

Visible Language

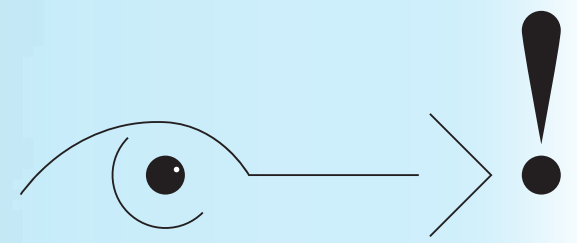
51.3 + 52.1

the journal of visual communication research

december 2017 + april 2018

ISSN 0022-2224

Published continuously since 1967.



51.3 + 52.1 Visible Language

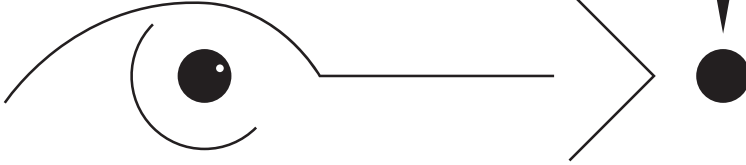
the journal of visual communication research

december 2017  
april 2018

51.3 – 52.1

**Visible Language**

the journal of  
visual communication  
research



**special issue:**

**Practice-led Iconic Research**

---

**Advisory Board**

Naomi Baron – *The American University, Washington, D.C.*

Michael Bierut – *Pentagram, New York, NY*

Charles Bigelow – *Type designer*

Matthew Carter – *Carter & Cone Type, Cambridge, MA*

Keith Crutcher – *Cincinnati, OH*

Mary Dyson – *University of Reading, UK*

Jorge Frascara – *University of Alberta, Canada*

Ken Friedman – *Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia*

Michael Golec – *School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL*

Judith Gregory – *University of California-Irvine, Irvine, CA*

Kevin Larson – *Microsoft Advanced Reading Technologies*

Aaron Marcus – *Aaron Marcus & Associates, Berkeley, CA*

Per Mollerup – *Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia*

Tom Ockerse – *Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI*

Sharon Poggenpohl – *Estes Park, CO*

Michael Renner – *The Basel School of Design – Visual Communication Institute,  
Academy of Art and Design, HGK FHNW*

Stan Ruecker – *IIT, Chicago, IL*

Katie Salen – *DePaul University, Chicago, IL*

Peter Storkerson – *Champaign, IL*

Karl van der Waarde – *Avans University, Breda, The Netherlands*

Mike Zender – *University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH*

---

**Contents**


---

 framing texts

---

**Practice-led Iconic Research: Towards a Research Methodology for Visual Communication**

Michael Renner

**8 – 33**

---

**The Practice of Practice-led Iconic Research**

Arno Schubbach

**34 – 55**

---

 research into the design process

---

**The Dynamism of the Vertical Strokes of Hangeul and the Flow of Its Lines of Writing**

Jinsu Ahn

**56 – 73**

---

**Identifying Design Processes in Photography by Analyzing Photographic Strategies**


---

**in the Documentation of Public Places: "It's hard to be down when you're up."**

Helga Aichmaier

**74 – 95**

---

 .....  
 research about an image category:

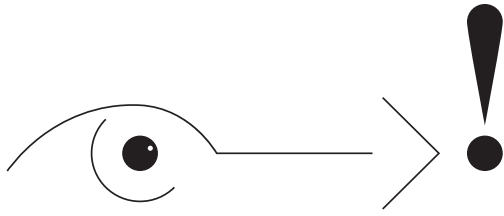
---

**Documentary Image Sequences**

Susanne Käser

**96 – 123**

*continued...*



**The Image as Unstable Constellation:** Rethinking Darwin's Diagram from the Perspective of Practice-led Iconic Research

Paloma López Grüninger

124 - 147

**Premises for Interaction between Images**

Claire Reymond

148 - 173

**Making Things Visible:** Visual Strategies for the Representation of Objects in Collections

Michael Hübner

174 - 201

Book Reviews

*Taking a line for a walk: Assignments in design education*

Jorge Frascara

202 - 203

*Fire Signs, A Semiotic Theory for Graphic Design*

Sharon Poggenpohl

204 - 207

## Introduction

The thematic issue of *Visible Language* on hand introduces 'practice-led iconic research' as a methodology developed over the past decade. 'Iconic Research,' an interdisciplinary field of scientific inquiry into all kinds of images, emerged from the description of the 'iconic turn' (Boehm 1994) and the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1995) in the mid-1990s within the scope of art history. In reference to the linguistic turn – a term coined in the 1960s in philosophy (Rorty 1967) – the lack of reflection on how images create meaning was pointed out in comparison to the analytical reflection on language starting in antiquity. This lack of a scientific analysis of images is especially significant considering the exponential increase of image production and dissemination caused by digitalization. Based on this argumentation, a number of interdisciplinary research clusters have been established in Europe (cf. page 14 of this issue). Philosophers, art historians, linguists, theoreticians, and historians of science, anthropologists, psychologists, and other disciplines from the humanities and the sciences became involved in the "alphabetization" of images, contributing to the question on how images generate meaning within the context of social exchange. The Swiss National Center of Competence in Iconic Research, *eikones*, was founded with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Basel in 2005. Considering the tradition of Swiss Graphic Design and Visual Communication, as well as the relevance these fields have in shaping the flood of images in daily life, the Visual Communication Institute, The Basel School of Design HGK FHNW was involved in the project ever since the preparatory phase. The large-scale project, involving around 30 PhD candidates and Post Docs, was initiated by Gottfried Boehm, who had coined the term 'Iconic Turn' in 1994.

Through their co-operation, it became gradually clear, that the visual communication designers involved in the project brought other aspects to the discourse about images through their understanding of the very process of image generation. With the ability to generate visual variations and the interpretation of a field of visual alternatives, the informed communication designer can, in this context, develop a unique approach complementing existing scientific methodologies. This finding led to the development of the methodology we call today 'practice-led iconic research' (Renner 2010). In short, this term means the systematic creation of visual variations as a methodology to describe a specific effect images cause in a beholder. The verbal description is based on the comparative analysis of visual alternatives created beforehand.

We can distinguish two major trajectories within the described methodology. The first trajectory is focusing on the understanding of the image generation processes and differentiates the description of how decisions in processes lead to an unpredictable visual result. The second trajectory is focusing on the understanding of a specific image category or a specific situation we encounter images in, e.g. diagrammatic images, documentary images, ornamental images, typography and image, etc.

The articles published in this issue describe and demonstrate what distinguishes the design of images for communication in a design office from the design of images to contribute to a scientific question related to iconic research. The articles present projects which were developed in the context provided through the co-operation of the Visual Communication Institute, The Basel School of Design HGK FHNW with eikones from 2005 till 2013 as well as research projects which were developed independently at the Visual Communication Institute since the turn of the Millennium until today.

The publication is structured into three parts.

Part 1 consists of two texts framing the methodology of practice-led iconic research applied to the concrete projects described in Parts 2 and 3. Michael Renner's article introduces the concept of practice led-iconic research. It provides a brief background on the relation between 'text and image'. The article introduces practice-led iconic research as an approach starting from the making of images and distinguishes the two trajectories described above. Both trajectories of iconic research aim to provide evidence perceived by the visual sense that augments the evidence provided by language. Arno Schubbach's contribution argues that the opposition of theory and practice is outdated and not adequate to conceive practice led-iconic research. That rather, it should be understood as a specific research practice based on the production of images. In order to characterize this kind of practice-led research, Schubbach compares it to a theory-driven approach to images and its use of visual examples as well as to the ways in which the natural sciences and artistic research deal with pictures.

Part 2 presents two inquiries into an image-generation process describing the process of taking a photographic picture and writing the Korean alphabet Hangeul. Jinsu Ahn's contribution investigates the design properties of Hangeul that appear in the process of practical writing. They are in contrast to the first publication of the script in 1446 by King Sejong the Great, which introduced letters based on basic geometric shapes. Basic writing experiments and the analysis of their outcome were performed to find answers to the questions of what formal properties Hangeul strokes have, and what role they play in connecting letters to form a fluid vertical line of text. Helga Aichmaier's article explores, based on her dissertation, how taking pictures within a research context enables the analysis and verbalization of strategies that are employed in photographic design processes. Despite a growing body of knowledge on image creation, little research has been conducted into photographic design processes. Viable contact sheets, sketches, proofs, or notes have not been available yet for proper research. Thus practice-led iconic research is adapted as a method for photography – possibilities of photographic practice and its strategies are explored as an instrument of research.

Part 3 presents four articles addressing the image category of the documentary image, the diagrammatic image, the interaction between two pictures, as well as the representation of objects for accessing those objects in an archive. Susanne Käser approaches the question of how a documentary image sequence has to be designed to convey a temporal development. Using the method of practice-led iconic research, aspects such as the

scope of the sequence, temporal distances between the images, gradations between the difference and similarity of the image material, light situation, color palette, and image section are investigated and discussed with the help of practical examples. Paloma López's paper, is based on her PhD thesis, and starts with the observation that the visual process is formed by a broad variety of choices. The knowledge about and the practical experience of these options are at the very core of a particular manner of looking at images. A famous diagram that Charles Darwin drew, is used to show how a different understanding of images can allow us to uncover new insights on the intrinsic meaning of the diagram itself. Claire Reymond's article presents an explorative study using the method of practice-led iconic research to detect the premises that allow connection processes between two images. The analysis documents the relevance of different image features such as, for example, the analogy of the main vectors within the images or the width of the stroke in line drawings. A pilot study using eye-tracking, that was conducted as a subsequent step, strengthens the findings of the practical research. Michael Hübner's contribution presents a practice-led investigation on a diversity of visual strategies to represent objects, and their effects on the perception of the latter. How and what kind of knowledge can be gained from the representation of objects? Series of photographs as well as hand and digital drawings alternate with analytical observations, thus formulating diverse findings and opening up further perspectives not only applicable to the practice of object archives.

We hope that the articles in this issue demonstrate an approach of inquiry and research closely related to the practice of visual communication and representing a relevant contribution to the interdisciplinary field of iconic research. It is our understanding that the basic nature of the research approach presented in this issue is different to applied research, which is oriented towards its direct applicability. Besides, the basic nature of the practice-led methodology presented here is not comparable to a purely theoretical or historical approach. Therefore, we should like to describe the methodology of practice-led iconic research as basic practice-led research in the hope that the outcome of these research activities will help establish a community of communication designers and improve the recognition of design in the research community and in society in the long run.

We should like to thank all the authors contributing to this issue, and all the reviewers of the articles, who have contributed with their constructive criticism to the actual form of this issue. In particular however, we should like to thank the editor of *Visible Language*, Mike Zender, for his outstanding efforts as to the realization of this issue.

The team of guest editors,  
Michael Renner, Claire Reymond, Arno Schubbach

Boehm G. (1994). Die Wiederkehr der Bilder, in: Boehm, G. (1994) (ed.). Was ist ein Bild?, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 11 – 38.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1995). The Pictorial Turn, in: Mitchell, W.J.T. (1995) (ed.). Picture Theory, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 11 – 34.

Renner, M. (2010). Practice-led Iconic Research, in: diid, disegno industriale industrial design, 41: pp. 76 – 82.

Rorty, R. ((1967) 1992). The Linguistic Turn; Essays on Linguistic Method. Chicago US: University of Chicago Press.

# Identifying Design Processes in Photography by Analyzing Photographic Strategies in the Documentation of Public Places: "It's hard to be down when you're up."

Helga Aichmaier

Recent research in the fields of image studies, visual communication, graphic design, and the history of science shows that there are 'design processes' – specific decision-making processes – in the practices of designing, painting, or drawing. I assumed that parallels could be drawn between those visual practices and photography. This paper explores how taking pictures within a research context enables the analysis and verbalization of strategies that are employed in photographic design processes. Despite a growing body of knowledge around image creation, little research has been conducted on photographic design processes. Viable contact sheets, sketches, proofs, or notes have not been available yet for proper research. Thus "practice-led iconic research" is adapted as a method for photography – possibilities of photographic practice and its strategies are explored as an instrument of research. The research questions were narrowed down to inquire into the image production of documentary photographs, specifically, of four public squares in Switzerland and Austria: How do photographs have to look in order to be recognized as documentation of a certain place? Is it possible to identify specific photographic strategies for documentary image generation? It was found that there are several strategies that support a documentary impression if they are employed during the creative process of photography, such as top views, critical distance, or frontality. The findings can contribute to the question of how visual meaning might be generated, enhancing an understanding of photography and design in the field of design practice as well as theory. This paper is based on the dissertation "Strategies of an Image Practice" (Aichmaier 2016).

keywords

*design research methods  
practice-led iconic research  
design processes  
photographs*



Abbildung 85: Heldenplatz Wien, 20 Standorte. Die Ziffern in den weißen Kreisen markiert den jeweiligen Standort. Die schraffierten Linien deuten das Gebiet an, das in den jeweiligen Bildfeldern zu sehen ist.

364

4  
• von oben (Leopoldinis  
• auf dem Bildstatue(n), Ring, Parlament, Kunst  
Naturhistorische teilweise Äußeres

## Aim

What kind of strategies in the design process cause an image to emerge that is perceived as 'documentation'? This project aims to identify and name those strategies by doing photography. I claim that the decision-making process in the field of photography is comparable to that in designing, drawing, or painting. Therefore, the concept of so-called 'design processes' should be adapted to photography. By analyzing how pictures are generated, the assumption is that a better understanding will be gained about how images might produce meaning for the beholder.

## Documentary Photography and Design Processes

Two terms should be introduced: namely, the concept of the 'documentary' and 'photographic design processes,' as they are central to the discussion.

### Documentary Photography

If one thinks of a photograph of a public square, for example the Hauptplatz in Linz, Austria (Figure 1), how does one know that it is intended to be seen as a documentation of that specific place at a certain time?

There are different practices for creating documentary pictures; accordingly, there are manifold ways to specify a documentary picture. In general, documentary images, or images with a documentary style (Lugon 2001), are described as technical images produced by digital or analog tools that are held to guarantee a certain amount of objectivity (Flusser 1984; Bredekamp, Schneider, Dünkel 2008). Photography comprises an apparatus with a lens that renders visible light on a light-sensitive surface. From this technological perspective, the authenticity of photographs has been in question due to the possibilities of digital manipulation, although it is known that manipulation is part of the history of the medium (Rosler 2000).

To re-discuss the theoretical debates concerning the paradigms of "imprint," "trace," or "index" of the real is not crucial at this point. Peter Geimer summarized the common features of these debates: the photograph is affected by its emergence, e.g. with a photographic lens and photosensitive material that are chosen by a photographer. However, for a short moment, the human influence on the process is ineffective (Geimer 2009). These observations might be the key to the (mis)understanding of documentary photography. To this day, it is often assumed that reality gets 'fixed' mechanically in the photographic process. Therefore, documentations are often held as an objective or neutral mode of representing a person, an event, or a situation. In addition, it is still widely believed that the withdrawal of

Figure 1

Archives of the City of Linz, Hauptplatz, before 1897 (Archiv der Stadt Linz / Archives of the City of Linz)



the photographer's authorship legitimates the picture to be objective and factual. From a sociological perspective, photography is defined by certain aesthetics that have a "cultural legitimacy," as Pierre Bourdieu states: "Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from its origin) it has been assigned *social uses* that are held to be 'realistic' and 'objective'" (Bourdieu 1990, 74) Therefore, documentary photographs also have to be seen in connection with cultural, social, political, and historical aspects.

However, I will argue here that a comprehensive definition of 'a' – or 'the' – documentary photograph is lacking. Instead, there are various trends of the documentary that replace as well as influence each other. For Allan Sekula, the use of the term "documentary" is acceptable if the "myth" of the documentary is thematized (Sekula 1978). Martha Rosler argues that documentary photography is shaped by contexts of production as well as reception and, therefore, is rather versatile. She argues that the context of publication is the most decisive factor for whether something should be held as documentary (Rosler 1989). As Abigail Solomon-Godeau put it, documentary is a "variable practice" (Solomon-Godeau 2003).

Olivier Lugon scrutinizes the documentary as a "fluid concept" (Lugon 2005). What is actually held as documentary changes – what is perceived as a documentary image is subject to constant transformation. Recalling the history of the term "documentary," Lugon points out an inconsistency: "No-one has ever known with certainty what the term 'documentary' actually entails" (Lugon 2005, 65). It is presumably this undefinedness that gives rise to the prosperity and the propagation of the "documentary" genre. Referring to Allan Sekula, Lugon stresses that whenever someone finds a "formula" to explain the essence of the documentary, suspicions are raised, and the documentary is "reinvented," in Sekula's language. With the availability of digital means, photography and subsequently the concept of the documentary are again on the verge of radical change.

Design Processes and  
Photographic Design Processes

A major claim underlying this paper is that the decision-making process within photography is comparable to the design processes other fields. Within graphic design, the term 'design process' is known as the process of creating image series (Renner 2010) that lead to artifacts. It is the central category for ways of deriving a form from interactions between actors and their environments (Teixeira, Rickenberg 2008).

The word 'design process' is often used for meta-theory: there are various theories and models about how designers or architects think and work (e.g. Schön 1991; Lawson 2005; Cross 2007; Goldschmidt 2014). However, in this paper the word 'design process' is used for specific ways of understanding a particular practice of making images. Pieter Jan Stappers described developments of design thinking in research as "the act of designing" as well as a "method of generating new knowledge" (Stappers 2013). In other words, this article reports on an "inquiry through the *practice* of design" (Durrant, Vines, Wallace, Yee 2017).

There is a German term that embraces aesthetic processes used in practice known as 'entwerfen' or 'Entwurf'. However, these terms cannot be translated into English. They seem to be part of the English term 'designing'. In an encyclopedia of aesthetics, the term 'design' is defined as providing a framework of possibilities and decision-making practices, but it also comprises the division of work or the economic capacity that is entailed within an object (Palmer, Dodson 1998). Definitions of 'design' have a broad spectrum, as indicated, exceeding the meaning of 'entwerfen'.

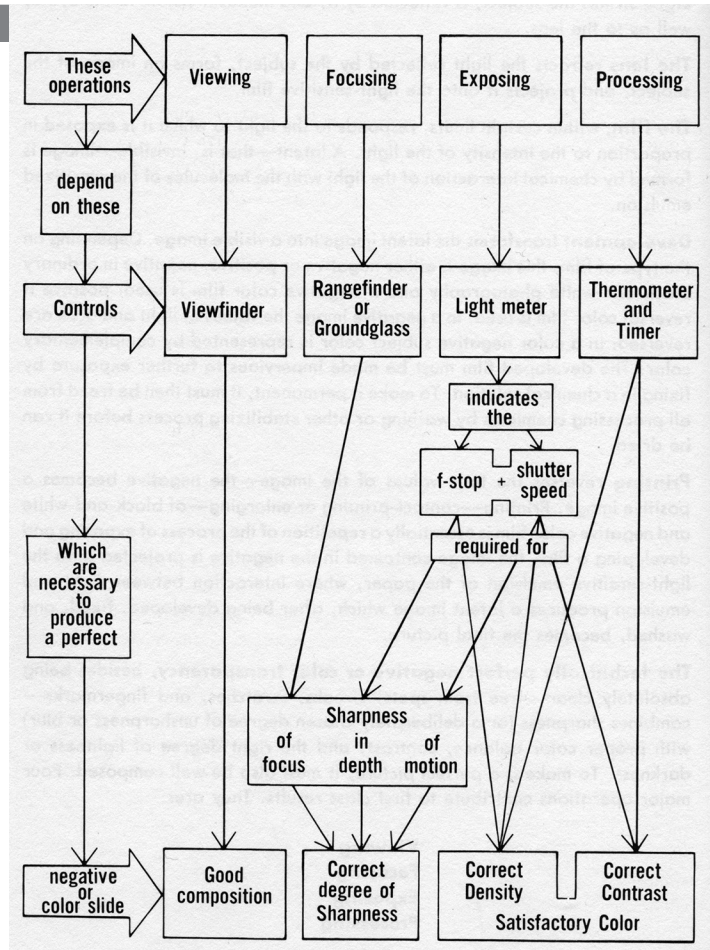
'Entwerfen' – a 'design process' – should not be understood as a linear, single or solitary action but a methodical process. It provides a framework of possibilities and decision-making practices, often by searching for the most suitable option by trial and error. Objects such as drawings, samples, sketches, or notes are the residua of design processes that embody the contingencies of the process, in other words, the impossibility to influence the trajectory in all aspects when designing. It is about a general potential of an output or, to put it in a more abstract way, of options. The materialized image or writing provides information about the process in retrospect.

During the activity itself there lies an explicit and a tacit knowing about one's own design process, as Barbara Wittmann and Christoph Hoffmann have described it for writing and drawing (Hoffmann, Wittmann 2013), or "reflection in/on action" (Schön 1991), as it is called in the field of design research. It is essential to be aware of this "expert knowledge" as a (historical or social) concept (Mareis 2012).

Transferring the term "design process" to the field of photography, a broad definition is beneficial for characterizing various photographic genres such as documentary photography – because it is still an open ques-

Figure 2

Andreas Feininger, diagram from the chapter "How to take a picture" (Feininger 1980, 110)



tion how to describe the process of creating (new) photographic pictures.

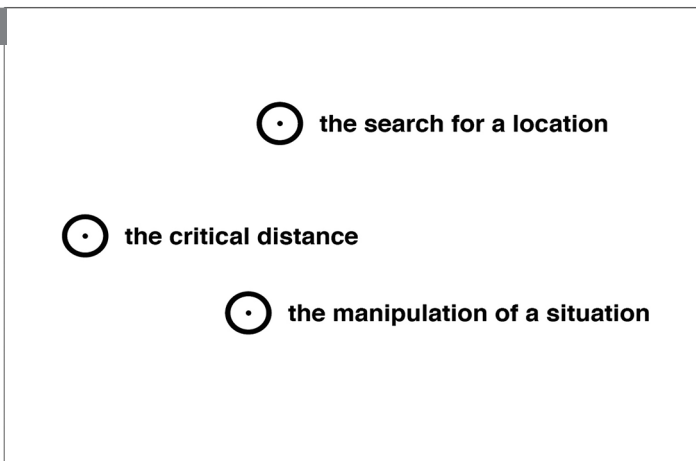
Compared to its concise technical language, the aesthetic discourse about photography is rather vague. For example, a "photographic process" is a detailed description of how to render a photograph visible by certain chemical procedures (Suzuki 2006). Jean-Claude Chamboredon stated in 1965, "Because it is impossible to apply traditional aesthetic language to it, photographic creation is difficult to define as such." (Chamboredon 1990, 132f.). Since then, the inconsistencies of the different photographic practices throughout the histories of photography have been explored and are part of the photographic literature (for example, Wells 2009). And yet there are various meanings in circulation: photography comprises practices such as pressing the shutter button, pre- and postproduction, the "decisive moment" (Cartier-Bresson 1952) or "photographic seeing" (Feininger 1980).

The idea that the "central act of photography" (Szarkowski 1966) only consists of choosing and eliminating, as John Szarkowski stated in 1966, is obsolete now. At the same time, in 1965, photographer Andreas Feininger proposed sharpening one's attention while doing photography. He suggests exploring different distances or point of views and imagining



Figure 3

Three aspects of the gesture of photography by Flusser (after Flusser 1991)



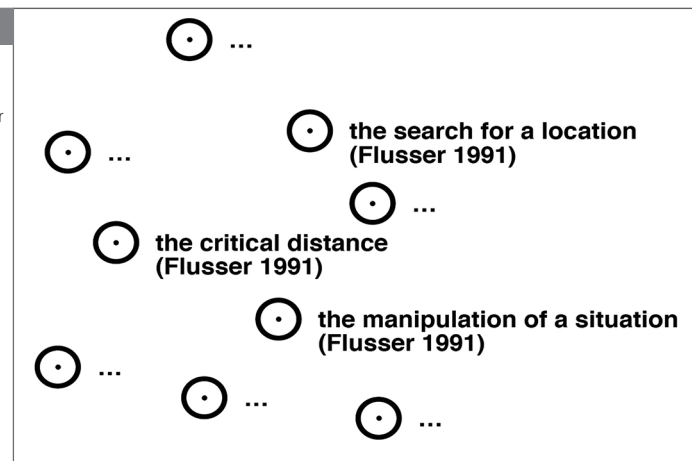
suitable weather or lightning conditions. This set of parameters helps to decide which means of photography might be used – which lens, film, or filter, or whether to change a given situation for the better. “And once he [the photographer] has reached specific conclusions he will not stop with one shot but will explore all the promising possibilities the situation presents ...” (Feininger 1980, 9).

However, Feininger’s diagram from the chapter “How to take a picture” (Figure 2) could lead to the mistaken impression that it suffices to adhere to a diagram, step by step, to achieve a successful photograph. For example, Feininger points out that there are four photographic “operations,” such as selecting a detail by “viewing” with the help of the control mechanism called the “viewfinder” – which together are necessary to produce a “Good Composition.” This recipe-like sequence of actions seems to me to contradict the description of photographing in his text since Feininger states the following: “You always have a choice. Don’t waste this precious privilege. If a subject is worth photographing, it deserves a perfect job – something which rarely can be accomplished with only a single shot.” (Feininger 1980, 9) With this description, photographing seems to be a very open procedure – but when brought into the form of a flow chart, photographing becomes something with a rigid sequence, which contradicts Feininger’s written enthusiasm for the possibilities of choice. In any case, it appears that photographing is a very easily controllable process, something that can be managed with a checklist.

A few years later, a more precise description of photography is found in Philippe Dubois 1983 treatise. The contents: no photo can be regarded and conceived solely as an image (Dubois 1998). A photo is above all the result of an act. Dubois stresses the “before” and “after” moments of a “Photographic Act.” He meticulously describes what it takes to make a photograph and points out that this decision-making process cannot be separated from cultural or social circumstances. This approach is as promising as it is problematic. That which comprises a photographic act seems in Dubois’s language to be very clearly and unambiguously nameable. In fact, as will be demonstrated, there are also unfamiliar circumstances and something resis-

Figure 4

Photographic design processes, enlarging terminology based on Flusser (after Flusser 1991)



tant that comes into effect during photographing. With Dubois, one could be under the impression that it is a process that has been analyzed down to the last detail and that can be exactly captured in language.

A type of openness of the process can be found formulated by Stephen Shore. He describes, in the generation of photographs, the interactions with the environment, with one’s own as well as with collective ideas, and the testing of alternative pictorial concepts. “It is a complex, ongoing, spontaneous interaction of observation, understanding, imagination, and intention.” (Shore 2007, 132) Shore addresses two directions in photographing: In the first, through an unconscious “filter,” what is already known is simply rigidly repeated. In the second, multiple and fluid possibilities can arise during photographing, when the photographer brings them into awareness. The photographing of sunsets is his example for the spectrum of possibilities. Images of sunsets often feel interchangeable – if one becomes aware of how they work, the conditioning could be managed better. The photographer’s enhanced attentiveness can enable new subjects to emerge, according to Shore.

Vilém Flusser adds another facet of photographing: to him, the search for a suitable image is a series of “abrupt decision-making procedures” (Flusser 1991, 140). Flusser developed his thoughts through his observations of portrait photography in a studio and the involved photographic gestures. He distinguishes three aspects that mutually influence each other (Figure 3): firstly, the search for a location (a viewpoint from which one is able to watch a situation); secondly, the manipulation of a situation (in order to adapt the situation to the chosen location); and thirdly, the critical distance of the photographer from the situation (because this distance is a deciding factor regarding success or failure when selecting the suitable moment for the generation of future images). In summary, Flusser shifts the analysis of a “finished” artifact to the activity of creating future photographs.

In my opinion, Flusser’s thoughts are worth further elaboration since they add openness to experience. On the basis of his writing, the definition concerning design processes of (documentary) pictures should be expanded for a better understanding of photographic design processes

(a forthcoming paper will address this issue). Because a design process is generally held to be an open-ended process, a “process through which new ideas and artifacts are generated” whereby “materialized intermediary stages” are produced and these different visual variations are evaluated. It enables creating a “visual form” to be developed “that has never been seen before” (Renner 2011, 95). Materialized intermediary stages in the field of photography have various forms (Fox, Caruana 2012), such as Polaroids, negatives, contact sheets, (annotated or stamped) proofs, handwritten notes, typescript or printed text, data, folders and files, indexes or printed reproductions – or, as Lugon puts it, “half-finished products” (Lugon 2013).

To come up with a definition for the ‘photographic design process,’ I suggest a provisional one at the moment – because further research will clarify as yet unknown factors. A photographic design process results in an artifact, yet the photographer leaves some trace of this process with “half-finished products.” However, not all the possibilities for the appearance of yet-to-be-made photographs are ‘stored’ in the residue of a photographic design process because of composing through the viewfinder of an apparatus. An experienced photographer only takes photos that he or she feels could embody a possible future artifact. This methodical process entails various (un)conscious decision-making procedures, and even then, there are factors or situations that cannot be completely ‘controlled.’ Christoph Hoffmann named these as “unfamiliar circumstances” (*unbekannte Umstände*, Hoffmann 2011) such as moments for one’s own serendipity, which are also part of a design process.

## Methods

To analyze images, I used methods from the field of art history such as “comparative analysis” (Bader, Gaier, Wolf 2010: comparing two or more pictures in order to name divergent or consistent visual characteristics) and “formal analysis” (Bredenkamp, Fischel, Schneider, Werner 2003: naming and identifying how a work of art is made and how this process might yield a meaningful image). These are known as qualitative methods and belong to a special branch of art-history methodology in order to understand ‘mechanisms of meaning,’ rooted in the German writings of Erwin Panofsky, Max Imdahl, and Gottfried Boehm.

I combined these methods used by art history with a “practice-led” approach from the field of design research. This methodological combination was made because appropriate photographic design processes were not available for examination – the careful documentation of decision-making is often neglected in daily practice (Renner 2017, 144f.). As I have a background in visual communication as well as in photography, it seemed feasible to create suitable photographic design processes for research pur-

poses through my own photographic practice.

To integrate one’s own creative practice in a research project is an approach that was addressed by Christopher Frayling as “research through art and design” (Frayling 1993/1994). An influential survey was published in 2007 that provided a definition for “practice-led research”: “Research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design, or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry.” (Rust, Mottram, Till 2007, 11) The authors of this definition point out that a researcher’s practice could also be a part of this methodological approach, if an explanation is provided why and how practice is applied within a research framework.

Michael Renner further developed this experience-based approach as “practice-led iconic research” (Renner 2011; Renner 2017), whereby the researcher integrates his or her creative design processes to create suitable visual matter, e. g. image series, for research purposes. I adapted his method to photography: to gain more insight into the characteristics of a documentary image concept, I created, screened, selected, combined, and compared images in order to analyze my own practice of photographic design processes. The methodological approach is to extend the analysis of photos by also including the process of their production. A comparative and formal analysis was used for a well-considered verbalization, but the visual variations of the design process should be considered as research findings as well. The approach of combining images and words as findings follows a discourse in the humanities that images cannot be entirely verbalized (Renner 2011; Renner 2017). Visual variations often do not comprise a “mature” appearance, as is known in the case of exhibitions. Rather, they can be understood as “epistemic objects,” since they shed light on an intellectual process (Rheinberger 2006).

It was necessary to determine how to manage the multitude of requirements occurring during a photographic design process in a research context – termed “exploration.” In terms of research, only a few characteristics of an exploration are investigated. Therefore, the role of scholarly documentation of the design process itself was identified to be a crucial factor. This includes the question of how to secure the explorations and make them accessible.

I found that the visual outcome of photographic explorations are suitable for research purposes even if they do not lead to the desired artifacts in terms of an aesthetic innovation. By analogy, the opposite of the ‘successful’ or “nice pictures” in science – the ambiguous or blurry ones – are neglected by scientists but are important for historians of science (Hoffmann 2011). I suggest naming them ‘research-driven pictures.’ These pictures demonstrate what a future (documentary) artifact may no longer incorporate.

For a research purpose, not only ‘successful’ but also ‘research-driven pictures’ should be made visible and included in an inquiry because they may provide information about divergent alternatives. These varieties

of pictures are needed to identify and name strategies used within photographic design processes.

## Analyses and Findings

How to identify different strategies of photographic design processes? Four public squares were explored by a photographic documentation: Heldenplatz in Vienna, Austria; Hauptplatz in Linz, Austria; Zaubplatz in Glarus, Switzerland; Marktplatz in Basel, Switzerland. "Practice-led iconic research" (Renner 2011) was transferred into the field of documentary photography. This was accomplished by following six steps: creating, screening, selecting, combining, comparing, and critically analyzing.

### Step 1: creating.

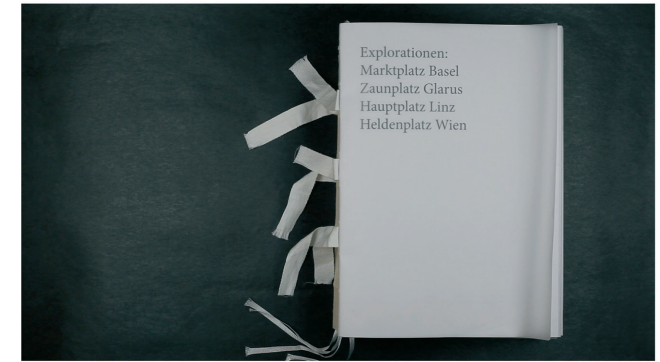
I made 39 explorations that yielded 4100 photos, from March 1, 2011, until February 2, 2014. Without going into great detail here, some explanations about the practice of doing photography in a research context should be given: I started the explorations about collective images of a certain place in order to identify what is held as a 'typical' or 'atypical' documentary picture. Picture archives of municipal institutions are a crucial source for this analysis (Aichmaier 2016, 260–389). Observing a public square without taking photos was also important to get acquainted with its usage. Several times, appointments were made beforehand to gain access to buildings in order to view the square from above. Digital SLRs and camera lenses were used – the choice of technical equipment has a major influence on the aesthetics created. Several different weather and lighting situations were tested. Finally, with the research question in mind as a guiding principle, photographic design processes were conducted. I attempted to maintain scholarly documentation by making notes and taking research-driven photos. The study of archival images, of artistic strategies in the field of documentation, and the research of relevant terminology strongly influenced my photographic practice. The following description by Pierre Bourdieu of his photographic design process as a researcher explains the benefit of combining theory and practice: "For me, it was a way to sharpen the gaze, to take a closer look, to find a way to access the topic ..." (Schultheis 2003, 26).

### Steps 2 and 3: screening and selecting.

All photographic explorations were printed as contact sheets (Figure 5) to be used as a notebook for the research project, in parallel to digital forms that were reviewed on screen. When, in screening, documentary strategies seemed to become apparent through the repetition of certain characteristics, pictures were selected and adjusted (Figure 6). The rather messy 'research-driven pictures' (Figures 7 and 8) seemed to be equally important as compared with the more accomplished ones (Figure 9, cf. T.1.4). In the course of a research process, those pictures also play a role that Will Steacy termed "missing pictures" (Steacy 2012). For the art context, Steacy thereby

Figure 5

Helga Aichmaier, scholarly documentation/contact sheets of the explorations ("Explorationen: Marktplatz Basel, Zaubplatz Glarus, Hauptplatz Linz, Heldenplatz Wien"), 2014



describes pictures that were not or could not be made. Here, a situation of feeling one's way occurs that normally takes place during "photographic seeing." For research purposes, such situations also have to be made visible and incorporated into the analysis. An example: if the camera was placed on the ground (Figure 7), the unevenness of the paving stones and the slope of the public square could be shown. This extremely low perspective – a so-called "worm's eye view" is not associated with documentary photography. The areas of blurring in the foreground and background are particularly irritating, which recall photographs of models. However, if the camera on the ground is tipped slightly upwards (Figure 8), this enables a wealth of details to be observed. The result is a snapshot but not an overview of the square.

Documentary design strategies were here intentionally disregarded.

Figure 6

Helga Aichmaier, photographic exploration, Hauptplatz Linz, 2011



Figure 7

Helga Aichmaier, photographic exploration, Hauptplatz Linz, 2011



Figure 8

Helga Aichmaier, photographic exploration, Hauptplatz Linz, 2011



ed in order to test what the concrete process yields. Designing is characterized by its relationship to making – a principle that is well known but that nevertheless plays a decisive role in designing. For images first have to be made, and only then can one decide how to proceed with them.

Steps 4 and 5: combining and comparing.

By studying the printed contact sheets and by screening the digital files, pictures were pre-selected.

Firstly, the pictures of this pre-selection were marked where it was clear that a certain characteristic is repeated throughout the whole series – following an observation by Barbara Wittmann about the essence of design processes in the field of hand drawings (Wittmann 2012, 139). One can compare that qualitative way of photo editing also to ‘theoretical sampling’ in the field of social science (Hildenbrand 2007). Thereby data is gathered until the researcher is under the impression that the research question is likely to be answered or a theory can be conceptualized. This personal judgment – comparable to a ‘trained judgment’ (Daston, Galison 2007, 370f) – was deployed in this phase of combining and comparing. This selection was then combined to show the scope of the documentary, however, it was important to be specific enough to demonstrate relevant details and to keep the number of pictures as small as possible at the same time. The combined pictures should therefore not be regarded as the most ‘successful’ but as suitable ones to represent a certain characteristic. In other words, the selected photos should represent the outcome of a certain strategy used

T.1 Tableau 1 Top views—the view from above



Figure 9

“T.1. Tableau 1”, Top views – the view from above

within a design process.

Secondly, I decided to gather the visual variations as tableaux – arrangements of selected pictures. Each tableau comprises a specific documentary strategy. This resulted in eight tableaux, a suggestion that is held as neither normative nor complete. Writing in retrospect about this phase, it should be added that in the beginning it was rather unclear how to proceed. I tried several ways to display pictorial combinations. Combining pictures as a tableau enables “comparative analysis,” so the form of the tableau was chosen.

Step 6: critically analyzing.

Finally, the eight tableaux were analyzed by criticizing apparent distinctions or characteristics. The methods I used were previously mentioned as “comparative analysis” and “formal analysis” from the field of art history.

It was found that a documentary image concept representing public squares consists of the following strategies at minimum: (1) top views – the view from above (Figure 9); (2) lighting conditions – visualization of topography; (3) color or monochrome – a question of emphasis; (4) motif – selected topics; (5) critical distance – interaction with surroundings (Figure 10); (6) frontality – points of view (Figure 11); (7) clarity – irritation or disruption in a picture; (8) overview – full view. Three examples of the findings should be given a more detailed explanation (cf. Aichmaier 2016, 484ff, for all tableaux):

The first example, “T.1. Tableau 1” (Figure 9), shows a well-established design-process strategy called “top view.” It provides a presentation of an overview at a simultaneous distance. Michel de Certeau adopted

T.5 Tableau 5 Critical distance— interaction with surroundings



Figure 10

"T.5. Tableau 5", Critical distance – interaction with surroundings

the phrase "It's hard to be down when you're up" – this is the headline of a poster he saw inside the former World Trade Center in New York while climbing the stairs (Certeau 1998, 180). The phrase emphasizes a certain superiority that is inherent in elevated viewpoints.

The guiding question for explorations involving top views was, which decisions are implied in the choice of location, that is, in systematically changing the camera position in a horizontal and vertical direction. In practice, this means going from one window to another in a building to vary the camera position. The explorations were adjusted as the color was subsequently converted to grey-scale, contrasts were raised, and the picture was cropped for an increased comparability. The difference is most evident in the lower row: the perspective of the proposed picture on the left side, taken from the level of the square itself (Figure 9, T.1.6), is compared with the perspective taken from the top floor of a building (Figure 9, T.1.4). With an increase in height, the structure of the square appears more clearly, and the spatial impression of the Hauptplatz in Linz is changed. In T.1.6, one can only guess that this is a location that is bordered by three building facades. The upper half of the picture is multiply intersected with tram wires. In T.1.4, however, the viewer is looking at a square that is clearly bordered on three sides. Behind the Trinity Column at the center of the image, there is an opening upon a road that leads out of the square. An overview becomes evident with increase in height. Here, more information about the urban infrastructure, its use, and the character of the square can be learned than in the image on the left. If one follows Donna Haraway's conception that knowledge is "situated," then this elevated view is tied to questions about the power of access (Haraway 1998).

T.6 Tableau 6 Frontality—points of view



Figure 11

"T.6. Tableau 6", Frontality – points of view

The second example, "T.5. Tableau 5" (Figure 10), deals with the question of a suitable critical distance. To lose distance would not support a documentary attitude – since, in some circumstances, the photographing person would come into contact with her environment. The question of distance involves how one enters into contact with the surroundings on location or avoids it. Vilém Flusser calls this "critical distance," which determines a successful photograph (Flusser 1991). One can observe public squares for hours and days at a time. However, one's interaction with passersby changes from the moment when one begins observing a square with a camera. Whether this is desired or not: a reaction generally ensues. If the interaction with a passerby is too significant, something other than the documentation of the square dominates one's view of the image. On the left side of the tableau, photos of Hauptplatz, Linz, were assembled. Except for one image (T.5.5), a digital compact camera was used in order not to draw too much attention with a professional camera. I took photographs from places that are accessible to anyone on the square. In viewing the possibilities, one lingers on the views of photographed passersby (T.5.2 and T.5.4). In other examples, one's own gaze leads away from the actual objective to show a square: there are too many undefined elements to see for one to acquire an overview of the square. On the right side of the tableau, Zaunplatz, Glarus, can be seen during an annual event called "Landsgemeinde" in 2012. The information that a viewer could be standing on site, in the crowd of spectators, is suggested in T.5.8. Each of the two vertical edges of the picture is occupied by a person. A gap in the center of the image allows a view of the crowd to be glimpsed between them; one can imagine oneself as part of the audience.

In T.5.9 a similar impression arises. Through the location of photographing, direct proximity to the audience is imaginable: too little distance is preserved.

The third example, “T.6. Tableau 6” (Figure 11), displays design processes of seeking suitable points of view upon iconic buildings at the Heldenplatz in Vienna. How one documents a public square also depends upon the location of important buildings around the square. Looking to the northwest, there are additional buildings in the picture, but they do not support the collective image of Heldenplatz. An example of this is T.6.14, in which the equestrian statue of Prince Eugen can be seen, surrounded by a parking lot with a view of parts of the city gate and the Leopoldine Wing of the Hofburg as well as buildings of the Ring Road farther away. In T.6.1-T.6.9, T.13, and T.6.15-T.6.17, there are views in the direction of the Neue Burg that demonstrate a search for a frontal view. There are certain photographing locations from which the square together with the building complexes can be brought into the format of an image more advantageously. If one follows the documentary design strategy of the frontal view, it is the search for a suitable viewpoint.

To complement these findings and acquire not only a technical language but also support an aesthetic discussion, it is suggested to expand the terminology concerning photographic design processes based on Flusser’s writing about the gesture of photography (Figure 4; Flusser 1991).

---

## Conclusion

“Practice-led iconic research” was adapted as a method for photography, by which photographic design processes can be identified through analyzing visual variations that are produced during photographic explorations. It was found that photographic design processes documenting a public square follow several strategies. Regarding the design processes of photographs that can be perceived as a ‘documentation’ undermines the assumption of the withdrawal of a photographer’s authorship and the neutral mode of the pictures to represent something ‘authentic’. It shows the factitious side of a documentation: the strategies used within the design processes foster an image of an ‘objective’ documentation. Three examples of those strategies were given in detail, explaining why “It’s hard to be down when you’re up” – top views –, or the importance of a critical distance, or the power of frontality.

The findings might be useful for creating images as well as working with documentary photography; however, they are not limited to the field of practice. Contributing to theory is about understanding how documentary photographs are made by applying different strategies during photographic design processes.

---

## References

- Aichmaier, H. (2016). *Strategien einer Bildpraxis. Fotografisches Entwerfen anhand dokumentarischer Bilder öffentlicher Plätze / Strategies of an Image Practice. Photographic Design Processes in the Documentation of Public Places*. PhD at the University of Art and Design Linz, Department of Art History and Art Theory. Linz: Kunstuniversität Linz.
- Bader, L., Gaier, M., & Wolf, F. (2010). Einleitung. In L. Bader, M. Gaier & F. Wolf (Eds.), *Vergleichendes Sehen*. München: Fink.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). The Social Definition of Photography. In P. Bourdieu, L. Boltanski, R. Castel, J.-C. Chamboredon & D. Schnapper (Eds.), *Photography. A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 73–98.
- Bredenkamp, H., Fischel, A., Schneider, B. & Werner, G. (2003). Bildwelten des Wissens. In *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*. 1, 9–20.
- Bredenkamp, H., Schneider, B., & Dünkel, V. (2008). Editorial. Das Technische Bild. In H. Bredenkamp, B. Schneider & V. Dünkel (Eds.), *Das Technische Bild. Kompendium zu einer Stilgeschichte wissenschaftlicher Bilder*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 8–11.
- Cartier-Bresson, H. (1952). *Images à la sauvette. Photographies*. Paris: Éditions Verve.
- Certeau, M. de (1988). *Die Kunst des Handelns*. Berlin: Merve Verlag.
- Chamboredon, J.-C. (1990). Mechanical Art, Natural Art. In P. Bourdieu, L. Boltanski, R. Castel, J.-C. Chamboredon & D. Schnapper (Eds.), *Photography. A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 129–149.
- Cross, N. (2007). Designerly Ways of Knowing. In N. Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 17–31.
- Daston, L. & Galison, P. (2007). *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books.
- Dubois, P. (1998). *Der fotografische Akt. Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv*. Dresden / Amsterdam: Verlag der Kunst.
- Durrant, A. C., Vines, J., Wallace, J. & Yee, S. R. J. (2017). Research Through Design: Twenty-First Century Makers and Materialities. In *Design Issues*. 33(3), 3–10.
- Feininger, A. (1980). *The Complete Photographer*. London: Prentice-Hall.
- Flusser, V. (1991). Die Geste des Fotografierens. In V. Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Düsseldorf: Bollmann, 127–150.

- Flusser, V. (1984). The Technical Image. In V. Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Berlin: European Photography, 10–14.
- Fox, A., & Caruana, N. (2012). *Behind the Image. Research in Photography*. Lausanne: Ava Publishing.
- Frayling, C. (1993/1994). Research in Art and Design. In *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1993/94 (1), 1–5.
- Geimer, P. (2009). *Theorien der Fotografie zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.
- Goldschmidt, G. (2014). *Linkography: Unfolding the Design Process*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Haraway, D. (1998). The Persistence of Vision. In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*. London / New York: Routledge, 677–684.
- Hildenbrand, B. (2007). 2.1 Anselm Strauss. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, I. Steinke (Eds.), *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 32–42.
- Hofmann, C. (2011). Forschen mit Bildern. In H. Rickli (Ed.), *Videogramme. Die Bildwelten biologischer Experimentalsysteme als Kunst- und Theorieobjekt*. Zürich: Scheidegger&Spies, 66–68.
- Hoffmann, C. & Wittmann, B. (2013). Introduction: Knowledge in the Making: Drawing and Writing as Research Techniques. In *Science in Context*, 26(2), 203–213.
- Lawson, B. (2005). *How Designers Think. The Design Process Demystified*. Oxford: Architectural Press.
- Lugon, O. (2001). *Le Style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans. 1920–1945*. Paris: Éditions Macula.
- Lugon, O. (2005). 'Documentary': authority and ambiguities. In F. Gierstberg, M. van den Heuvel, H. Scholten & M. Verhoeven (Eds.), *Documentary now! Contemporary strategies in photography, film and the visual arts*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 64–73.
- Lugon, O. (2013). La photographie, œuvre collective. In N. Mathys, W. Leimgruber & A. Voellmin (Eds.), *Über den Wert der Fotografie. Zu wissenschaftlichen Kriterien für die Bewahrung von Fotosammlungen*. Baden: Hier+Jetzt, 73–82.
- Mareis, C. (2012). The Epistemology of the Unspoken: On the Concept of Tacit Knowledge in Contemporary Design Research. In *Design Issues*, 28(2), 61–71.
- Palmer, J. & Dodson, M. (1998). Design. In *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Vol. 1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 17–20.

- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday.
- Renner, M. (2010). Practice-led Iconic Research. In *diid, disegno industriale industrial design*, 42/43, 76–83.
- Renner, M. (2011). The Mute Iconic Criticism of Design. In *Rheinsprung 11 – Zeitschrift für Bildkritik*, 1, 92–116. Retrieved July 5, 2017 from [https://rheinsprung11.unibas.ch/fileadmin/documents/Edition\\_PDF/Ausgabe1/thema-renner\\_E.pdf](https://rheinsprung11.unibas.ch/fileadmin/documents/Edition_PDF/Ausgabe1/thema-renner_E.pdf)
- Renner, M. (2017). Practice-led Iconic Research Towards a Research Methodology for Visual Communication. In K. M. Langkilde (Ed.), *Poetry of the Real. Basel 2016*. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 133–157.
- Rheinberger, H.-J. (2006). *Experimentalsysteme und epistemische Dinge. Eine Geschichte der Proteinsynthese im Reagenzglas*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Rosler, M. (1989). In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography). In R. Bolton (Ed.), *The Contest of Meaning*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 303–340.
- Rosler, M. (2000). Bildsimulationen, Computermanipulationen: Einige Überlegungen. In H. von Amelnunx (Ed.), *Theorie der Fotografie IV (1980 – 1995)*. München: Schirmer/Mosel, 129–170.
- Rust, C., Mottram, J. & Till, J. (2007). *AHRC Review of Practice-led Research in Art, Design & Architecture*. Retrieved July 5, 2017 from [http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/43065/Practice-Led\\_Review\\_Nov07.pdf](http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/43065/Practice-Led_Review_Nov07.pdf)
- Schön, D. (1991). *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. London: Ashgate.
- Schultheis, B. (2003). Bilder aus Algerien. Ein Gespräch mit Pierre Bourdieu. In F. Schultheis & C. Frisinghelli (Eds.), *Pierre Bourdieu. In Algerien. Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*. Graz: Camera Austria, 21–51.
- Sekula, A. (1978). Dismantling Modernism: Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation). In *The Massachusetts Review*, 19(4), 859–883.
- Shore, S. (2007). *The Nature of Photographs*. London: Phaidon.
- Solomon-Godeau, A. (2003). Wer spricht so? Einige Fragen zur Dokumentarfotografie. In H. Wolf, S. Holschbach, J. Schröter, C. Zimmer & T. Falk (Eds.), *Diskurse der Fotografie. Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 53–74.

- Stappers, P. J. (2013). Design Thinking in Research: The Role of Design Skills in Research and Vice Versa. In M. Held, G. Joost, & C. Mareis (Eds.), *Wer gestaltet die Gestaltung? Praxis, Theorie und Geschichte des partizipatorischen Designs*. Bielefeld: Transkript, 105–116.
- Steacy, W. (2012). *Photographs not taken*. Hillsborough, NC: Daylight Community Arts Foundation.
- Suzuki, R. (2006), Developing Processes. In L. Warren (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography. Volume 1 (A–F)*. New York: Routledge, 384–389.
- Szarkowski, J. (1966). Introduction. In J. Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*. New York: Doubleday.
- Teixeira, C. & Rickenberg, R. (2008). Design Process. In M. Erlhoff & T. Marshall (Eds.), *Design Dictionary. Perspectives on Design Terminology*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 128–130.
- Wells, L. (2009). *Photography: a critical introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Wittmann, B. (2012). Papierprojekte. Die Zeichnung als Instrument des Entwurfs. In *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, Heft 1|2012, 135–150.

---

## Author

Helga Aichmaier finished her PhD in 2016 with a project on photographic design processes of documentary images (PhD supervisors: Martin Hochleitner and Michael Renner). She holds a diploma degree from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria. She worked as a freelance graphic designer in Vienna from 2004 to 2008. Moving to Basel, Switzerland, she was a research assistant at the National Centre of Competence in Research »eikones NCCR Iconic Criticism« at the University of Basel from 2008 to 2009. From 2009 to 2012, she was a research associate at the Institute of Visual Communication at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, Academy of Art and Design. From 2010 to 2016, she was enrolled in the PhD programme at the University of Art and Design, Linz, Department of Art History and Art Theory. Her research interests include visual communication, photography, design research methods, and visual literacy.