly staged, but what is important is that the mode of attention and aesthetic judgment solicited by the tableau is itself a way of 'artificing' it....Of course, this premise existed before photography in painting, but when it appears in photography it produces a tension between the picture's status as record or evidence, which locates it in the past, and its pictorial organisation, which conjures an imaginary, contemplative dimension.[9]

This aesthetic tension challenges assumptions of the epistemological tension, for in order to experience a photograph as an art object there must be an intervention, an "artificing." This intervention goes directly against the veracity of an un-tampered documentary index. Manipulations can occur before the photograph is taken, or afterwards, through what is now commonly known as post-processing. They can occur intentionally through the desires of an artist, but they can also be produced accidentally as a quality of a specific affect caught in the image. It could be argued that all photographs experienced as art engage this conflict as a tension between fact and fiction, between reality and its representation. Photos as art disturb the relations between an object and its qualities; they initiate doubt then deeper contemplation regarding

the content of what is displayed. These are the aesthetic questions of realism. They do not originate in photography and are not medium specific. As Jacques Rancière argues, the aesthetics of realism began in nineteenth-century painting (e.g. Gustave Courbet) and literature (e.g. Émile Zola, Gustave Flaubert). These aesthetic experiments flattened the hierarchy of traditional genres, introduced high levels of specific episodic detail, appropriated aspects from the everyday, and deployed abstraction of matter and technique as an estrangement of the real.

The relationship between ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics is a complex one, and we will obviously not be able to track its philosophical history in the space of this essay. The entanglement extends back to the formation of Western philosophy where Plato feared the forsaking of moral essence through the seduction of the senses, in other words ethics compromised by aesthetics.[10] It is important to note that conflations between ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics often underlie arguments regarding the uses and abuses of the image. Most often these arguments are critical, claiming that aesthetics masks what is true regarding a situation. *Images conceal knowledge*. Furthermore, this belief often gains an additional valence. *Images conceal knowledge for nefarious intentions*. This statement implies that images are not just problematic, but unethical because they disturb access to truth. The ethical process following from this would be to analyze, critique, and dismantle images in order to raise awareness and reveal underlying motivations, that is, using ethics and epistemology as foundations to critique aesthetics. The problem with this is that the three distinct modes of engagement become ranked, with aesthetics always as a subservient and secondary concern.

Within architecture, fear of the mediated image is as old as the modern establishment of the discipline, initiated with Leon Battista Alberti's advisement against perspective for architects. The perspective image produces "deceptive appearances," while the orthographic drawing is true on account of its fidelity to "certain calculated standards."[11] Despite this advice, architects have used rendered perspectival images throughout the last five centuries to both construct disciplinary arguments and engage extra-disciplinary audiences. Examples can be found in Peruzzi, Piranesi, Boullée, Soane (Gandy), Schinkel, Wagner, Wright, and Le Corbusier. The École des

Beaux-Arts had a thoroughly developed pedagogy around rendering through the tripartite techniques of *entourage*, *poché*, and *mosaïque*, applicable to both orthographic and perspective images. A shift in attitude is noticeable after the democratization of photography in the early part of the twentieth century. The drawing merged with photographic images for both public presentation and utopian critical discourse. Through an engagement with photography, rendering became more realistic in some instances and more abstract in others, such as using photos as fragments in collage. Architectural discourse would largely focus on the second path of collage, leaving the more traditional naturalistic visual image in the wasteland of professional marketing. This divide only accelerated with the advent of digital imaging.

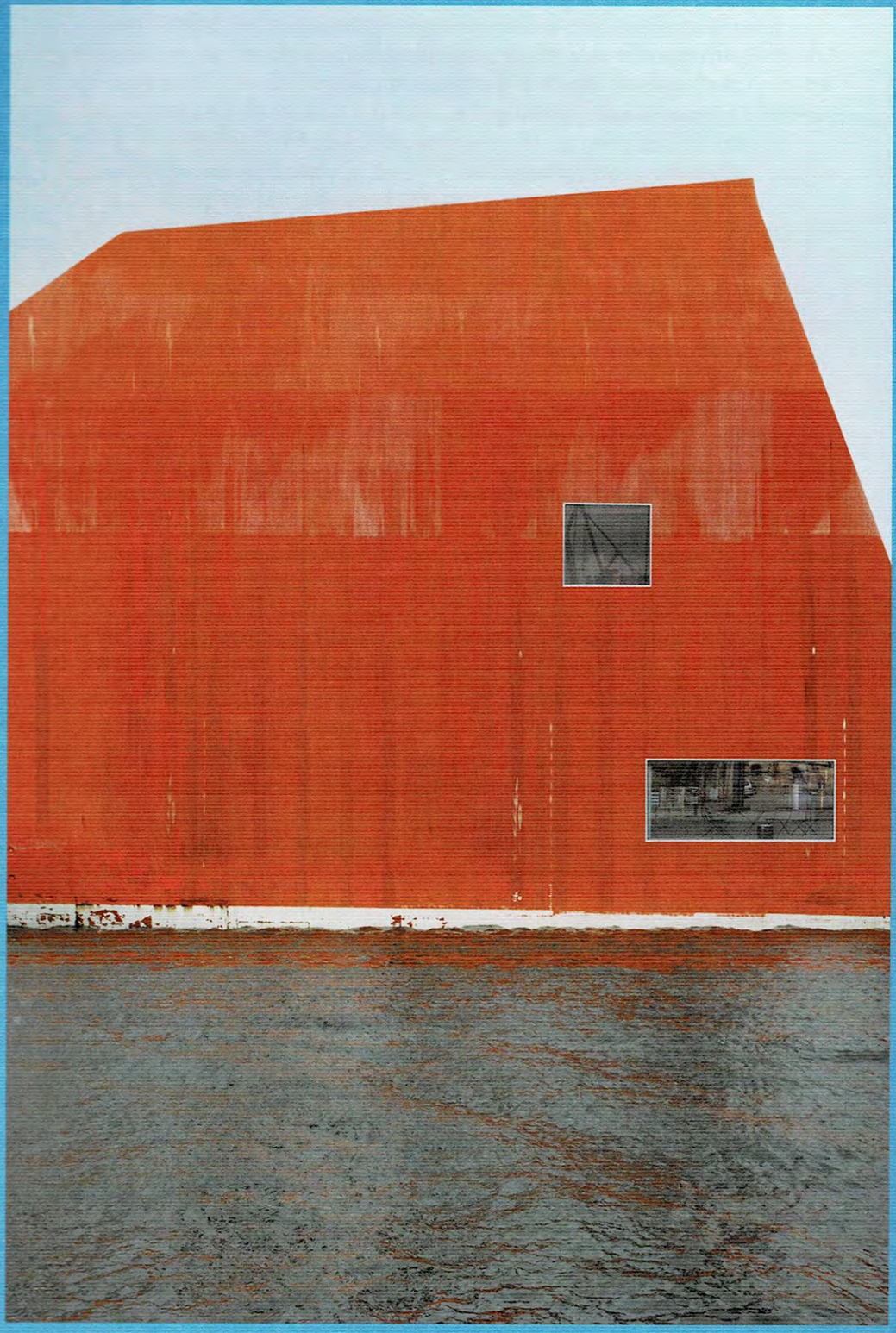
On first glance, the digital image would seem to be a complete rupture between iconicity and the indexical, as visual qualities are rendered illuminations of information signals. John May elucidates in his article "Everything is Already an Image" that digital images are in no way photographs. Instead he likens them to photon detection.

> Unlike photographs in which scenic light is made visible during chemical exposure, all imaging today is a process of detecting energy emitted by an environment and chopping it into discrete, measurable electrical charges called signals, which are stored, calculated, managed, and manipulated through various statistical methods. Images are thus the outputs of energetic processes defined by *signalization*, and these signals, in their accumulation, are what we mean when we say the word *data*.[12]

May is observant and precise regarding the differences between chemical and digital image making. Coded signals do not look like a visual image. A digital camera detects energy, stores this data through computation, and then at another location, at another time, through another machine, translates these signals as an array of illuminated pixels. This process of digital photon detection is obviously different than the chemical trace of light on film, and it brings with it different techniques, interfaces, and methods for the construction and manipulation of images. But, given our concerns in this

essay about the relations between images and truth, how different is this really regarding the relationship between image and reality? There is a common belief that digital images are more easily manipulated in the production of deception, more difficult to decipher as artificial. I will suggest that the collusion between the two registers of icon and index in traditional chemical photography was an epistemological error. There was never a natural connection between the two. Both chemical and digital images are indexical, and both can be used to create fictions and truths regarding the iconic resemblance to things in the world. A chemical image is created through material processes of energetic translation, but its value as an iconic resemblance remains outside of these techniques. A digital image is created through technical processes of energetic translation, and its value as an iconic resemblance remains outside of these techniques as well. There is an ingrained bias for the material as natural and the technical as cultural, tainting assumptions regarding the veracity of digital images, but this bias ignores the fact that digital processes are also always material processes and naively assumes that there is no technology in a chemical emulsion. Discrete imaging is much older than the computer. Images can be considered marks in matrices (painting) as opposed to lines on grounds (drawing).[13] All technologies of reproduction work through some discrete transfer involving a resolution of the mark that can be located, verified, and copied. W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us that, "Digitization of the image is a consistent technical feature from mosaic tile to the mezzotint to the Ben-Day dots of newspaper photographs."[14] Regardless of the informational capture, storage, and computational processes, as soon as the data is displayed for human perception we are in the realm of images, which opens aesthetic concerns.

To manifest the data of digital images as "photo-real rendering" is an aesthetic choice. A digital image is a collage of discrete independent pixels. The same data can be assembled and reassembled in multiple manners. The images of Philipp Schaerer activate tensions between the aesthetics of photography and the discrete resolution of independent pixels. His images are not photographs, they are montages. The difference from many traditional collages is that Schaerer removes the seams and ruptures from the visual surface and pushes the artifice into the reality the image presents, triggering a conceptual doubt



regarding veracity. This uncanny feeling is a result of the tensions between reality and its representation—an aesthetics of realism.

Photography automatically brings with it issues of reproduction fundamental to its ontology. A photographic image can be reproduced as a potentially infinite number of identical copies. These reproductions can be inserted into any form of publication, printed and distributed as books, portfolios, journals, newspapers, or pamphlets. Walter Benjamin famously described the result of these reproductions as a "loss of aura," for now the artwork was divorced from its context in time, place, materiality, and reception. The qualities of the unique singular original are lost under the spread of mechanical reproduction.[15] "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" contains many of the seeds that would become media studies in the twentieth century, eventually leading to postmodern theories of societal immersion in the simulations of spectacle. Furthermore, Benjamin's argument has been an important foundation for theorists attempting to understand the transformations of digital reproduction. The most common view is that digital images spread via the internet are a massive increase in reproduction, thus an even more intense loss of aura, an even deeper immersion in simulation, and even more distant from the original reality.

But what if this transference of Benjamin's argument from mechanical to digital reproduction is too quick? Yes, images on the internet spread rapidly and in a manner that can seem so out of control that we give them the biological metaphor of going "viral." But Benjamin's mechanical reproduction argument is based on the idea of a single original and an infinite amount of identical copies. What makes the original special, is its uniqueness in time, material, and place—three aspects which architecture prides itself on. But let's consider for a moment what is literally being reproduced in a digital image. When an image file is copied, it is data that is being reproduced, a discrete set of numeric signals compressed into a format that machines can translate into visible images. The data can be copied infinitely, but these coded signals are not the visual image itself. Every digital image will appear visually different based on the machine translating it. Any display device—a phone, a tablet, a monitor, a projector—will scale the image differently, have different resolutions, different color settings, and furthermore, each software platform will interpret the coded information differently, altering the image's

appearance. The data is closer to the abstraction of a written score in music or dance. As Boris Groys suggests, the visual image of a digital file is a performance, sometimes even a one-off occurrence.[16] This makes each opening of a digital image something singular, something that in Benjamin's language would have its own unique "aura." Only now, it is fruitless to consider any of these unique occurrences an original.[17] Instead of originals without auras, we have auras without originals. This furthermore suggests that the consumer takes on aspects of the producer of an image. What matters is less the original image as a single material artifact than how it is manifested, manipulated, and released into the wilderness of the internet, knowing full well that it will come back transformed after passing through the hard drives of unknown places. This change in dissemination and manipulation is a profound difference between mechanical and digital reproduction.

Mechanically reproduced images were circulated through a limited number of portals. These were regulated, curated, verified, and legitimized by the institutions that produced and published them. It is important to consider that one of the roles these institutions played was to manipulate (distort) images to serve their desires, regulating aesthetics through disciplinary knowledge. Within architecture, these images were crafted by professors wishing to instruct, architects trying to promote, and critics establishing an argument. The aesthetics of reproduction have political implications in terms of the communities they generate, described as the "distribution of the sensible" by Jacques Rancière.[18] The journals that began to appear in the early part of the twentieth century embraced mechanical reproduction and created a discursive space radically different from the portfolios of the academies that preceded them.[19] Consider the redistribution that took place between a portfolio such as Letarouilly's *Edifices de Rome Moderne* (1840-1855) and a journal like *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920-25) edited by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant. The aesthetics of the portfolio instilled a close reading based on an epistemological construct of disciplinary knowledge through formal analysis. A student was disciplined through drawing overlaid layers, studying the underlying geometry, proportions, and ornament. The aesthetics of *L'Esprit Nouveau* used images in blunt juxtaposition. These were images of architecture, but also images of machines, airplanes, factories, fashion designs, household

objects, etc., all combined with text and the experiments of modern graphic design.[20] The journal was a very different discursive space for architectural thought. It constructed a new constituency for architecture in relation to modern culture, one that was politically and socially less regulated by the academic and professional institutions of the nineteenth century.

The internet is our contemporary platform for the dissemination of architectural imagery. The discipline of architecture needs to consider how this alters image consumption and the production of discourse. The spread of images through websites, blogs, image boards, and social media are regulated along completely different terms than mechanically reproduced books and journals. These are no longer controlled by a single institution. Rather, it is often an algorithm that selects what appears on millions of devices. Furthermore, there are frequently no human eyes witnessing or evaluating the reproduction of these images. For instance, a Google image search tests an array of data signals, stored as an image file, looking for similarities of adjacent pixel patterns to determine resemblance.[21] This is a very different iconology.

The reproduction and distribution of images on the internet often requires a compression of image resolution. For Hito Steyerl, these low-resolution images are called "poor images."[22] This is deliberately provocative, with a relevant aspect for our current discussion. She argues that the low-resolution JPEG and AVI files are the raw material of our internet-image culture. Typical image consumption online is not of the high print resolution of art photography, but the misnamed, compressed, clipped, pixelated assemblages that appear on our screens. These are the images that we view and manipulate. These establish the reality of image distribution, consumption, trade, monetization, and influence.

> The poor image is no longer about the real thing the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.[23]

All images are captured at a resolution. The images we term "high" are those that eclipse the specific scalar perceptions of our eyeballs. In traditional photography, this is the grain of the image;

in digital images, this is DPI (Dots Per Inch). There is an assumption that the high-res is more real, more similar to the appearance of reality, while the low-res is a bad copy that misses the richness of real experience. High-res is a misnomer though. All images are at a lower resolution than the reality they represent, regardless of the technology of mediation. To push the issue even further, our unmediated vision is also at a lower resolution than the real object. There are always qualities we cannot perceive, aspects that are withdrawn from the senses. The threshold that we use to qualify images is an aesthetic decision. Above a threshold, the image looks like unmediated vision (icon), below the threshold, the grain or pixel is visually present (index).

Ruy/Klein, *Apophenia: The Form of Los Angeles in the Style of the Himalayas as Seen by a Convolutional Neural Network*, 2017.

Since digital devices all work in a fragmented and discrete manner, the exposure of the chunk, the unit, or the pixel appears to be true to the medium, in that it reveals its abstract artifice. There are several contemporary arguments that suggest that lowering the resolution of an image will open a better understanding, and in accordance, produce a more critically engaged aesthetic.[24] This critical revelation will allow an escape from the false simulations of smooth high-res image seduction and all of its ethical quagmire. There is an aspect of this argument that ties into traditional architectural drawings where abstraction provided the distancing mechanism believed necessary for criticality. This argument also seeks to epistemologically ground the digital image as a specific medium. A digital image automatically brings up issues of resolution, but this does not mean that this is what determines its "medium specificity" in terms that align with the arguments of Clement Greenberg.[25] The contemporary image world is an assemblage of multiple resolutions, and its medium is one of constant exchange and manipulation throughout a multitude of devices, software, algorithms, producers and consumers. Take for example the JPEG image from Thomas Ruff that opens this essay. This is an image of an iceberg that was found on the internet and appropriated by Ruff. It was then blown up to the scale typically associated with painting, at roughly four by three feet. This transforms the low resolution of the image into large visible squares. But look closer: within each of these divisions there are other squares, other resolutions, and at the lowest level, we have the mark that eludes our vision—the pixel of the print resolution itself. Ruff has not given a simple exposé of the digital nature of contemporary images, he has built worlds within worlds of resolutions as abstract color field studies, and simultaneously, it is still an image of an iceberg. Another example of the multi-resolution image is provided by Ruy/Klein's project *Apophenia*. In this series of images, two satellite photos are combined using a convolutional neural network. In this process the pixel information of two images are analyzed to filter features. The algorithm "learns" these features through thousands of passes through the data of the image signals. This allows the images to be collaged along a fine grain of resolution—a sequencing that could only be processed through the digitally discrete. The resultant image fuses the organization of one image with the features of another. The observer sees two images simultaneously,

but not as layered, woven, or visibly fragmented. The image appears as a "real," single satellite photo, yet it evokes a reality other than the one we assume to exist.

Does one find truth in the similitude of an image to the way the world appears to vision? Or, is it more true to expose the technology and the abstractions that a medium is composed of? As noted before, realism is not medium specific. It is the production of a tension between reality and its representation. This can include techniques of producing doubt through the grain of a medium, but just as often, this tension is produced as a friction between mediums—photography in tension with painting (Wall), painting in tension with photography (Gerhard Richter), photo-collage in tension with digital rendering (Schaerer), and satellite data in tension with satellite photography (Ruy/Klein). Furthermore, images do not cross into our attention as singular objects. They are received as sets, as searches of associations, even if the associations subscribe to a logic outside of human control, motivation, or comprehension. A better description of digital images may be as quasi-objects that manifest, circulate, and redistribute visual information. Resolution is tied to how images travel, to the context they are received in, to the audiences they build, to the portals that disseminate them, and to the aesthetic engagement they intensify. Internet-image cultures build collectivities around these redistributions—the political opens from the aesthetic. Architecture could find possibilities for speculation on alternate plausible realities by appropriating these contexts to actively disturb them. To estrange this background, to challenge it to be other, opens a space for the development of an architectural discourse that no longer fears the image, but respects the anxiety of operating in a mediated reality.

> But if images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter, the major and quite overlooked consequence is that reality now widely consists of images; or rather of things, constellations, and processes formerly evident as images. This means one cannot understand reality without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modeling, animation, or other forms of moving or still image. The world is imbued with the shrapnel of former images, as well as images edited, photoshopped, cobbled together from spam

and scrap. Reality itself is post-produced and scripted, affect rendered as after-effect. Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety.[26]

1 Jacques Rancière, "The Future of the Image", (2002) from *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 11-12.

2 Ibid.

3 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Realism and the Digital Image", from *Image Science* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2015), p. 49.

4 Charles Sanders Pierce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs" from *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 102.

5 Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1859" from *Strangeness and Beauty* ed. Eric Warner & Graham Hough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

6 Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 2" from *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

7 Lorrine Daston & Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).

9 David Campany, Jeff Wall *Picture for Women*, (London: Afterall Books, 2011), p. 39.

10 Plato, *The Republic*, translation 1955 Sir Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Publishing, 1955), pp. 429-431.

11 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

12 John May, "Everything is Already an Image", from *LOG 40* (New York: Anyone Corporation, 2017), p. 12.

13 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" from *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 220-221.

14 Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (New York: Verso, 2016), pp. 142-145.

15 Ibid.

16 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

17 Huyngman Pai, *The Portfolio and the Diagram* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

18 Beatriz, Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 118, 128.

19 Lowe, David G. (2004). "Distinctive Image Features from Scale-Invariant Keypoints" from *International Journal of Computer Vision*, vol. 60, iss. 2, pp. 91-110.

20 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" from *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2012).

21 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" from *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2012), p. 44.

22 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" from *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

23 Hito Steyerl, "Is the Internet Dead" from *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 148.

24 These are varied in their objectives and should not be lumped together, but I have in mind here, Michael Meredith's exhibition at the Princeton School of Architecture, *44 Low-Res Houses*, Mario Carpo's *The Second Digital Turn*, and the voxel based designs of M.Casey Rhem and Gilles Retsin.

25 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" from *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 4* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

26 Hito Steyerl, "Is the Internet Dead" from *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 148.