Chapter 7
Photography as a Tool of Alienation: *Aura*

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Abstract Regular photographic imaging records volumetric planes with smooth surfaces. The reason is the camera's deficiency in perceiving and documenting the visual richness of "persuasive" details in life. HDR imaging methods used in creating the artwork series titled *Aura* helped invisible textures to emerge through different exposures and layering multiple surfaces in an image. A major objective in this series was to facilitate the experiential visual complexity between the animate and inanimate to emerge that cannot otherwise be recorded. The intention was to achieve a new symbiotic painterly visual relationship between biological (humans) and non-biological (space) through the rich textures achieved after high-dynamic-range-imaging (HDRI) procedures. The chapter will focus on photography as a tool of personal world making, instead of photography as witnessing. In unfolding this practice notions of superimposition, palimpsest, painting vs. photography, truth and photography as an apparatus to provoke de-familiarisation will be covered. The aim is to confirm photography as a visual language that enriches and transforms human perception.

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Introduction

Aura series is a digital experiment to study the advantages of using computational imaging tools to create a novel photography aesthetic. This is alien to the classical perception of photography where straight evidential images are assumed.

Photography is a creative field in which technological advances greatly influence artistic expression. The ease of manipulation offered by software and the new functions available in cameras have caused artists who use photography as a tool to reconsider their visions, themes, narration, syntax and ways to share their artwork. Photography sharing sites such as Flickr, which facilitate encounters with individuals from different cultures, help to change the perception of time geographically and enable artists to get faster feedback, revelation, exposure and layering of information to be conveyed.

While some photographers are deeply engaged with analogue processes and deny digital technology many artists, aware of the complexity and particular advantages, do indeed adopt the novel aesthetics of photography. The familiar methods of montage and collage used in the old analogue days are still available but digital imaging techniques additionally enable artists to work with concepts such as augmented perception, chronophotography, subreal encounters, pictorialism, palimpsest-like superimposition, interlacing, simplification or minimisation, the creation of new worlds, delusion, synthetic realism or artificiality and appropriation.

Superimposition: The Notion of Palimpsest

The painterly effect obtained as the result of digital superimposition reminds us of the analogue concept of palimpsest (from the Greek *palin*, again; *psëstos*, scraped) – a re-used papyrus, parchment or other manuscript where the original text has been washed or scraped off and a new one substituted. The modern version of this archaic surface of knowledge, which allows the accumulation of information, is the Photoshop canvas, where details of layers behind the current can still be visible. The ability to layer various data from different sources onto one plane is a more complex form of analogue collage and montage that enables artists to achieve richer expression through superimposed pluralities (Fig. 7.1).

Layering different photographic planes into one is not the only way to create visual superimposition. "Also very common in photographs are disjunctions caused by reflections. While reflections in mirrors create discontinuities, reflections in glass can create an intermingling of spaces. This prevalence of reflections in photographs is matched by prevalence in photo-realist paintings, but in each medium the effects are very different. This is not just because the image of reflection is generally flatter, more broadly defined, and more opaque in paint." [1]. This sort of optical
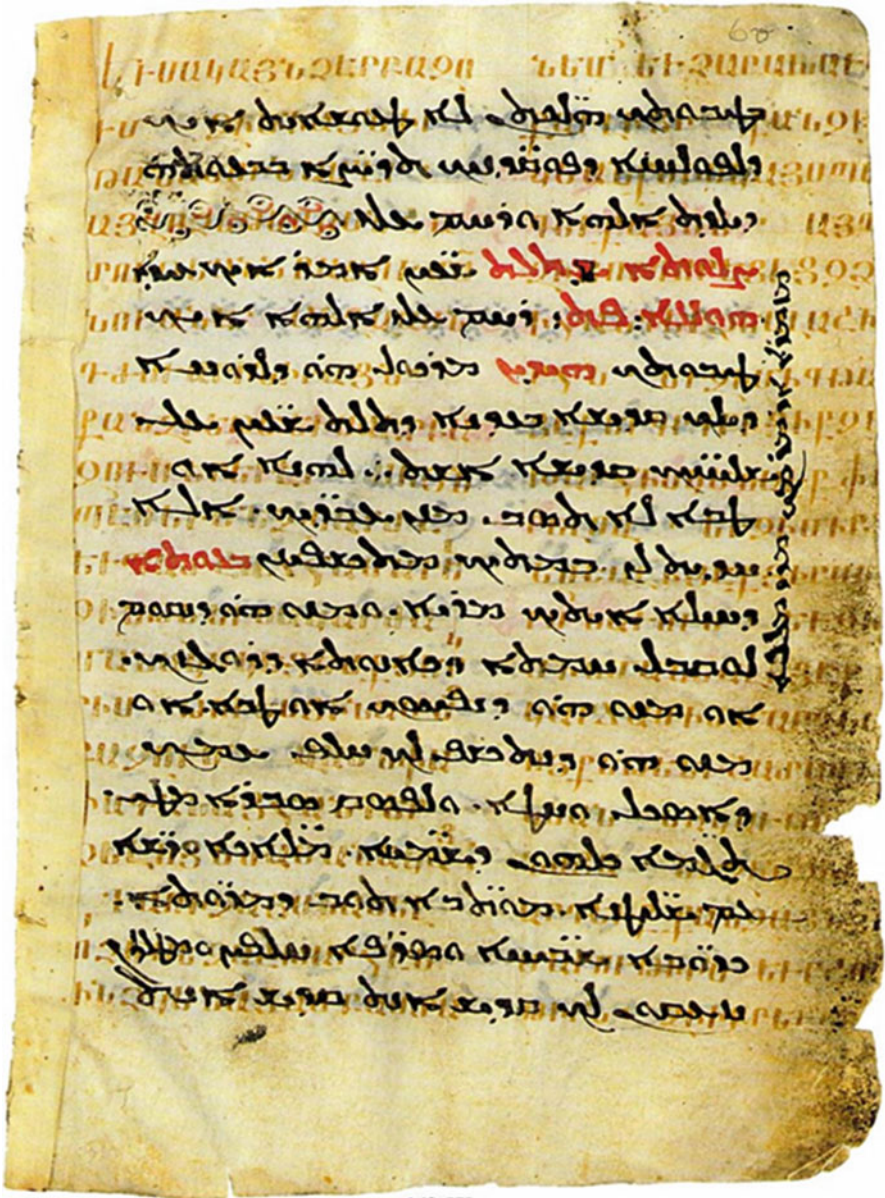
MS 575
Codex Armenicus Rescriptus. Palimpsest,
Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai, 6th c. and 1st half of 10th c.

Fig. 7.1 A palimpsest is created when writing on a surface is partially erased and a new text is inscribed on it (Image reprinted from http://analepsis.wordpress.com/2008/04/24/this-is-a-palimpsest/, captured on Dec. 6, 2008)

superimposition is unique and yields a cumulative result different to that from layering multiple images in the digital environment. When analogue and digital visual layerings are combined it is possible to create renderings of the "real" world that are almost impossible to decipher spatially.

The *Aura* series consists of photo-composites created using a combination of Photoshop and Photomatix Pro in order to perform HDR (High Dynamic Range) imaging. Four or more images taken from the same viewpoint are used for each of the plates from the series. As in all multiple image groups, inanimate objects are captured as still while animate subjects are imaged in different positions with movements recorded as blurs, due to slow shutter speeds and the lapse of time between shots. Superimposing four images resulted in particular aesthetics, with immobile objects appearing constant and mobile subjects dynamically intricate, as a consequence of layering. In using multiple photographic renderings of these mobile subjects the aim is to achieve a complex result similar to that described above, arising from merging the reflective analogue visual image with the reflexive digital one.

Superimposition of Contexts: The Concept Text of the *Aura* Series

The *Aura* series does not focus only on the visual complexity of the world surrounding us: there is also a social concern that can be expressed only in words. Therefore, it is essential to take account of the concept text. As Barthes states in his book, *Image-Music-Text*, "the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text – title, caption or article."[2]. The following paragraphs constitute the departure point of the series and explain why images of different places were superimposed to create the photographs: museums and galleries with market places…

In galleries, museums and art fairs or bazaars and markets alike, items on display are usually preferred if they have a certain "aura." This aura, beyond a pristine "beauty" of the self may depend on current trends that are in vogue, the identity of the particular exhibit venue, the specific person or the brand that exhibits, the arbitrary daily mood of the audience or buyers, the symbiotic relationship between the exhibitor and the positive critique of the promoter, and sometimes the exhibitor's statement and the perception of this statement by the audience or buyers. What renders something beautiful is not always its intrinsic qualities; it can easily be rendered "attractive" externally by cosmetic retouching or remodelling, not integral to the original (Figs. 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, and 7.5).

This series of artworks, focusing on the difference between the intrinsic soul of artworks and their extrinsic perception determined by conditions was created in galleries, museums and market places in Paris, Bologna, Hong Kong, London and Istanbul in the year 2009. The work is conceived as a reminder and critique of the ever-present (but recently peaked) market economy mindset, which is concealed in

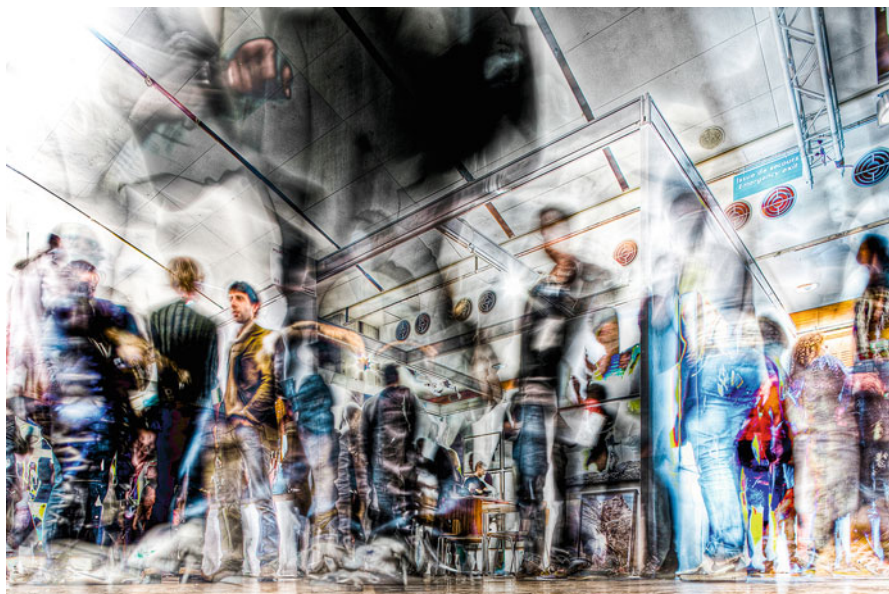**Fig. 7.2**   Aura #2, Paris Photo fair, Murat Germen, 2009

Fig. 7.3   Aura #3, Market place – Istanbul, Murat Germen, 2009

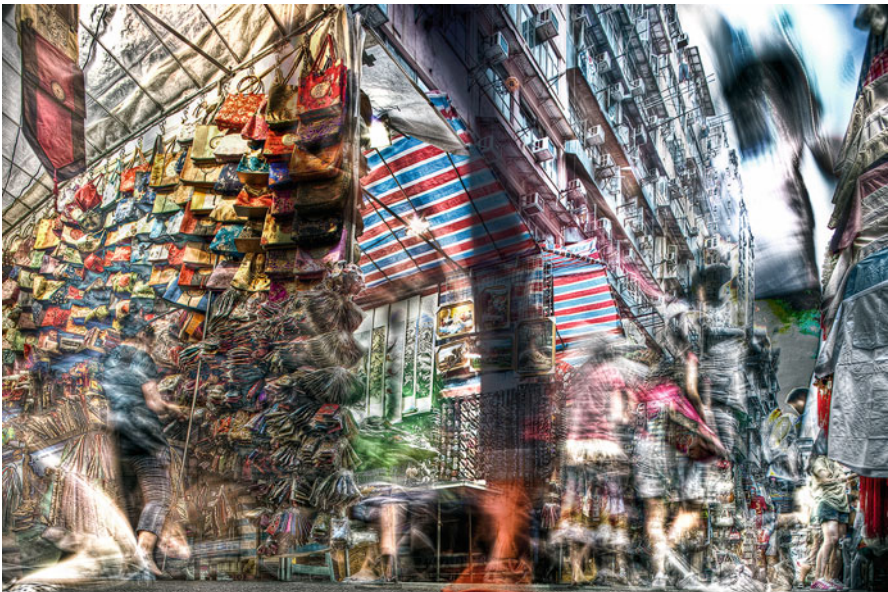**Fig. 7.4** Aura#12, Bologna Art Fair, M. Germen

Fig. 7.5 Aura#5, Market place – Hong Kong (*bottom*), M. Germen

Fig. 7.6 Aura #1, Paris Photo fair, Murat Germen, 2009

artists' statements with a range of arguments and awareness. Important art events draw much attention due to the delusional presence of wild parties, discourses, allegations, lobbying and pathetic self-promotion efforts in exhibition openings, the pursuit for sponsors and influence they exert, artists competing with each other for auction prices, and the focus of attention and press coverage of celebrities at openings as opposed to artworks themselves. These surprising carryings-on perhaps indicate that art has lost its freedom, and is now situated right in the middle of the system it allegedly criticises, but which it finally disingenuously exalts. In the commercial art milieu it seems there is no longer much difference between art venues and shopping malls (Figs. 7.6 and 7.7).

The *Aura* series can be understood as a study created from a desire to make artworks independent of peripheral conditions and to embody their inherent value. Nevertheless, work on this series stopped after its exhibition in 2009, because after a solo exhibition galleries expect a new series.

There are a few reasons why this series is titled *Aura*. First of all, the initially invisible pictorial character of a space can be made visible. HDR technology enables light fields of different intensities to be equally visible on photographic images. Secondly, the ghostly appearances of moving people in the photographs are reminiscent of the so-called aura photographs that claim to document people's otherwise invisible spiritual powers.

Fig. 7.7 Aura #4, Market place – Istanbul, Murat Germen, 2009

Relationship Between Painting and Photography

There is an ongoing relationship between photography and painting. When photography was invented, it annexed painting's function of recording history and was trusted more as a documentary tool, since it bore witness to experiences more realistically than paintings, which are always constructs. Some time after that, photography proved its independence and stopped being viewed purely as evidence. This is when it found the opportunity to evolve into an apparatus of fiction, like painting. This new relationship gave birth to "pictorial" photos that emulated the optical qualities of paintings, which in turn paved the path for hyper-realistic paintings that are easily mistaken for photographs.

Technological advances in the image processing capabilities of computers and the amazingly rich variety of image editing software allow for the utmost manipulation in photography and seem to weaken its credibility as evidence. Thus, the photograph has been able to lose the heavy weight of the representation of the truth for the public and to begin to represent the photographer, i.e. the self, just like the painter.

Barthes speaks of the painterly potential in photography as a way to consider it as art: "For if one can talk of aestheticism in photography, it is seemingly in an ambiguous fashion: when photography turns into painting, composition or visual substance treated with deliberation in its very material 'texture', it is either so as to signify itself as 'art' (which was the case with the 'pictorialism' of the beginning of

Fig. 7.8 Aura #26, Paris Photo fair, Murat Germen, 2009

the century) or to impose a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures." [2].

The pictorialism used in the past is nowadays replaced by the digital alchemy of two different forms of images: photography and three-dimensional synthesised images. "Computerised design systems that flawlessly combine real photographed objects and objects synthesised by the computer." [3]. The photographic image obtained from witnessing 'what is there' can easily be turned into an image recreated from scratch and made to express 'what is here', i.e. in the creator's mind. As William Mitchell claims, "a digital image is radically different [from an analogue counterpart] because it is inherently mutable: 'the essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer. Computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analysing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments to a painter.' Furthermore, in a digital image, the essential relationship between signifier and signified is one of uncertainty." [3]. This uncertainty offers the possibility for multiple readings of artworks and is much appreciated by most of artists (Figs. 7.8 and 7.9).

The association of photography with (so-called) reality seems to constrain its expressive promises but the ambiguity of digital image in the relationship between signifier and signified (discussed above) takes it beyond the boundary: "Unlike paintings, photographs are seen as having a special connection with reality, and this gives the transformations of photography a compelling force and surreal power unavailable to painting. This difference between painting and photography can also

Fig. 7.9 Aura #23, Historical Grand Bazaar – Istanbul, Murat Germen, 2009

he observed in the comparison of animated and live film." [1]. In painting the signifier has to be defined realistically as far possible, since paintings are taken to be constructs resulting from the artist's imagination. But in photography, which is assumed to record the world as seen, the realistic rendering of the signifier/phenomena is not of prime importance: this is how it is possible to focus on the meaning/presence of the signified. As Barbara Savedoff puts it, "the difficulty in painting is to make the image seem alive. Photography, though, has a different starting point. Because it provides a direct record of an animate being, it can be a triumph of photographic art to make us see that person in a new way." [1].

Barthes says "painting can feign reality without having seen it" [4] in his famous 'Camera Lucida'; photography on the contrary, can pretend reality *after* having seen it. This pretended reality is actually the photographer's subjective "framed" reality and is sometimes presented as objective. Despite this subjectivity and false objectivity, photography can keep its documentary connotations, as "digital manipulation might seem particularly conducive to photographic transformation, since very complicated alterations can be achieved without destroying the image's documentary feel [1] (Figs. 7.10 and 7.11).

Paintings describe personal worlds created from imagination and are not expected to be evidence of reality as they are created from personal interpretation and are not instant recordings of objects/subjects. On the other hand photography, in addition to sustaining its duty of pure documentary, has also begun to be used as an apparatus

Fig. 7.10 Aura #24, Bologna Art Fair, Murat Germen, 2009

Fig. 7.11 Aura #18, Market place – Hong Kong, Murat Germen, 2009

for portraying constructed personal worlds, reminiscent of paintings. Its potential
for augmented perception, chronophotography, subreal encounters, pictorialism,
palimpsest-like superimposition, interlacing, simplification or minimisation, creation
of new worlds, delusion, synthetic realism or artificiality, or appropriation, discussed
at the outset of this article, is used by many artists to create unique aesthetics in
photography. Below are some of these artists, using the categories mentioned above
(no visuals are provided due to copyright issues):

– Augmented perception: Andreas Gursky (German), Chris Jordan (American),
  Jean-François Rauzier (French)
– Pictorialism: Jeff Wall (Canadian), Desirée Dolron (Dutch), Yao Lu (Chinese),
  Alessandro Bavari (Italian), Helena Blomqvist (Swedish)
– Palimpsest-like superimposition: Michael Najjar (German), Jo Teeuwisse
  (Dutch), Sergey Larenkov (Russian), Kay Kaul (German)
– Chronophotography: Pablo Zuleta Zahr (Chilean), Thomas Weinberger
  (German), Peter Langenhahn (German)
– Simplification/minimisation: Jesper Rasmussen (Danish), Josef Schulz
  (German), Pavel Maria Smejkal (Slovakian), Josh Azzarella (American), Matt
  Siber (American), Liddy Scheffknecht (Austrian)
– Creation of new worlds: Ruud van Empel (Dutch), Anthony Goicolea (American),
  AES + F Group (Russian), Filip Dujardin (French), David Trautrimas (American)

Photography and the Rendering of Truth

Photography for some is the factual manifestation of reality. Yet, the illusion of a
single reality, is criticised by V. Flusser: "The [observer] trusts [technical images] as
he trusts his own eyes. If he criticises them at all, he does so not as a critique of
image, but as a critique of vision; his critique is not concerned with their production,
but with the world 'as seen through' them. Such a lack of critical attitude towards
technical images is dangerous in a situation where these images are about to dis-
place texts. [It] is dangerous because the 'objectivity' of the technical image is a
delusion. They are, in truth, images, and as such, they are symbolical…" [5]. Some
artists take this critical attitude to an extreme to defy 'reality' and create a new syn-
thetic reality.

As William Mitchell states in his 'The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the
Post-Photographic Era'; "because of the difficulty involved in manipulating them,
photographs were comfortably regarded as causally generated truthful reports about
things in the real world." Yet developments in digital image processing made
manipulation ever more easily available to more people, not only to experts. This
deconstructionist attitude to defying reality and the ease of manipulating images led
to new trends to create personal worlds. Mark Kingwell asserts that "photographs
are not multiple depictions of some single reality, waiting out there to be cornered
and cropped, and somehow regulating, even in the cornering and cropping, how/
what the image means. Rather, photographs offer multiple meanings. The presented

image is not a reflection, or even an interpretation, of singular reality. It is, instead, the creation of a world." [6]. This trend should not be seen as a dangerous direction in the present day visual culture, since photographs have in fact never been autonomous entities but have always depended on specific local/contextual historic, social, political and cultural interpretations by the people producing and consuming them.

With this in mind, potential individuals, institutions and nations have started using photography as an illustrative tool to construct reality as opposed to representing reality, since photography can transform the way we see representations. "Media, being in between the segments of the society, have a certain influence in the construction of social reality. Media put issues on the agenda, provide information about facts and events, and offer a cognitive framework for society's interpretation" [7]. "Construct" is a temporary process that exists for a while and finally transforms itself into an end "product": A building, a culture, a society, an idea, a freedom, a dogma, etc. Not only buildings and structures are built; the major components that constitute the spine of the society we live in, such as tradition, culture and identity can also be constructed.

Photography as an Apparatus to Provoke Dis-appearance, Ambiguity and De-familiarisation

Life is so full of idiosyncrasies that the famous saying "truth is stranger than fiction" was coined. Consequently, conveying 'real' appearances through photographs, striving for certainty in image making or communicating familiarities may not always turn as "artful" as expected. Instead, de-familiarisation of the subject to be presented in the eyes the audience offers alternative ways to communicate with them. De-familiarisation is a strategy used especially by radical modernist artists in various fields to challenge our habitual ways of seeing and understanding, allowing or forcing us to see afresh. The key technique for artists attempting to convey strangeness or to create an alienation effect, as de-familiarisation is also called, is to foreground the various devices of artistic language in such a way as to bring attention to the language itself and prevent habitual ways of seeing and reading. Pioneered by the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, de-familiarisation was meant to disturb life's habitual ideologies [8]. Viktor Shklovsky introduced the concept of de-familiarisation in his seminal essay, 'Art as Device' (often translated as 'Art as Technique') and claimed that art de-familiarises objects by presenting them as if seen for the first time and thus removes them from the automation of human perception.

When a photograph de-familiarises, it is as though something new to the accustomed perception is being revealed through ambiguity; the resulting observation can turn out to be highly stimulating. This approach makes the familiar disappear and allows us to focus on the notion of *dis-appearance*. This can be described as the depiction of the subject, object or scene as experienced and or felt and not only as seen.

Conclusion

My artist's statement, set out above, will clarify my position. Photography is an opportunity for me to find things people ignore and bring them forward to make people reconsider their ideas. I am not interested in extraordinary things since they are always covered and receive more attention due to mankind's unending interest in celebrities, fame, and sensation… I try to concentrate more on ordinary things and catch possible latent extraordinariness in regularity. It is easy to take ordinary photos of extraordinary things but more challenging to take extraordinary photos of ordinary things. It is possible to say I tend to concentrate on extracting beauty out of ordinary. I attempt to de-familiarise ordinariness, render it ambiguous by alienating it from its familiar context and finally make people see it afresh. Photography records surface information, where one can only depict the exterior features of objects (colour, texture, shape, etc.) and the resulting visual representation cannot incorporate the internal condition, content, even soul. This is why I additionally aim to make photos that carry the many traces of time, multiple dimensions of space and finally create photos usually invisible to the naked eye. The basic idea is to form a personal visual accumulation through time and space that supposedly give us more insight and clues than a single photograph. I see multi-layered photography/chrono-photography as gates to augmented perception, surreal encounters, creation of new worlds and self appropriation, since I do not believe in ultimate objectivity in photography and "Truth" with the capital T. Personal delineations of temporary yet experienced smaller realities are truer than imposed institutional "realities." The key is reflecting the inner world with a genuine, idiosyncratic way: "Do not follow the suggested agenda/trend, do your own thing…"

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